Proofreading

Why should I proofread?

Many people don’t proofread thoroughly enough and some don’t do it at all, but proofreading well could increase your mark by up to 10%. It could mean the difference between a pass and a fail, or a lower and higher grade.

Think of it as an important part of the writing process, and build in time for it. You should expect to spend at least an hour on a 2000 word essay.

Strategies for proofreading

Problem: I can’t see my mistakes!

You can get so absorbed in your assignment that it is difficult to see it objectively anymore. You need to find ways to see it afresh.

1. Build in a time lapse between writing and proofreading
   o Plan to finish writing a week ahead of the deadline, so that there’s plenty of time to revisit the essay
   o Put your draft aside for a day or so, or even for an hour

2. Look at it in a different format: Print off a hard copy of your draft if you have been looking at in onscreen.

3. Read differently
   o Read slowly; look at each word separately
   o Read backwards – paragraph by paragraph or sentence by sentence
   o Read aloud

4. Look at your work through your reader’s eyes: role play reading your work as a critical reader

5. Engage Help
   o Have a friend or family member read it aloud to you

Problem: I don’t know where to start or what to look for!

Look at your assignment systematically, moving from the overall structure to the fine detail:

1. Edit for structure and content
2. Check if ideas are clearly expressed
3. Look for specific types of mistakes one by one, based on your commonly made errors
Proofreading versus Editing

Edit for content and clarity of your essay

- Are you answering the question/addressing the remit?
- Have you addressed the learning outcomes?
- Are you doing what you said you would do in your introduction?
- Have you signposted and linked your ideas coherently?
- Have you consistently used the active/passive voice and past/present tenses?
- Have you expressed ideas precisely? (Have you said exactly what you mean?)
- Have you expressed ideas concisely? (Have you expressed ideas in as few words as possible)

Proofread for details

Items that you may need to proofread for:

- Grammar, e.g. subject/verb agreement
- Over-repetition
- Over-wordiness
- Ambiguity
- Wrong use of words
- Missing words/letters
- Punctuation
- Spelling: commas, apostrophes
- Referencing
- Use of abbreviations
- Spacing between words and between paragraphs
- Changes of tense
- Singular/plural mixup

You may not need to look closely for all these items:

- Know your own weaknesses and look for them
- Take cues from comments on previous assignments

Taking a closer look

1. Spelling
• Use the spellchecker on your computer, but don't rely on it. Use a dictionary as well.
• Be aware of common spelling mistakes and avoid them.
• Make sure you spell important subject-specific terms correctly.
• Check out our study guide Spelling Tips for more help.
• See the section below for online tools to help with spelling.

2. References and Bibliography

• Be sure to check with the library referencing guide constantly to ensure your references are in the proper format and consistent throughout your work.
• Ensure that every reference in the essay is properly documented at the end, and that each source in your reference list is cited in the text.
• Pay attention to details in the reference list, particularly punctuation, capitalisation, and use of italics.
• Make sure that dates are correct and consistent.

3. Style

• Look for and replace slang words and 'fillers'. Make sure the essay is written in a properly academic style.
• Make sure you understand what you have written. If it is not clear to you, your reader will not understand it.
• Refer to our study guide Essay Writing Style and Clarity for more help.

4. Paragraphs

• Make sure your paragraphs are properly laid out, using either indenting or line-drop.
• Check that there are links from one paragraph to another. Is each paragraph long enough to develop an idea?
• Are there any places where you could usefully split a long paragraph into two or more shorter ones?

5. **Introduction and Conclusion**

• Are these effective?
• Your introduction should set out what the essay will be about, and the conclusion should show that you've dealt with the topic intelligently. Look at our study guide Structure and Organisation for more information.

6. **Answering the Question**

• Does your essay answer the question? If it doesn't, then you need to rewrite the introduction and conclusion (at least).

7. **Missing Words**

• Are there any words missing?

8. **Repetitions**

• When you use a word-processor, it's very easy to copy and paste sentences or phrases. Have you left in any repeated sentences or phrases?

9. **Making Sense**

• Does every sentence make sense? If one doesn't, rewrite it so it does.

10. **Plagiarism**

• Have you used secondary sources properly? Check that you haven't fallen into the trap of plagiarism.
Proofreading links

Hull University’s guide to proofreading
http://www2.hull.ac.uk/student/docs/Proof-reading.doc

The BBC’s ‘Skillswise’ site has a good section on proofreading
http://www.bbc.co.uk/skillswise/words/writing/proofreading/

University of Leicester study guide on editing, includes 5 stages the last of which is ‘proofreading’:
http://www2.le.ac.uk/offices/ssds/sd/ld/resources/writing/writing-resources/editing

Purdue Online Writing Lab: tips on looking at details, looking for cohesion etc
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/1/

Plain English Guide to general approaches to proof reading
http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/files/proofreading.pdf