

# 5

## Proofreading an Essay or Report

In Chapter 1, the importance of proofreading in the final stages of writing was mentioned.

Despite its importance, there is no one clear definition of proofreading.

Some people treat proofreading as editing which starts after the first draft is finished and

involves looking for all types of errors in a paper. Others define proofreading as the final stage of the editing process, focusing on *surface errors* only, such as errors involving spelling, punctuation, grammar and word choice, which should be corrected before submitting an academic essay or report to a reader. That is the definition used here. This chapter will look at:

- Typographical errors
- Grammatical errors
- Stylistic errors
- Tips for effective proofreading

Why is proofreading so important? An error-free essay or report with proper punctuation and capitalisation and no typographical or grammatical errors conveys a positive message to your audience and builds an impressive image of yourself. Careless errors, however, send wrong signals to your audience and eventually affect the grade you get for the essay.

Before you give your text to your reader (usually your tutor or professor), look carefully for the various types of errors discussed here and make sure to correct them.



### 5.1 Typographical Errors

Typographical errors or *typos* refer to word errors that are caused by the writer's carelessness, such as misspelling, misuse of homophones, and misuse of similar words.

### 5.1.1 *Spell/type words correctly*

Many people use the Microsoft Word spelling checker before they submit any writing. However, if you misspell a word into another meaningful word, the spelling checker may not be able to identify the error, e.g. *though* into *tough* or *brought* into *bought*. Therefore, you still need to read your work carefully to locate any easily misspelled and/or mistyped words, such as the following:

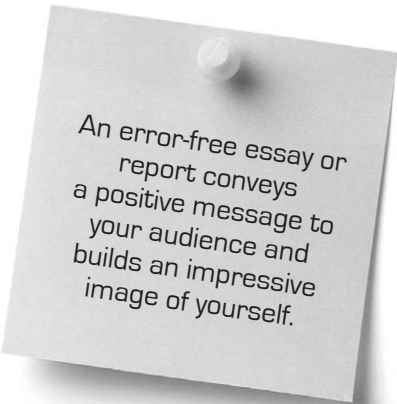
<i>dessert</i>	<i>desert</i>
<i>loose</i>	<i>lose</i>
<i>off</i>	<i>of</i>
<i>the</i>	<i>he</i>
<i>to</i>	<i>too</i>
<i>whole</i>	<i>hole</i>

Additionally, the spelling checker gives you American spelling, while Singapore generally uses British. Therefore, you still need to make sure that your usage is consistent throughout a text.

### 5.1.2 *Be careful with homophones*

A homophone is a word that has the same pronunciation as another word but differs in meaning. In most cases, the Microsoft Word spelling checker will not be able to identify such errors either, so you should be careful with such homophones as the following:

<i>bare</i>	<i>bear</i>
<i>complement</i>	<i>compliment</i>
<i>it's</i>	<i>its</i>
<i>principle</i>	<i>principal</i>
<i>reign</i>	<i>rein</i>
<i>stationary</i>	<i>stationery</i>
<i>storey</i>	<i>story</i>
<i>weather</i>	<i>whether</i>



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### 5.1.3 Avoid confusing similar words

Another group of words that cause difficulty are those which both look and sound similar so that you may have used a wrong word without knowing it, e.g. *proceed* for *precede* or *passed* for *past*. Therefore, you should pay special attention to this group of easily misused words such as the following:

<i>affect</i>	<i>effect</i>
<i>breath</i>	<i>breathe</i>
<i>conscience</i>	<i>conscious</i>
<i>allusion</i>	<i>illusion</i>
<i>precede</i>	<i>proceed</i>
<i>militate</i>	<i>mitigate</i>

## 5.2 Grammatical Errors

Perhaps the most common errors are grammatical errors so you need to be extra careful checking for these. Recent research (Wu, Tupas & Zhu, 2008) shows that the mistakes NUS students tend to make most frequently are those regarding the use of articles, subject-verb agreement, parallelism, comma splices, sentence fragments and dangling modifiers.

### 5.2.1 Use the right article and noun form

An article is used with a noun to indicate whether the noun refers to a particular thing or a general example of something. English has two articles: the definite article *the* and indefinite article *a/an*, with *the* indicating a specific reference and *a/an* a general reference. For example, *the book* in *Give me the book* is specific, but *a book* in *Give me a book* refers to any book.

