

## Foolproof Proofreading: 7 Tips to Eliminate Writing Errors

By Ren Atkins

Proofreading your own writing sounds like a simple task. Read through your work and remove the errors...right? And yet we've all had that gut-sinking feeling of spotting our mistakes in a reply email or (the horror!) a published article.

One of the reasons why these errors slip through is that proofreading is a time-intensive task that can't be rushed. This is a strong argument for refining your proofreading skills, because you'll become quicker and more effective with practice.

These seven tips will help you identify weaknesses in your writing and eliminate errors before it's too late.

### 1. Don't edit as you write.

Write freely to get your thoughts out on paper (or screen) quickly, and resist the urge to check spelling or grammar as you go. Editing as you write will only impede the writing process, and it really won't save you any time at the proofreading stage. Sure, change things around while writing if you have a new idea or a better phrase pops into your head, but don't get too hung up on correctness during the writing stage.

### 2. Know your stuff.

This one is a bit disappointing for shortcut-seekers, but you really do need to have a firm grasp on writing, grammar and spelling fundamentals or your proofreading will be in vain. No matter how great a writer you are, my advice is to find a grammar guide that includes a list of commonly confused words and read it from start to finish. If you spot anything you struggle with or were unaware of, jot it down. It's particularly important to get a handle on common usage errors, because your word processor's spell check will not save you when you use wander instead of wonder, or your instead of you're.

### 3. Walk away.

Our brains have a wonderful quality that works against us when we are proofreading: the ability to fill in blanks without even noticing that we're doing so. This ability is most powerful when we've just finished writing and still have

a strong memory of what we wanted to say. Your overly helpful brain will assist you to see the words on the page as you intended them, rather than as you wrote them. Thanks, but no thanks, brain. Take a rest - as long as possible - and come back with a fresh mind to proofread.

#### 4. Be orderly.

One reason why proofreading is so time consuming is that we tend to attack the task in a haphazard manner. But there's no point moving a comma if you're going to reorganize the whole piece later down the track. Start by reviewing the structure of the entire work, then move on to your paragraph and sentence structure, and finally to your grammar, punctuation and spelling. Don't try to fix everything at once. Do several passes and focus on one type of error or refinement at a time.

#### 5. Read it out loud.

You probably already know that you should be reading your work aloud to proofread, but are you actually doing it? Working along each line, use a pen, ruler or mouse cursor to keep your visual focus on each word as you read. Don't let your clever brain make assumptions about what the text should say.

#### 6. Create your own checklist.

Keep track of the errors you spot, and create a checklist to help you remember to check for your most common mistakes. You may need to use a grammar guide to help you through your first few attempts at proofreading, but if you're like most of us then you'll probably discover that your errors are quite predictable. Keeping track of your writing weaknesses will help you become efficient at eliminating or avoiding them.

#### 7. Phone a friend.

If your writing is about to be made available for public consumption, it's a great idea to ask a friend to read over it. Even experienced copywriters will take advantage of a second set of eyes whenever available. Don't be so close to your work that you can't let someone else review it and make corrections or suggest changes.