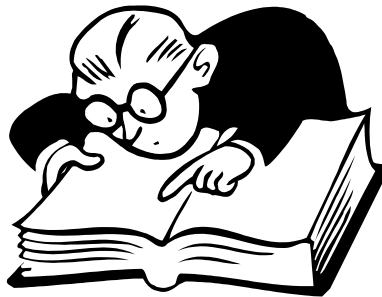


# A GUIDE TO PROOFREADING



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## What can this book do for you?

The information provided here can help you more easily locate and recognize the mistakes in your writing. This process is generally known as proofreading.

Proofreading is one of those things that we have all been sternly advised to do by generations of teachers – like sitting up straight or not chewing gum in class. But most of us were given very little guidance in how to do it.

The goal of this book is to show you how to proofread.

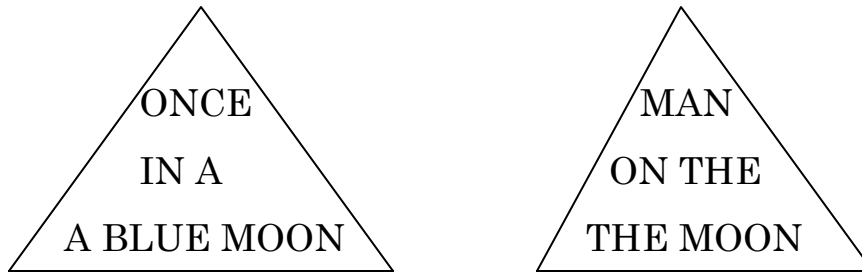
Specifically, these materials will help you to:

1. See that proofreading is different from ordinary reading.
2. Learn ways to slow down your eye movement.
3. Learn to shift your attention from the meaning of the words to the individual letters and marks on the page.
4. Understand what kinds of errors are common in beginning college writing.
5. Prepare an individualized proofreading guide to use in correcting your own papers.

## PART I

### WHAT IS PROOFREADING?

Let's begin with a simple proofreading exercise.



Did you notice anything odd when you read the words inside the triangles?

The first time you read them, you may not have noticed the repeated words. If this happened, you have just experienced an important fact about reading: most of the time when we read, our eyes move so rapidly that we do not perceive everything on the page.

In fact, we don't need to see all the letters or words to understand the meaning because our brains are so good at "filling in the blanks". Our brains often leap to meanings, given even the barest of clues. This leads us to our first main point about proofreading.

## A. Proofreading is not reading.

Here is a chart to demonstrate some differences between the two:

### Normal Reading

Reader looks for meaning.

Reader's eyes fix on units of meaning (2-5 words long) as they move across the page.

Depends less on visual perception and more on the brain's ability to construct meaning.

### Proofreading

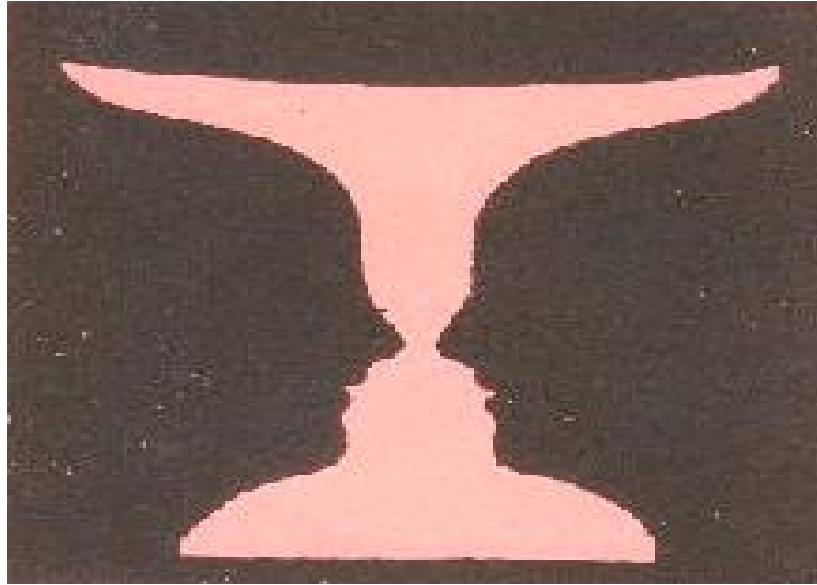
Reader looks at form – spelling, punctuation, etc.

