

Journalism Style

Proofreading the Work of Others

Proofreading the work of others on your staff is a powerful way to improve your own writing. Almost every journalist spends time proofreading others' work.

Proofreading copy is slow, systematic work. A proofreader pays attention to exactly what is on the page and almost always works with a printed copy, even if something will be posted on a Web page. Proofreaders may place a pen under each word or punctuation mark as they read, move their lips as they read, watch for the weaknesses they know a writer has or vary the fonts and font sizes of a work so they are able to view copy they have seen before as if they were proofing it for the first time.

Sometimes a proofreader will read an article several times, looking for only one sort of error with each reading and using a different technique to discover each one. Here are eight common errors and the techniques proofreaders use to find them.

1. Sentence boundary errors.

What should be two sentences is glued together with a comma or without any punctuation at all. Or a fragment of a sentence sits off by itself. Or a muddle of words tries to be a sentence. (These often are artifacts left from editing on a computer screen without rereading the text.)

Your job as a proofreader is to read each sentence by itself, to see if it can stand alone as one complete thought without help from the surrounding sentences.

To do this, you need to locate the last sentence in the document. Read it.

Move to the second-to-the-last sentence. Read it.

Continue working your way to the beginning of the document.

If any sentence does not make sense, or seems to contain more than one sentence, mark it for the reporter's attention.

2. Colloquial language.

Watch for colloquial (informal) expressions such as *a lot*, *used to* (as a past tense marker), *kind of*, and addressing the readers as *you*. If your stylebook discourages contractions, search for them and replace them with the full form, such as *he is* for *he's* and *will not* for *won't*.

The search function on most word processors will allow you to look for these expressions or for apostrophes that may mark contractions,

but nothing will replace reading the copy and focusing on the misuse of language.

3. Punctuation errors.

Highlight all punctuation marks, such as periods, commas, exclamation marks, ellipses, question marks, apostrophes, colons and semicolons.

Ask yourself, "Is this the right mark here?"

4. Capitalization.

Highlight each capital letter.

Ask yourself, "Is this capital necessary?" Read each sentence to see if something else needs a capital.

5. Verb use.

Highlight each verb. Ask if it is in the right tense and number for the noun or pronoun associated with it.

6. Pronoun use.

Highlight each pronoun. Ask yourself, "Should this pronoun be plural or singular? If singular, should it be male or female?"

7. Spelling and word choice.

Read word-by-word, asking, "Is this the best word, spelled the correct way, for this sentence?"

8. Quotations and attributions.

Check all quotations and attributions to make certain they are accurate and follow your publication's style.

Try It!

In teams of four, proofread a page from another student publication available online or in print. Make four copies of each page, if possible. Each member of your team should check the whole page for two of the common errors listed above. Compare your findings. Could you have improved this publication?

Repeat the exercise with three more pages, preferably from other publications. Each member of your team should check for different errors, so that each person has searched for each sort of error by the end of the exercise.

Compare what you found with the proofreading errors other groups found.