Proofreading: Tips for Improving Your Document

Allow enough time to revise

Allow time between writing and proofreading. The longer you can distance yourself from your writing, the more likely you are to detect any concerns. Leaving your document overnight or taking an hour or two to work on another project will be helpful. Getting “out of your own head” and focusing on something else for a while will help you to see things with a fresh eye. Also, make sure you have enough time to read through your document several times and to make all the necessary changes.

Break it down and review it in stages

Read one sentence at a time; try using a piece of paper to cover up your document and reveal one line at a time. You could also try reading from the last sentence of your document and work backwards, or even backwards word by word – these strategies should help you detect sentence-level issues that you may otherwise overlook.

Read over your document multiple times, each time focusing on a different concern. For example, read through once for article use, again for punctuation, and so on. Establish the most prominent errors and prioritise. For example, altering the passive/active voice or replacing participles with finite verbs will often change the structure of your sentence significantly, which may then affect word choice. Make this process easier for yourself by starting with the big issues and becoming pickier and more mechanical in later stages.

Do not rely on spell and grammar checkers

Although spell and grammar checkers might flag some issues, they can also miss many others. Even worse, they might make inaccurate suggestions/corrections. For instance, you may spell a word correctly, but it may be an incorrect word entirely, as is often the case with homonyms (e.g., complement/compliment, accept/except, affect/effect). Computers are good at following rules, but bad at assessing context. These checkers are also, typically, very basic; they may not recognize technical words and often do not deal well with complex sentence structure. In addition, checkers will not flag contractions, which you should avoid in academic writing, and they will not detect the incorrect use of apostrophes (apostrophes are used to indicate possessives, not plurals). Checkers also will not detect incorrect uses of prepositions.

Read aloud

If you are a proficient English speaker and writer, reading aloud may help you “hear” a problem that you have otherwise overlooked when reviewing your work silently. This technique can be particularly helpful for detecting issues with punctuation. For example, you may notice that you naturally pause at certain points, or are running out of breath by the end of a sentence – these are good clues that you need some punctuation or that your sentences are too convoluted. Reading aloud can also help you check for flow; for instance, you may find that, as you read, your writing sounds like a list of statements rather than a series of interconnected arguments. This is a clue
that you need some transitions to help connect your arguments and to link them back to your overall thesis or objective.

**Work from a printed copy**

Not only is this better for your eyes, you are more likely to detect mistakes compared to reading from the computer screen. Although your professor may require single-sided copies of the final product, for the purpose of proofreading (and in the interest of conservation) consider double-sided printing for these rough drafts, or printing on the back of used paper.