A noun is used to refer to a person, a thing, or an abstract idea. The following are some basic facts about nouns:

- Nouns in English are identified as *countable*, e.g. (one) *woman*/(two) *women*, and *uncountable*, e.g. (x) *happiness* (you cannot count happiness)
- A countable or uncountable noun with *the* refers to someone or something specific, e.g. *The woman I love...*; *The happiness I feel...*
- A singular countable noun with *a/an* or a plural countable noun without any article refers to people or things in general, e.g. *A woman is all he needs. Women are wonderful.*
- The most common error with articles and nouns is probably the use of a countable noun without either an article or the plural form, for example:

*Teacher may have problem monitoring the students and checking whether they have really viewed the blog.*

In the previous example, both *teacher* and *problem* are countable nouns, and should be used either with an article or in their plural forms, for example:

**A teacher** (any teacher) may have **a problem** (any one problem) monitoring the students and checking whether they have really viewed the blog.

**Teachers** (teachers in general) may have **problems** (any problem) monitoring the students and checking whether they have really viewed the blog.

**The teacher** (a specific teacher) may have **the problem** (a specific problem) of monitoring the students and checking whether they have really viewed the blog.

### 5.2.2 Make sure the subject agrees with the verb

In English, the subject of a sentence has to agree with the verb in the sentence in terms of number, that is, a singular subject must be followed by a singular verb and a plural subject by a plural verb. For example, the following two sentences from a student's essay contain subject-verb agreement errors.

As the **technology are** improving, the education system also improves.

[The subject, *technology*, is singular so the verb should be *is*.]

**Blog entries** usually **contains** personal opinions and **provides** subjective reviews and non-polished information.

[The subject, *blog entries*, is plural so the verbs must take on the plural form — *contain* and *provide*.]

### 5.2.3 Use parallel structures

Faulty parallelism is an error in sentence structure, specifically with items in a parallel list. Parallel ideas need to be expressed in parallel structures. The following sentences suffer from faulty parallelism.

It was both **a long lecture** and **very tedious**.

**My income** is smaller than **my husband**.

The two sentences may be changed to

It was both **a long lecture** and **a very tedious one**.

**My income** is smaller than **my husband's**.

## 5.2.4 Avoid comma splices

Comma splices occur when two independent clauses are joined by only a comma, for example:

*This new phone doesn't make sense to me, it came without a manual.*  
[ independent clause ] [ independent clause ]

To correct a comma splice, you can use either a conjunction to link the two independent clauses or change the comma into a semicolon or a full stop, as in the following sentences:

*This new phone doesn't make sense to me as it came without a manual.*  
[conjunction]

*This new phone doesn't make sense to me; it came without a manual.*  
[semicolon]

*This new phone doesn't make sense to me. It came without a manual.*  
[full stop]

► See *Chapter 2: Developing an academic essay* for information on conjunctions.

## 5.2.5 Use complete sentences

A sentence fragment is either an incomplete sentence or a dependent clause, for example:

*Working far into the night in an effort to complete her project.*  
[incomplete sentence]

*Even though he has every reason to leave us.*  
[dependent clause]

In the first example, you need to add a subject or a verb to complete it. Here are three possible ways to rewrite it:

*Working far into the night in an effort to complete her project, **she** [subject] felt very lonely.*

***She** [subject] worked far into the night in an effort to complete her project.*

*Working far into the night in an effort to complete her project **proved** [verb] to be a silly idea.*

The second example cannot stand on its own and has to depend on a main (independent) clause. These are two good examples:

***He should not go** [main clause] even though he has every reason to leave us.*

*Even though he has every reason to leave us, **he should not do so** [main clause].*

### 5.2.6 Make sure a modifier refers to the correct subject

A modifier is a word, phrase, or clause that qualifies another part of a sentence. When a modifier improperly modifies something, it is called a dangling modifier, for example:

**Changing the ring tone every week, the phone** seems new to me.

[It is not the phone that is changing the ring tone every week.]

**By working far into the night, the project** was finally completed.

[It is not the project that is working far into the night.]

To correct a dangling modifier, you need to change the subject of the sentence so that the modifier refers to the right person or thing.

