

## Guide to Editing and Proofreading

**Editing and proofreading are often neglected, but they are the crucial final stages of the writing process. Even the smallest error can result in embarrassing or even costly outcomes (misspelling a name, transposing digits in a telephone number, mistakes in a prospectus) so taking time and care to check what you have written is essential. This document explains the processes of editing and proofreading, and provides useful tips for doing both effectively.**

### What is the difference between editing and proofreading?

To many people, editing and proofreading are one and the same thing. There is, however, a distinct difference between the two.

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### Editing and Proofreading

**Editing** is the first task that should be undertaken after finishing the first draft of a piece of text. It involves checking the content of the text to ensure that the ideas are expressed clearly and logically, and form a coherent and meaningful whole.

**Proofreading** involves checking over the text in finer detail after the editing stage, to detect errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and format.

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The importance of the two tasks is demonstrated by the fact that the publishing and printing industries employ different people who are specifically responsible for each of them.

### Before you start

Editing requires careful analysis and critical thinking, and proofreading requires a great deal of attention to detail. As such, they are not tasks that can be done in a rush or squeezed in between other tasks: it is essential to devote sufficient time and concentration to both, and being in the right frame of mind to do this is very important.

Schedule a period of time in your diary for focusing solely on editing or proofing, and find an environment where you can be alone and free from distractions and interruptions. You may even wish to book a meeting room for yourself. Before you start, ensure that you are in a relaxed mood, with no other conflicting priorities or concerns to sidetrack your thoughts. Sit at a clear, uncluttered desk, which should have on it only the things that you need to help you with your task – pen, ruler, dictionary, thesaurus, grammar/punctuation guide, and your organisation's style guide, if one exists.

As with all types of work, take regular breaks, as it is not possible to concentrate for long periods. Don't edit or proofread for more than half an hour at a time without taking a break. Take even just a few moments to give your eyes a rest from the text.

## Editing

Editing requires focusing on the content of the text. The key goals are to check that the text:

- flows logically
- is coherent and consistent
- forms a meaningful whole
- is clearly expressed
- is accurate in the information it provides
- has an appropriate tone
- is concise
- makes its purpose clear
- is targeted towards the reader

Some key questions to ask yourself when editing a piece of text are:

- Does the opening paragraph provide a clear indication of the purpose of the text and a broad outline of the content?
- Does every part of the text contribute to the key idea in order to form a meaningful whole?
- Does the purpose remain clear throughout the text?
- Is every sentence relevant to the purpose of the text, with no digressions?
- Is there a sentence (preferably the first) in each paragraph that summarises the key point of that paragraph?
- Are the paragraphs unified, i.e. do they contain only one single idea each?
- Has every idea been given sufficient weighting?
- Does the text flow logically from one paragraph to the next?
- Have transitional words or phrases (such as, for example, 'however', 'thus', 'therefore', 'as a result', 'in this way', 'furthermore', 'above all' and 'moreover') been used, but not overused, to help the reader to make connections between the ideas?
- Are the sentence structure and vocabulary varied, without too much repetition?
- Has the text been worded concisely?
- Have irrelevant and unnecessary 'filler' words such as 'actually' or 'basically' been avoided?
- Is the text free from colloquialisms, slang, jargon and clichés?
- Has evidence been given to back up statements?
- Has consistent terminology been used throughout, or if more than one term has been used to refer to something, is it clear that they are one and the same thing?
- Is a positive and professional tone maintained throughout?
- Is the tone appropriate for the reader?
- Does the text meet the readers' needs?
- Does the last paragraph neatly and concisely summarise and conclude?

If the answer to all of these questions is 'yes', the text is likely to be a well-written piece that will not require too many changes. Don't be alarmed, however, if it seems that a lot of changes are needed – editing a piece of text to ensure that it forms a coherent and meaningful whole can sometimes involve making major changes or even rewriting.

After the adjustments from the editing process have been made, the text is ready for proofreading.

## Proofreading

Proofreading is not merely casting a glance over what you have written: it requires concentration to disconnect your mind from the content of the text in order to focus on the language and layout. Errors can be difficult to spot, so it is essential to read the text word by word to ensure that you don't miss anything. As it involves correcting small errors (some of which can, nevertheless, have a major impact), it does not require major rewriting.

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### The aim of proofreading is to spot and correct errors in:

- spelling
- typography
- grammar, punctuation and use of language
- style and format
- anything missed at the editing stage

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When proofreading your own work, you are often so familiar with the text that you see what you think you have written rather than what you actually wrote. For this reason, you will get the best results by asking someone else to proofread your work. Find someone to be your 'proofreading partner', with whom you can swap and share proofreading tasks. If this is not possible and you have to proofread your own work, make sure that you take a break of at least an hour (or ideally 24 hours) after writing before you start to proofread. This will help to distance you from the text.

One of the most important principles of proofreading someone else's work is to never make assumptions. If you are unsure what the writer has intended to write, query it rather than jump to conclusions and amend it wrongly.

