Editing for Lower Order Concerns

Inquire: The Final Touches

Overview
It should go without saying that knowing how to use correct grammar and punctuation is essential to writing an effective essay. But, knowing the rules and following them exactly right on the first draft are two very different issues. This is why editing for grammar, punctuation, and spelling is a necessary step in the writing process, separate from editing for style or clarity. Editing your language through the process of proofreading is how you will put the final touches on your paper, making sure each tiny detail is as well-crafted as it can be.

Big Question: How do I make sure the language in my paper is correct and well-crafted?

Watch: Smoothing the Rough Edges
Have you ever watched an artist sculpt a statue? Like writing, crafting a statue is a process. It starts by chiseling away at a block of marble until the vague shape of the figure is found, and then slowly carving out more and more detail. The final step is also the most tedious: finding any rough edges or imperfections and smoothing them out until the statue is as well-crafted as the artist is capable of making it. In the craft of writing, this smoothing out takes the form of correcting the grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors in the language of your paper.

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Proofreading is the nitpicky process of making sure that your sentences are grammatically coherent and use correct punctuation and spelling. This can either be a long, arduous process that requires you to read over your writing multiple times, or it can be a quick re-read to double check that you’ve caught any errors that you didn’t correct while you were drafting. Either way, this will be a tedious process, but the extent of your proofreading is largely dependent on your own writing process, so don’t be worried if you find yourself needing to do a few read-throughs of your paper in order to catch all your errors; it’s just another part of writing.

What is your process for finalizing your paper? Do you usually proofread? If so, do you do multiple read-throughs, or just one or two?
Read: The Proofreading Process

Overview: Following the Rules

It's usually advised that when you are drafting your paper, your focus should be on crafting your ideas into the strongest articulation possible through writing, without worrying too much about the mechanics or spelling of what you are writing. Put simply, during the drafting stage, what you write matters more than how you write it. However, once you move into the editing stage, the conceptual content of your paper should be essentially complete. Your focus at this point will therefore be on the language itself and finding any grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors that you may have missed in your previous drafts.

Proofreading

Proofreading is the nitpicky process of making sure your sentences are grammatically coherent and use correct punctuation and spelling. Style isn’t your focus here, and clarity only matters insomuch as making sure your sentences are understandable in whichever language you are writing in. Depending on your writing process, proofreading can either be a long, arduous process that requires you to read over your writing multiple times, or it can be a quick re-read to double check that you’ve caught any errors that you didn’t correct while you were drafting. Either way, this will be a tedious process, but it is absolutely necessary for putting the final touches on your paper and making it the best it can be. Again, the extent of your proofreading is largely dependent on your own writing process, so don’t be worried if you find yourself needing to do a few read-throughs of your paper in order to catch all your errors; it’s just another part of writing.

Best Practice for Proofreading

Perhaps the best practice for proofreading is simply reading your paper, word for word, leaving no part out. Reading it out loud can be even more helpful, as this will help you focus on the language itself, rather than letting your mind be distracted by the meaning. Again, the goal here is to find all of the grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors so that you can correct them, so a close reading of the words on the page is essential to at least starting your proofreading process.

Some Helpful Tips for Close Reading

Close reading requires a great deal of focus, which can be hard if you find your mind drifting back to your ideas rather than staying on the language. Sometimes, using tricks to keep yourself from reading the ideas can help with your proofreading. For instance, you can print out a copy of your paper and, using a ruler or another piece of paper to cover up the bottom half of each page, read through your text line by line. This will keep your eye and mind on the words.

It's also a good idea to limit yourself to finding one type of error at a time. Stretching yourself thin by looking for every grammatical, punctuation, and spelling error in the same read-through is a good way to miss a lot of them, so be sure you are leaving enough time for at least a couple of reviews over your paper.

For spell-checking, you can try reading each sentence backwards. As strange as this sounds, you will be able to focus more on each word independent of the context of the sentence, giving your mind a chance to think about the whether the word is spelled correctly. Finally, it’s always helpful to have a language reference guide on hand in case you’re not sure if a sentence is using correct grammar and punctuation. English is a complex language, so there’s never any harm in making sure your writing is working the way it should.
Have a Peer on Hand

Another helpful practice is having someone else read your paper and see if they can spot any errors. This is especially helpful if you aren’t sure about whether your sentences are grammatically correct, as even the greatest care given to your writing can result in some weird sentence structures.

As an addendum to this point, remember that computer spelling and grammar checking software is far from perfect and may not catch every error in your paper. It also does not always account for every factor in your writing, and may give you a bad suggestion that changes the meaning of your sentence. While these programs can be very useful tools, always double check your paper after using correction software.

Reflect: The Scavenger Hunt of Language

Poll

If you think about it, proofreading is something like a scavenger hunt, except that instead of hunting for fun things, you’re hunting for grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors. Perhaps thinking about it that way takes the fun out of it, but the reality is that proofreading can be kind of a drag. But, maybe you have a different view.