**Changing the ring tone every week, I** find I am using a new phone every week.

[I am the one changing the ring tone every week.]

**By working far into the night, she** finally completed the project.

[She is the one working far into the night.]

## 5.3 Stylistic Errors

Stylistic errors refer to different types of errors ranging from punctuation errors to some grammatical ones. Editorial style usually concerns making sure you have uniform use of the following elements:

- punctuation and abbreviations
- construction of tables
- selection of headings
- citation of references
- presentation of statistics
- many other elements that are a part of a manuscript

Therefore, when you write your essay or report, you should first find out what editorial style you are expected to follow as different universities, or even different departments, may have different requirements. Then, you should follow that specific editorial style closely and consistently, especially when you are writing citations and references.

- See *Chapter 6: Using other people's ideas* for more information on editorial style.

Common mistakes are those regarding the use of articles, subject-verb agreement, parallelism, comma splices, sentence fragments and dangling modifiers.

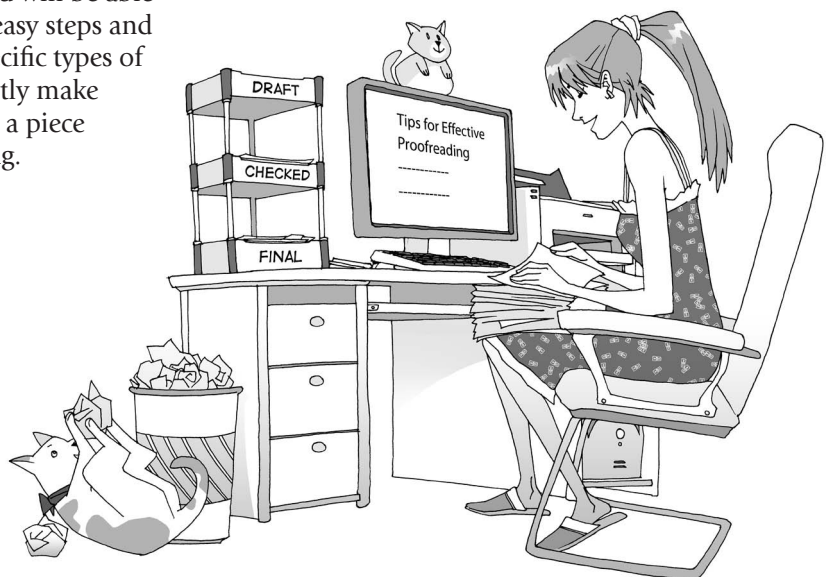
## 5.4 Tips for Effective Proofreading

You may have tried different approaches to proofreading your essays or reports but you may not have found an effective approach yet. The following tips for proofreading may be useful for you:

- Do a spelling and grammar check with the spelling/grammar checker incorporated in Microsoft Word. However, do not just rely on the computer spelling/grammar checker because even the best technology cannot identify all the errors you make. You must make sure that the spelling conventions you use (American or British) are consistent throughout the text.
- Read your writing aloud, listening to the sound of your voice as you read. This may help you spot any words that have been left out or do not make sense to you.
- Double check the homophones, words that look and sound alike and words that are spelled differently in British and American English.
- Pay special attention to words that you know often give you problems because writers do repeat errors.
- Pay special attention to long sentences and make sure that they are grammatically correct.
- Double check the facts in your writing, such as figures, numbers and dates.
- Double check your citations and references and make sure you have used the right names (first or last name), correct publication year and page number and that each of your citations is properly acknowledged in both the in-text and the end-of-text references.
- Do not submit any writing without proofreading it first. Always ask a friend or colleague to proofread your writing as well.

### Conclusion

Proofreading is an important skill in academic writing. Increased awareness of the types of errors you tend to make can help you get a better grade for the work. Proofreading takes a lot of meticulous effort and requires a lot of training and practice but once you master the skill you will be able to follow the few easy steps and focus on some specific types of errors you frequently make in order to submit a piece of error-free writing.



## Reference

Wu, S.M., Tupas, T.R.F., & Zhu, S. (2008). Students' written errors: An exploratory study. Paper presented at *TLHE 2008: International Conference on Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*. Singapore: National University of Singapore.

## Further reading

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