Proofreading for Common Surface Errors: Spelling, Punctuation, and Grammar

What is proofreading?

Proofreading refers to the process of reading written work for “surface errors.” These are errors involving spelling, punctuation, grammar and word choice.

Why should I care about proofreading, and what should I know about it?

In most college courses, instructors expect that your writing will be free of surface errors, but you may be uncertain of the rules for spelling, punctuation, grammar and word choice. The following rules and examples, taken primarily from The St. Martin's Handbook, 3rd ed., by Andrea Lunsford and Robert Connors, may help you find and correct some of the most common surface errors in your writing. If you have questions about these rules, consult any good grammar book.

How can I proofread effectively?

The following four steps should help you become a better proofreader.

1. Familiarize yourself with the errors you commonly make by looking over writing that has already been marked. Make a list of your errors, and check your writing for each of them.
2. Carefully and slowly read your writing out loud. Often your ear will hear what your eye did not see.
3. Read your writing, sentence by sentence, from the last sentence to the first sentence. This technique interrupts the logical flow of the prose and neutralizes any impression of correctness arising from your knowledge of what you meant to say.
4. Use your dictionary to check any words of which you are unsure, and to check for correct prepositions, verb tenses, and irregular forms.

What are some of the more common surface errors?

Here is a listing of some of the more common surface errors, broken down by category. Either select the link you would like to view or scroll down to the appropriate topic.

- **Spelling (#spelling)**
- **Punctuation (#punctuation)**
  - **Commas (#commas)**
  - **Apostrophes (#apostrophes)**
  - **Periods (#periods)**
- **Verbs (#verbs)**
- **Subject-verb agreement (#agreement)**
- **Pronouns (#pronouns)**
- **Other grammatical errors (#other)**
  - **Sentence fragments (#fragments)**
  - **Misplaced or dangling modifiers (#modifiers)**

### Spelling

Spelling errors are among the most common surface errors as well as the most easily corrected. To correct spelling errors, use a spell-checker, regardless of your spelling skill, along with a dictionary to help you find the right alternative for a misspelled word. Remember that the spell-checker won’t help with homonyms, words that sound alike but have different spellings and meanings. Some words that can cause trouble are listed below.

- **their** (possessive form of they)
Proofreading for Common Errors

Punctuation

Commas

1. Use a comma to signal a pause between the introductory element of a sentence and the main part of the sentence.
   
   - Frankly, the committee’s decision baffled us.
   - Though I gave him detailed advice for revising, his draft only became worse.

2. Use a comma when you join two independent sentences with a conjunction (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so).
   
   - Meredith wore jeans to the hotel, but she changed before the wedding.

3. Use a comma to signal the presence of a nonrestrictive element, that is, a word, phrase, or clause that gives additional information about the preceding part of the sentence, but which can be deleted without changing the basic meaning of the sentence. If the element is in the middle of the sentence, use a comma before and after the element.
   
   - Marina, who was the president of the club, was the first to speak.
   - Puerto Rico was a Spanish colony until 1898, when it was ceded to the U.S.

4. Do NOT use a comma with a restrictive element, that is, a word, phrase, or clause that restricts the meaning of the word or phrase it modifies. A restrictive element cannot be deleted without changing the sentence’s basic meaning.

   Wrong: I’ll return the sweater, that I borrowed, after I wear it tonight
   Right: I’ll return the sweater that I borrowed after I wear it tonight.

   Wrong: The people, who vandalized the school, were never caught.
   Right: The people who vandalized the school were never caught.

   To see why these are restrictive elements, try eliminating them from the sentence. Once you do so, you see that the first sentence implies that there is only one sweater, while the second implies that all the people were never caught.

5. Traditionally, commas separate all the items in a series (three or more words, phrases, or clauses that appear consecutively in a sentence). Some instructors don’t require a comma before the and or or between the last two items. Check your teacher’s preference, and be consistent in either using or omitting this comma.
   
   - Sharks eat squid, shrimp, crabs, and fish.
Apostrophes

1. To show that one thing belongs to another, either an apostrophe and an s or an apostrophe alone is added to the word representing the thing that possesses the other. An apostrophe and an s are used for singular nouns, indefinite pronouns (anybody, everyone, nobody, somebody), and for plural nouns that do not end in s. When plural nouns end in s only the apostrophe is used.