Reader's eyes fix in turn on each letter, word, and punctuation mark.

Depends on visual perception of each individual mark on the page.

**B. You can't read for meaning and proofread at the same time.**

To demonstrate this, let's look at an optical illusion.



Looking at this figure, we may see a white vase with a wide dish and base, and narrower, curving stem. At second glance, our perception can shift and we see, in black, the profiles of two people facing each other, almost nose-to-nose.

What we cannot do, however, is see both images at once, no matter how hard we try. We have to consciously shift our perception back and forth. If you go back and look again at the illustration, you will see this is true.

So it is in looking at a piece of writing. We cannot see both letters and words, both form and meaning, at the same time.

Proofreading requires a deliberate shift in perception (King p. 110).

**C. To proofread effectively, you must deliberately slow down your eye movement and shift your attention away from meaning.**

If you glance back over something you have written without consciously making the shift in perception, you may not find any of the errors or omissions in your writing.

Why? Because your mind will “see” what it knows should be there, not what actually appears on the page.

**D. Proofreaders – even trained ones – identify only about 60-70% of errors during one reading of a paper (Barton p.88).**

That means even English teachers. So, if you want to find most of the mistakes, every paper should be proofread at least twice.

## PART 2

### HOW TO SLOW DOWN EYE MOVEMENT

The key to effective proofreading, then, is to make sure your mind reads what is actually on the page. In order to do that, you will need to adopt some conscious strategy to force your eye movement to slow down and take in each symbol as you move from left to right across a line of text.

Strategy 1. Isolate the line or sentence you are proofreading from the rest of the words on the page.

A ruler works well or even a piece of paper. Hold it under the line you are looking at. This helps you focus your attention by blocking out the rest of the information on the page.

Strategy 2. Place your finger or pencil on the page and point to each word and punctuation mark as you read it.

You may have been previously advised not to move your lips or use your finger as you read, but these are o.k. to do in proofreading.

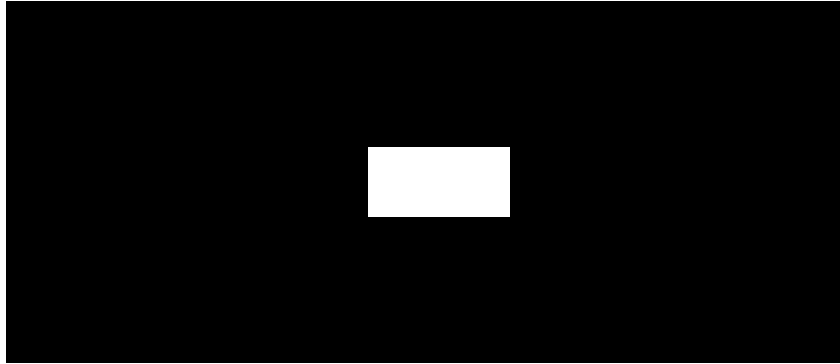
Strategy 3. Sub vocalize or read out loud.

To sub vocalize is to say each word under your breath and move your lips as you say it. Hearing your voice reading slowly keeps you from speeding up your reading rate and also helps you find the discrepancies between what you wrote and what you meant.

## **Practice 1**

Directions: Staple your writing sample here to practice the proofreading strategies just discussed – put a ruler under each line, point with your finger or pen to focus your attention, and sub vocalize or read aloud.

Strategy 4. Use a window card.



This is a window card. Use it to isolate each word and punctuation mark as you read:

- Place the window opening over each word and punctuation mark in order.
- Look closely. Is the word spelled correctly? Is the punctuation mark in the right place?
- After perceiving a word, lift the window and look again at the word in the context of the whole sentence to verify that you have used the correct word.

When looking at the whole sentence, you can hold the edge of the card under a line of text to help block out the rest.

Strategy 5. Read a piece of writing from back to front.

