

Proofread Like a Pro

Proofreading is an essential part of the writing process. No one writes a perfect first draft. E.B. White, co-author of Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style*, said:

“Revising is part of writing. Few writers are so expert that they can produce what they are after on the first try (Strunk and White 72). Your paper really starts to take shape once you start editing (refining wording and thought processes) and proofreading (looking for grammar and mechanical errors). Here are our top ten tips to help you proofread like a pro:

1. Take a break
2. Be objective
3. Arm yourself with a good reference library
4. Proofread on paper
5. Read aloud
6. Make multiple passes
7. Check the assignment criteria
8. Know your challenges
9. Have someone else read your work
10. Save your paper in more than one place

Take a Break

To begin, allow time between writing and revision; the amount of time you allow is up to you. This gives you a little “breathing room” so that you can reflect on what you’ve written and see it more objectively than you will if you revise immediately after writing. At the very least, take about 15 minutes—that’s enough time to get a snack, make a quick phone call, or read your email.

Be Objective

Writing is a personal process, and it can be challenging to look at your writing objectively. Remember that your paper is just that—it’s a *paper*. It isn’t you. Try to look at your paper as a product rather than as an extension of yourself. That objectivity will help you become a better editor and proofreader of your own work. Then polish your paper until it clearly represents your ideas. You may be surprised at how gratifying that can be.

Arm Yourself with a Good Reference Library

Experienced writers have an arsenal of reference materials that help them correct grammar, spelling, punctuation, style, citations, and format. It may take you some time to amass your own reference library, and you may find that you need to update it periodically. We recommend the following:

- A good dictionary like the *American Heritage Dictionary*
ISBN-13: 978-0553583229
- A good writing handbook like *A Writer’s Reference*
ISBN-13: 978-1457686498
- A good style handbook like Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*
ISBN-13: 978-0205309023
- A citation manual (choose the one writers in your discipline use)

Proofread on Paper

Revising is easier when you have a printed copy of your paper. It's easy to miss errors on a computer screen. However, if you do choose to proofread from your computer instead of on paper, try changing the font and the size of your type. Sometimes just changing the physical appearance of your paper can help you catch errors you might otherwise miss. A couple of other tips at the beginning stages of proofreading:

- Move a pencil under the text as you read
- Use a colored pen or pencil to mark the errors or revisions you want to make

Read Aloud

Read your paper aloud as if you were reading it to your professor or to an audience of experts. Pay attention to any awkward wordings or gaps in your reasoning or explanations.

Make Multiple Passes

You'll have a much easier and more successful experience at revising your papers if you proofread in multiple stages. This stage of proofreading will take you the longest. Just remember—slow and steady wins the race. Try to take a brief break between each pass of your editing.

You'll need to revise the following things in your paper:

Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Make sure your introduction is focused and that your reader can clearly understand where you're headed with the rest of the paper. The introduction serves as a kind of "road map" for the rest of the paper. <input type="checkbox"/> Put your thesis towards the end of the first paragraph.
Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ask yourself "why does this idea matter?" as you read the rest of your paper. It's up to you as the writer to address this issue. <input type="checkbox"/> Connect the dots for your reader by fully explaining what you mean in each paragraph. In particular, ensure that you've adequately explained how any quoted material fits into your paper. If you find yourself thinking "they'll know what I mean," you're dead wrong. It's up to you as the writer to go the distance by fully explaining why you see this issue as you do. <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that your paragraphs are adequately developed. A well-developed paragraph generally has about five sentences. <input type="checkbox"/> Keep to one idea per sentence. <input type="checkbox"/> Check that your transitions between paragraphs are clear. <input type="checkbox"/> Consider whether or not you've presented your material in logical order.

Specific Examples	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure that you've supplied adequate specific examples to support your claims. If you remember "show and tell" in elementary school, you know that it's more interesting to <i>show</i> what you mean than to <i>tell</i> what you mean. <input type="checkbox"/> Analyze, don't summarize. Your paper shouldn't read like a repeat of something you've read for class. Assume that your reader has read but not memorized any texts you examine in your paper.
Grammatical Errors	<p>Check your paper for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Active voice (use vigorous verbs rather than the passive form of "to be": am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been) <input type="checkbox"/> Missed or repeated words <input type="checkbox"/> Mixed constructions (stay in one tense) <input type="checkbox"/> Pronoun/antecedent clarity <input type="checkbox"/> Run-ons <input type="checkbox"/> Sentence fragments <input type="checkbox"/> Subject/verb agreement
Mechanical Errors	<p>Check your paper for the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Apostrophes <input type="checkbox"/> Comma splices (two sentences fused together with a comma) <input type="checkbox"/> Common misspellings like there/their/they're and your/you're <input type="checkbox"/> Punctuation <input type="checkbox"/> Citations

If you need to make multiple changes of the same word, use the "Find/Replace" function on Microsoft Word. To use this function:

1. Go to the "Home" ribbon
2. Go to Find/Replace (on the far right of the Home ribbon)
3. Look for the dialog box that opens up
4. Type the word you want to change in the "Find What" field
5. Type the corrected word into the "Replace With" field
6. Click on "Replace All"
7. Look for the dialog box that indicates how many changes have been made
8. Click "OK"
9. Click "Close"

Check the Assignment Criteria

Make sure you've met the assignment criteria. If you were given a prompt, carefully check that you've answered all the questions or written all the pieces of the assignment.

If your paper is shorter than the assigned length, that's a sure sign that your ideas need more development. See if you can find places where you can more fully explain what you mean.

If your paper is longer than the assigned length, cut out any elements that aren't absolutely essential to your argument.

Know Your Challenges

All writers have something that's a challenge for them. Yours might be comma usage or pronoun/antecedent agreement. Chances are you know what your issue is, and now you can work on eliminating it from your paper. The more you do this, the sooner you'll master the concept that you find challenging. Once you've mastered that concept, it will be time to focus on something else that challenges you.

Have Someone Else Read Your Work

Ask someone you know and trust to read your paper for you. Having a fresh set of eyes is often the best thing you can do to write a better paper.

The "comment" function on Microsoft Word is a great help in this process. To use this function:

1. Go to the "Review" ribbon on Microsoft Word
2. Put your cursor next to the word or item that needs correction
3. Click on "New Comment" in the Comments section
4. Type your comment; you can write as much as you'd like in the bubble

When you're ready to print your paper, you'll need to delete the comments. To do this,

1. Right click on the comment
2. Look for the dialog box that pops up
3. Scroll down to "Delete Comment"
4. Click on Delete Comment

Save Your Paper in More than One Place

Nothing's worse than working hours on a paper only to lose it because you've saved it in only one place. If nothing else, print a hard copy of your paper each time you revise it. Some writers like to keep multiple copies of their papers so that they can see the progress they've made. Consider saving in one of these ways:

- Save to a flash drive
- Email the paper to yourself
- Use a saving/sharing site like Dropbox
- Use the Microsoft Cloud

Works Cited

Strunk, William Jr. and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. Fourth Edition. Needham Heights, Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.