Proofreading

Overview

Think about cooking a meal. Some people like to clean up as they go because they find the lingering mess distracting. Others prefer to clean up at the very end because they think stopping to clean up gets in the way of the artistic process. Either way, the goal is the same – a good meal and a clean kitchen. Writing is similarly idiosyncratic and however we go about the process, the goal of good writing, correctly presented, is the same.

We believe that the goal should always be error- free writing and the reason for this is simple; our ideas are only as good as our ability to express them, and each time a mechanical error is made in our writing the expression of our ideas is diminished and our credibility suffers. Correctness matters. And, since writing correct prose is a complicated process and human error is inevitable, it is necessary to have some sort of system for locating and fixing those errors. This is no easy process, especially for those who use English as an additional language. The production of error-free writing can be very challenging; it is a learning process that takes time, attention and practice. Here are a few tips to help you develop a better system of editing and proofreading.

Know something about yourself

Are you the kind of person who likes to clean up your writing as you go? Or do you just let it flow and clean up at the end? Do you make the same kinds of errors over and over again? What are those errors? Are there patterns? Do you leave enough time for editing and proofreading? Ask these kinds of questions. Knowing this about yourself allows you to organize your time accordingly and to develop a more targeted approach to proofreading.

Understand your own limitations as a proof-reader

Most writers tend to think that simply re-reading their completed writing a few times will be enough to locate and fix errors, but this doesn't work very well. Our focus as a proof- reader of our own writing is upon the content and not the mechanics, so we tend to be a bit "blind" to the errors that would be apparent to others. What we need is a more systematic approach to proofreading that focuses our attention on the sentence-level mechanics.

Be a systematic proof-reader

Your goal as a proof-reader is to find and fix mechanical errors (this is different than "revision" which is the process of re-working and organizing the content and flow of your ideas – something that should precede proofreading). To be successful at this, then, requires focus. Here are a few things to try:

a. **Proofread your writing with a specific mechanical error in mind.** For example, if you tend to make errors with commas, proofread with a focus on identifying and fixing errors in comma usage only. Then, proofread again with a focus on something else, say subject-verb agreement. And so on.

b. **Proofread out loud**. We are much more likely to notice our mistakes when we hear them. This won't work for every kind of mechanical error but does work well for run-on sentences and incorrect word choices.

c. **Read backwards.** Some people find this helps, particularly if spelling is your issue. Reading backwards will help you to isolate words and find incorrect spelling or typos.

d. **Take time.** Proofreading requires sufficient attention to be successful. Even the best, most careful writers will make mistakes during the writing process. It is inevitable. So, give proofreading the attention it deserves. Give yourself enough time for this, and do it in stages. A quick re-read just before submitting your assignment will never be enough

How We Can Help

Students often mistakenly think of the Writing Centre as an editing service – a place where they can drop off their essay and have someone fix up all the mechanical errors. But this isn't what we do. The reason for that is simple. As an undergraduate student, your writing will primarily be about learning – learning about the subject matter and learning about the craft of writing. If we were to do the proofreading and editing for you, we would be interfering in that process and depriving you of the opportunity to learn how to do it yourself. So, what we will do is help you to become better at writing in general, become more familiar with the common patterns of error you make, become more knowledgeable about rules of grammar and usage, and become better at locating and fixing those errors yourselves.

Generally, we're more concerned with the content of your writing – whether the ideas make sense, whether your writing process results in coherent work, and whether you are building confidence as a writer. However, we also acknowledge, that producing an error-free paper is important. It's important to you, to your

professors and it's important to us. It's what you should strive for. But, we also think too much emphasis on mechanics and format can come at the expense of what's more important – ideas, inventiveness, playfulness, daring– the stuff of the undergraduate experience. In your quest to be better proof-readers and producers of error-free writing, don't lose sight of this larger goal.

Resources

Beware of online grammar checkers and applications. Ask yourself if they are designed to help you become more proficient or just more dependent.

You'll find many "proofreading tips" websites online. Feel free to browse for that at your leisure and find ones that make sense to you. Most will say pretty much the same thing. Here's one that's not bad: www.youtube.com/watch?v=X23haQTqcNk

A good repository of writing tips related to style and editing from the University of Toronto: www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/style-and-editing