Yes, this means starting at the end – of a sentence or paragraph – and reading backwards to the beginning. Again, sub vocalize and point to each word as you read.

Why is this useful? This proofreading method forces you to read word for word and ignore the meaning.

These strategies may seem at first like mere “gimmicks”. However, a good gimmick is sometimes just what we need to help us experience the difference between reading and proofreading.

## **Practice 2**

Directions: Staple the sample of your writing here and use the window card to proofread it. Then go over it a second time without the window card, using strategy 5 –reading from back to front.

## PART 3

### WHAT TO LOOK FOR WHEN YOU PROOFREAD

Proofreading is often difficult for us because we don't know what to look for. The next sections of this book will guide your proofreading by answering two questions:

- What types of errors are common enough that we should know about them?
- What types of errors do you as an individual writer tend to make?

Why is it important to answer these questions?

Because if we don't, our attempts to identify error may be aimless or misdirected. We don't know what to look for or we will go off on tangents.

What kinds of writing mistakes do beginning college students commonly make?

In 1988, two college teachers published the results of their research into errors in student writing. After reading 300 papers written by college freshmen, the two researchers identified these as the most common errors (Conners and Lunsford p.400):

<u>Error or Error Pattern</u>	<u># in 300 papers</u>
Spelling	450
No comma after introductory element	138
Comma splice	124
Wrong word	102
Lack of possessive apostrophe	99
Vague pronoun reference	90
No comma in compound sentence	87
Pronoun agreement	83
Sentence fragment	82
No comma in non-restrictive phrase	75
Subject-verb agreement	59
Unnecessary comma with restrictive phrase	50
Unnecessary words/style rewrite	49
Wrong tense	46
Dangling or misplaced modifier	42
Run-on sentence	39
Wrong or missing preposition	38
Lack of comma in series	35
Its/it's error	34
Tense shift	31
Pronoun shift/point of view shift	31
Wrong/missing inflected endings	31

We can see that spelling mistakes were by far the most common type of error, with a total of 450 occurring in the 300 papers.

The third most common type – “comma splice” – is related to two other items on the list – “sentence fragment” and “run-on sentence”. All together, they add up to 245 mistakes in 300 papers.

So the conclusion we can draw here is that the two most common types of error in freshman papers are:

1. Spelling error
2. Errors in determining where a sentence ends
  - A comma splice is the term given two sentences erroneously punctuated with a comma between them instead of a period.
  - A sentence fragment is a group of words not complete as a sentence but written as one.
  - A run-on is two sentences written with no punctuation between them.

## PART 4

### PROOFREADING FOR SPELLING

#### A. Proofreading after using a spell checker.

You may have a big question at this point: “But if I use an electronic or computer spell checker, won’t it find all my mistakes? I won’t really have to proofread for spelling after using a spell checker, will I?”

The answer is yes, you will.

Why? Because the computer won’t find certain kinds of common problems related to spelling. It won’t find these problems:

1. Cases where one correctly spelled word is substituted for another, such as that instead of than, or than instead of then, think instead of thing, or now instead of not.
2. Errors made by adding an unnecessary letter or word: your recent orders instead of your recent order or your your recent order.
3. Errors made by omitting letters or words: you request instead of your request or we able instead of we were able.

These errors are invisible to the computer or electronic spell checker, yet are likely to occur because of the speed difference between the mind and the hand.

They are also easy to miss during casual reading of a paper because our minds “overlook” them.

B. Proofreading for real spelling error.

If you do not have access to a spell checker or choose not to use one, it will help you to know two types of information before looking for spelling mistakes.

1. You should be aware of what sorts of words are likely to cause trouble. Words with the following features are more likely to be misspelled. Look carefully for them as you proofread.

Long words with many syllables.
---------------------------------

If a word has many syllables, people tend either to leave some out or add some; for example:

Correct

maintenance

convenience

possibility

Student misspelling

maintence or  
maintainance

convience

possibility

Words where letters might be doubled.

Sometimes a writer may use double letters where they don't belong:

Correct

habit

fulfill

Misspelled

habbit

fullfill

On the other hand, a writer may not put double letters where they should be:

Correct

roommate

embarrassed

Student wrote

roomate

embarassed

Words with indistinct sounds.