Print off the text and proofread on paper – it is much easier to spot errors on paper than on-screen. Before you do this, however, it is a good idea to run the spell check on the computer to catch any obvious errors. Don't rely on this alone to detect spelling and typographical errors, though, as it cannot always be completely accurate. The grammar check is not worth using at all, as a computer cannot cope with all the complexities of grammar and sentence structure, and often ends up being more confusing than helpful.

Use ink that is a different colour from the print so that your corrections stand out and can be easily spotted. Beware of using red if proofreading for your colleagues, though, as it may remind them of the dreaded red pen wielded mercilessly by their teachers back at school!

Read slowly and deliberately using a ruler so that your eyes focus on only one line at a time. Go through the text several times, each time working on a different aspect. This will help you to retain your focus and concentration.

1. On the first read, it is a good idea to focus only on reading rather than on correcting, to get an idea of the overall content and meaning, and to spot anything missed at the editing stage.
2. Then, on subsequent reads, focus on correcting different types of errors each time.
3. To spot typographical errors, you may wish to do one read backwards, to disconnect your mind from the content and focus fully on the text word by word. This will not help for grammar, punctuation or some spelling errors, though, which can only be spotted in the context of the sentence.

It is also a good idea to view the whole text from a distance, as some of the errors, especially those in style and format, are difficult to spot close up.

Here are some of the most common mistakes with grammar and language use that you should look out for when proofreading:

- tense agreement: mixing past and present tenses throughout a piece of text
- subject/verb agreement: using plural verb conjugations with single subjects (e.g. 'one in ten people are ...' instead of 'one in ten people is ...')
- pronoun/case agreement: confusing the subject and object of the sentence (e.g. 'He sat between Bob and I' instead of 'He sat between Bob and me', or 'Me and John are working on that project' instead of 'John and I are working on that project')
- confusing similar words, such as the verbs 'imply' and 'infer', which describe different angles ('imply' is when the speaker/writer suggests something without explicitly stating it, and 'infer' is when the listener/reader logically deduces something from the information given by the speaker/writer) – another example is 'affect' and 'effect' ('affect' is normally used as a verb meaning 'to make a difference to', and 'effect' is used as both a noun and a verb – as a noun, it means 'a change that results from an action or cause', and as a verb it means 'to cause or bring about something')
- misuse of apostrophe before 's' at the end of a word, which is often incorrectly added before the 's' in plural words, e.g. 'The report's are finished' instead of 'The reports are finished' – an apostrophe should only be used before 's' to indicate possession (genitive case), e.g. 'The minister's cat is black' or 'My friend's desk is tidy'. However, in the case of the pronoun 'it', the possessive form is 'its' **without** an apostrophe. Adding an apostrophe and 's' to 'it' indicates the abbreviated form of 'it is' or 'it has'. Look at the difference between 'The dog has lost its collar' (possessive form, i.e. the collar belongs to the dog) and 'Look over there – it's the dog without the collar' (it is). Apostrophes follow the added 's' when indicating possession by more than one person, e.g. Gents' toilet, the pupils' classroom.
- incorrect conjugation of modal verbs, such as 'should of' or 'would of' instead of 'should have' or 'would have'
- words with similar spelling or pronunciation but different meanings, which cannot always be detected by automatic spelling and grammar checks, such as 'they're/their/there', or 'where/were/we're/wear'.

Some other common errors relating to typography, style and format are:

- double spaces between characters, especially after a full stop
- wrong or missing headings or titles in a table, or captions
- misaligned columns or rows in a table
- misaligned margins
- incorrect text references
- inconsistent bullet formatting
- incorrect fonts/font sizes
- incorrect capitalisation
- footnotes or endnotes not matching references
- interchanging small words such as: of/off/on, and/an/as, or it/is/if
- incorrect use of trademarks
- missing numbers in a numbered sequence/list
- incorrect dates
- inconsistent use of abbreviations

Also look out for dashes. There are three types:

1. **(-) hyphen:** smallest dash, normally used to join words that combine together to form a single meaning or that are linked together as an expression, such as 'decision-making' or 'problem-solving'
2. **(–) en dash:** in typesetting, approximately equal to the width of the type size being used

– normally used to join two words that are separate but related (en dash can be thought of as substitutes for ‘and’ or ‘to’), for example ‘work–life balance’

3. (—) **em dash:** in typesetting, approximately equal to the height of the type size being used – the least common type of dash, normally used to form parenthetical phrases, for example: ‘parenthetical phrases — such as this one — are separated from the main clause by dashes’, although the en dash is often used instead

It is a good idea to use standard proofreading marks, as they will enable you make corrections neatly and concisely. This is especially useful if you are proofreading for a colleague. Try to avoid squeezing too many marks into a small space, as it will become difficult to interpret. For example, if a word/sentence needs several corrections, score it out and rewrite it completely rather than amending each individual error. Also, try to keep the original text visible, so that the writer can clearly see the error and why it needs to be changed.

Finally, never take for granted that anything in a piece of text will be correct – be sure to check everything. This includes any parts that have originated from templates, as well as marginal parts of the text such as headers and footers, titles, subtitles and footnotes.