- Overambitious parents can be harmful to a child's well-being.
- The accident was nobody's fault.
- Both drivers' cars were damaged in the accident.

2. The word its, spelled without an apostrophe, is the possessive form of it, meaning of it or belonging to it. The word it's, spelled with an apostrophe, is a contraction of it is or it has. Even though with nouns an apostrophe usually indicates possessive form, the possessive in this case is the one without the apostrophe.

- The car is lying on its side in the ditch. It's a white 1986 Buick.

Periods

1. A comma splice occurs when two or more clauses that could each stand alone as a sentence are written with only a comma between them. To correct this error, separate the clauses with a period or semicolon, connect the clauses with a word like and, for, because, or although, or combine them into one clause.

   Wrong: The ship was huge, its mast stood thirty feet high.
   Right: The ship was huge; its mast stood thirty feet high.
   Right: The ship was huge, and its mast stood thirty feet high.
   Right: The mast of the huge ship stood thirty feet high.

2. Fused sentences are created when two or more groups of words that could each be written as an independent sentence are written without any punctuation between them. To eliminate a fused sentence, divide the groups of words into separate sentences, or join them in a way that shows their relationship.

   Wrong: Our fiscal policy is not well defined it confuses many people.
   Right: Our fiscal policy is not well defined. It confuses many people.
   Right: Our fiscal policy is not well defined, and it confuses many people.

Verbs

Active and Passive Verbs

1. Verbs can be in either active or passive voice. In active voice, the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb; in passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb. Readers typically find active voice sentences more vigorous and clearer; for these reasons, writers usually prefer active voice.

   Passive: The ball was kicked by the boy.
   Active: The boy kicked the ball.

   Passive: A decision was reached by the committee.
   Active: The committee reached a decision.

   Passive: Many arguments are offered against abortion.
   Active: Religious leaders offer many arguments against abortion.

Notice that in the passive voice examples, the doer of the action is either at the end of the sentence in a prepositional phrase or, in the third example, is missing entirely from the sentence. In each active voice example, however, the doer of
the action is in the subject position at the beginning of the sentence.

2. On some occasions, however, you might have a good reason for choosing a passive construction; for example, you might choose the passive if you want to emphasize the receiver of the action or minimize the importance of the actor.

   Appropriate passive: The medical records were destroyed in the fire.
   Appropriate passive: The experiment was performed successfully.

Passive voice verbs always include a form of the verb to be, such as am, are, was, is being, and so on. To check for active versus passive voice, look for sentences that contain a form of this verb, and see whether in these sentences the subject of the sentence performs the action of the verb.

**Shifting Verb Tense**

1. If you shift verb tense (for example, from past to present tense) in a sentence or passage without a good reason, you may confuse your reader.

   Wrong: After he joined the union, Sam appears at a rally and makes a speech.
   Right: After he joined the union, Sam appeared at a rally and made a speech.

   To proofread for verb tense errors, circle all verbs in your writing. Look at the verbs in sequence and check that you haven’t changed tense unintentionally.

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**Subject-Verb Agreement**

1. Make sure that the subject and verb of each clause or sentence agree—that is, that a singular subject has a singular verb, and a plural subject a plural verb. When other words come between subject and verb, you may mistake the noun nearest to the verb—before or after—for the verb’s real subject.

   Wrong: A central part of my life goals have been to go to law school.
   Right: A central part of my life goals has been to go to law school.

   Wrong: The profits earned by the cosmetic industry is not high enough.
   Right: The profits earned by the cosmetic industry are not high enough.

2. Be particularly careful that your subject and verb agree when your subject is made up of two or more parts joined by and or or; when your subject is a word like committee or jury, which can take either a singular or a plural verb depending on whether it is treated as a unit or as a group of individuals; or when your subject is a word like mathematics or measles, which looks plural but is singular in meaning.

   Wrong: My brother and his friend commutes every day from Louisville.
   Right: My brother and his friend commutes every day from Louisville.

   Wrong: The committee was taking all the responsibility themselves.
   Right: The committee were taking all the responsibility themselves.
   (Note that the use of the word themselves shows that committee is being treated as a group of individuals, not as a unit.)

   Wrong: Measles have become less common in the United States.
   Right: Measles has become less common in the United States.