Many words contain unstressed syllables where all you hear for a vowel sound is "uh". It is hard to know what letters should go there.

Students often guess wrong:

Correct

permanent

separate

Student wrote

permenant

seperate

2. The second type of information useful to you in proofreading for spelling is knowledge of your own personal spelling “demons”.

Keep a list of your own problem words in a handy place. There’s a section at the rear of this book for you to keep such a list.

Your lab instructor can help you look at papers you write or have written to locate words you are likely to misspell.

### **Practice 3**

Directions: At this time turn to the Proofreading for Spelling pages at the back of this book. Under each category of “words that can cause trouble”, write examples of your own misspellings of that type.

**PART 5**  
**PROOFREADING FOR SENTENCE ENDINGS**

It can be difficult to tell if a word group is a complete sentence or where one sentence ends and another one begins.

Here is a sample passage from student writing:

(1) The staff dietician talks with the patients to see what their likes and dislikes are. (2) The activity director plans activities for residents, (3) it helps them fill days with something to look forward to.

How many sentences did you find in this passage?

The signals the writer gives us indicate that she thought of this as two sentences: she has two capital letters to mark sentence beginnings and two periods for end punctuation.

However, the passage really contains 3 sentences, not 2. Where should the other period go?

Sentence problem 1: Comma Splices and Run-ons

Examples:

Incorrect

The months of waiting  
paid off, I was accepted.

Melvin couldn't get in,  
he didn't look old enough.

Correct

The months of waiting  
paid off. I was accepted.

Melvin couldn't get in.  
He didn't look old enough.

Commas aren't strong enough by themselves to be used between two sentences.

What kind of thinking leads us to incorrectly use the comma instead of a period?

- Students may omit the period between two sentences about the same thing:

Example: My cousins are coming, I haven't seen them for years.

- Or they may omit a period when the second sentence backs up the first:

Example: The months of waiting paid off, I was accepted.

## Fixing Comma Splices

1. Recognize that certain words may be located toward the front of a new sentence, and use them as signals:

### Signal words

I, we

he, she, they, you

it

### Example

The months of waiting paid off. I was accepted.

He forgot his own address.  
He was terribly absentminded.

Don't read Centennial.  
It's such a dull book.

Remember these words to help you recognize splices.

2. Put a period between the two sentences, taking out the comma.

### Incorrect

She forgot her own address, she was terribly absent-minded.

### Correct

She forgot her own address. She was terribly absent-minded.

3. Put in a connecting word that shows how or why the two statements are related.

- Some connecting words are used with a comma when between two sentences.

and
but
so
or

These words need commas.

Incorrect

The months of waiting  
paid off, I was accepted

Correct

The months of waiting  
paid off, and I was accepted.

- Some connecting words do not always require a comma.

Incorrect

Melvin couldn't get in,  
he didn't look old enough.

Correct

Melvin couldn't get in  
because he didn't look old  
enough.

## Practice 4

Directions: Proofread the following passage for comma splices. Correct any you find by replacing the comma with a period or adding an appropriate connecting word. Remember to use your proofreading strategies for slowing down eye movement.

### The College Application

“It is to the student’s benefit to begin to apply to several colleges as soon as possible.” This is good advice, we have heard it before. In July, the deadlines are barely visible. We have the forms. Now it is October, we have to get to work. We wonder where to begin, everything looks so confusing.

The first source of information is the famous College Handbook. Finding the right college here is like finding Tom Cruise’s phone number in the white pages. Each college has different courses, different sports, and different requirements, they all seem the same. Asking a few teachers is always a help, but each teacher recommends the college he attended. For every ten teachers, there are ten colleges that are “...just right for you.” Of course, for those who find the time, visiting the colleges remains the most accurate method of making the right choice, the best colleges are always located hundreds of miles from home.

After receiving the many application forms, the college-bound student must now make some decisions. After the stack of applications has managed to block the bedroom door, the time comes to throw away what is useless. The student fills the trash can three times, enough brochures still remain to wallpaper the family room. One day the process of applying finally begins.