What do you think of the process of proofreading?

- It’s so boring, when does it end?! *bangs head against table*
- I actually do treat it like a scavenger hunt, so I kind of like it!
- I know how important it is, so I don’t worry about whether it’s fun.
- What proofreading?

Expand: English is Difficult and Complex

English is a notoriously difficult and complex language. It has many rules, and perhaps just as many exceptions to those rules. Even for native speakers, errors are a common occurrence in English writing. Here are a couple of the most common, and some tips on how to spot them.

Homophones

Homophones are words that sound the same but are spelled differently, and thus have different meanings. There are quite a few homophones in English, but these are the most commonly confused in writing.

“Their,” “there,” and “they’re” are probably the most confused words in the English language. A good way to remember when to use each is to remember that “they’re” is a contraction of “they are.” In a sentence it will be:

They’re going to the bank.

Whenever you use “they’re” in a sentence, take the contraction apart and see if “they are” still works.

They are going to the bank.
“Their” is the possessive form of “they”, so it requires both the subject of “their” and the object that “they” possess. Here’s an example:

They decided to take their car in to the mechanic.

In this sentence, “their” refers to the owner of the car. They possess their car. On the other hand, “there” refers to a place, as in:

The keys are over there.

A good way to remember the difference between “their” and “there” is in the nouns they each deal with: “their” deals with things possessed by people, as it refers to an object that is possessed by one or more person, while “there” is a place, as in something you can point to.

Since we’re on the subject of possessives, “your” is the possessive form of “you” and works in the same way as “their.”

This is your bike.

“You’re,” on the other hand, is a contraction and is short for “you are.” The same rule for determining if “they’re” is correctly used applies here. When you separate “you’re” into “you are,” the sentence should still work.

You’re going to the beach.

You are going to the beach.

Mistaking which homophone you want to use is a good way to show your reader that you haven’t taken the time to proofread your document. At best, they will think you missed a line in your read-through. At worst, they will be confused about what you meant to say.

Dropped Words

One common but rarely addressed error is the dropped word. This isn’t an issue specific to any kind of sentence, but it can occur in any of them. When write words as fast as you think them, it’s easy to think you’ve written a complete sentence, only to read the sentence later and realize you completely forgot to use a word. This is why reading your own writing slowly, word for word as it is on the page is so important.

Additional Resources

Obviously, there are far more common errors in English than can be covered here. While the two that are discussed above are very common, it is almost a guarantee that you will come across other types of mistakes in your own writing. Luckily, there are many different resources available for you to learn about common language usage and mistakes. The Toolbox section for this lesson also contains a couple additional links to lists of common errors.

https://www.grammarly.com/blog/

Grammarly is a cloud based text editing software, much like spell-check software. If you use this to check your text, remember to double check everything. Again, no software is perfect. Besides the software itself,
however, Grammarly has a blog that posts articles about writing and common errors that you can use as
guides for your own writing.

https://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl
Grammar Girl writes articles that cover many different topics about language usage, going in-depth about
things like using prepositions and the differences of usage for similar seeming words.

http://dailygrammarlessons.blogspot.com/
Daily Grammar Lessons is exactly what it sounds like. Each day, they post a new lesson on a different
topic, complete with quizzes. It’s a great way to improve your writing skills.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

Editing and Proofreading

- A comprehensive tip sheet on editing and proofreading with a bonus quiz included
- https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/editing-and-proofreading/
- Source: University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

General Strategies Before You Proofread

- More general advice for proofreading
- https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/01/
- Source: Purdue University Online Writing Lab

14 Common Grammatical Mistakes in English – And How to Avoid Them

- A list of common mistakes made in English usage, specifically word usage and punctuation relate
- https://www.oxford-royale.co.uk/articles/15-common-grammar-gripes-avoid.html
- Source: Oxford Royale Academy

15 Common Grammar Mistakes That Kill Your Writing Credibility

- More common mistakes in the English language
- https://authority.pub/common-grammar-mistakes/
- Source: Authority.pub

Lesson Glossary

grammar: the rules governing the structure of a language, such as sentence word arrangement
homophones: words that are pronounced the same phonetically, but have different meanings
proofreading: the process of finding and correcting grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors in a
piece of writing
punctuation: the marks, such as periods, commas, and quotation marks that separate and define parts
of sentences, as well as the rules governing them

Check Your Knowledge

1. What is the best practice for proofreading?
A. Reading your paper word for word.
B. Skimming your paper for obvious errors.
C. Catching errors while you are writing your paper.
D. Writing only one draft of your paper.

2. When checking for errors, what is not a good practice?
   A. Limiting yourself to finding one type of error at a time.
   B. Reading through your paper line by line.
   C. Thinking about the ideas in your paper.
   D. Reading sentences backwards.

3. Spell-checking software is an excellent tool to use for proofreading because it easily catches any and all spelling errors that may occur.
   A. True
   B. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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