   To proofread for subject-verb agreement, circle the subject and verb in each sentence and be sure they agree.

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**Pronouns**

[http://wts.indiana.edu/pamphlets/proofing_grammar.shtml](http://wts.indiana.edu/pamphlets/proofing_grammar.shtml)
1. A pronoun (like I, it, you, him, her, this, themselves, someone, who, which) is used to replace another word—its antecedent—so the antecedent does not have to be repeated. Check each pronoun to make sure that it agrees with its antecedent in gender and number. Remember that words like each, either, neither, and one are singular; when they are used as antecedents, they take singular pronouns. Antecedents made up of two or more parts joined by or or nor take pronouns that agree with the nearest antecedent. Collective-noun antecedents (audience, team) can be singular or plural depending on whether they refer to a single unit or a group of individuals.

Wrong: Every one of the puppies thrived in their new home.
Right: Every one of the puppies thrived in its new home.

Wrong: Neither Jane nor Susan felt that they had been treated fairly.
Right: Neither Jane nor Susan felt that she had been treated fairly.

Wrong: The team frequently changed its positions to get varied experience.
Right: The team frequently changed their positions to get varied experience.

To proofread for agreement of pronouns and antecedents, circle each pronoun, identify its antecedent, and make sure that they agree in gender and number.

2. As noted above, most indefinite pronouns (like each, either, neither, or one) are singular; therefore, they take singular verbs. A relative pronoun, like who, which, or that, takes a verb that agrees with the pronoun’s antecedent.

Wrong: Each of the items in these designs coordinate with the others.
Right: Each of the items in these designs coordinates with the others.

Wrong: He is one of the employees who works overtime regularly.
Right: He is one of the employees who work overtime regularly.
(In this example, the antecedent of who is employees, and therefore the verb should be plural.)

3. A vague pronoun reference occurs when readers cannot be sure of a pronoun’s antecedent. If a pronoun could refer to more than one antecedent, or if the antecedent is implied but not explicitly stated, revise the sentence to make the antecedent clear.

Wrong: Before Mary assaulted Mrs. Turpin, she was a judgmental woman.
Right: Before Mary assaulted Mrs. Turpin, the latter was a judgmental woman.
(In the first sentence, she could refer to either Mary or Mrs. Turpin.)

Wrong: They believe that an egg is as important as a human being, but it can’t be proved.
Right: They believe that an egg is as important as a human being, but such an assertion can’t be proved.
(In the first sentence, the antecedent of it is unclear.)

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Other Grammatical Errors

Sentence Fragments

1. The sentence fragment is an incomplete sentence punctuated as a sentence. To make it a complete sentence, join it to the main clause or rewrite it.

Wrong: She is a good friend. A person whom I trust and admire.
Right: She is a good friend, a person whom I trust and admire.

Wrong: In the workshop, we learned the value of discipline. Also how to take good notes.
Right: In the workshop, we learned the value of discipline. We also learned how to take good notes.
Wrong: The old aluminum boat sitting on its trailer.
Right: The old aluminum boat was sitting on its trailer.

To proofread for sentence fragments, check all sentences for a subject, a verb, and at least one clause that does not begin with a subordinating word like as, although, if, when, that, since, or who.

Misplaced or Dangling Modifiers

1. Misplaced or dangling modifiers are words, phrases, or clauses not clearly connected to the word they modify. Move a misplaced modifier closer to the word it describes, or revise a sentence to give a dangling modifier a word to modify.

Wrong: They could see the eagles swooping and diving with binoculars.
Right: With binoculars, they could see the eagles swooping and diving.

Wrong: Nixon told reporters that he planned to get out of politics after he lost the 1962 gubernatorial race.
Right: After he lost the 1962 gubernatorial race, Nixon told reporters that he planned to get out of politics.

Wrong: A rabbit’s teeth are never used for defense even when cornered.
Right: Even when cornered, a rabbit never uses its teeth for defense.

Wrong: As a young boy, his grandmother told stories of her years as a country schoolteacher.
Right: As a young boy, he heard his grandmother tell stories of her years as a country schoolteacher.

To proofread for misplaced or dangling modifiers, circle all modifiers and draw a line to the word they describe; be sure they can’t mistakenly modify some other word.

Produced by Writing Tutorial Services, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN

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