Weekdays are too hectic, and weekends disappear too quickly. However, Mom demands action, so the student begins. The personal-data sections and the list of activities take only a few days to complete. “Now,” the student mutters to himself, “I’m really rolling, I’ll start the essays next Saturday morning.” Unfortunately, I cannot tell you how to write the essay, next Saturday morning is always a week away. The completed application must be sent to the counselor’s office, his deadline comes months before the colleges’ deadlines. The application takes the student only a week to write, it takes the counselor’s office over a month to mail. However, this delay does not matter; the hardest part of applying is over.

The next problem is finding two teachers who are willing and able to write decent recommendations. Finding a slightly dishonest teacher is about as hard as finding a completely honest one. The remarks on report cards are usually gratifying, a recommendation to a college takes more than a smile and a courteous remark. If a student does find a teacher who will write a glowing recommendation, then his remarks often sound too good to be true.

Now, it is January, the writing game will last until March or later. The spring days creep along. On Saturdays, the senior occupies the recliner on the front porch and waits for the mail carrier. Mothers are warned not to open other people’s mail. The day finally arrives, the senior tears open the letter to learn where he will go to school for the next four years.

## Practice 5

Directions: Run-on sentences are similar to comma splices except that there is nothing between the sentences. Proofread this passage for run-on sentences and correct them using the techniques you used for comma splices.

Today's young people are blamed for a host of problems. Commentators, the media, and even the older generation castigate them it seems as if youth can do nothing right. The media and their commentators frequently blame the nation's crime problem on its youth they cite statistics, observations, and case studies to support their view-point. They seem to imply that the nation would not have a crime problem if it did not have young people. Would the trade-off be worth it? Another problem that is attributed to today's youth is the breakdown in the nation's traditions and values. American society has been changing for the past two decades during that time, a generation has been born, matured, and been assimilated into the mainstream while another generation is taking its place. On which of these generations would the blame be placed? Logic would seem to require placing it on the first generation, but that generation is the one that is currently complaining about young people. The generation that grew to maturity and middle age during the decades of turmoil and transition not only participated in the upheaval but also precipitated it today that generation seems to have forgotten toe role it played in changing society. Instead of emphasizing current problems and seeking to assign blame, it might be more useful to delineate modern advantages. Due to advances in medical knowledge and technology, the nation now has an increased life

span in addition, people enjoy better health for a greater percentage of their productive years. Also, more people have access to an improved life style. Finally, improvements in transportation and mass-marketing techniques have made a greater variety of foodstuffs available this, in turn, has improved the daily diet of a significant portion of the population. Whether today's youth should be praised or punished is irrelevant; instead let us hope they will continue the process of improving the nation.

### **Practice 6**

Directions: Return to Practice 1 and Practice 2 (page and of this book) and proofread your writing samples for comma splices and run-on sentences.

## Sentence Problem 2: Sentence Fragments

A fragment is a group of words written with a capital letter at the beginning and a period or question mark at the end but that doesn't really contain the key sentence elements too be a complete sentence.

Here are some examples of common types of fragments.

1. Groups of words starting with an -ing word.

<u>Fragment</u>	<u>Corrected versions</u>
Riding our bicycles on the trail. It was good exercise.	We were riding our bicycles on the trail. It was good exercise.
	or
	Riding our bicycles on the trail <u>was good exercise</u> .

### How to fix:

Add the words to tell who or combine the fragment with a nearby sentence.

2. Lists and examples not connected to a sentence.

Fragment  
Some examinations are not fair. For example, my Accounting I final last semester.

Corrected versions  
Some examinations are not fair, for example, my Accounting I final last Semester.

She passed time during the day by knitting. Plus by working crossword puzzles.

She passed time during the day by knitting and by working crossword puzzles.

First, assemble the items You need to cut out your garment. The pattern, pinking shears, straight pins, and the material.

First, assemble the items you need to cut out your garment: the pattern, pinking shears, straight pins, and the material.

How to fix:

Notice that all 3 sample fragments were fixed by connecting them to the sentence coming before. This kind of fragment often begins with one of the following words:

also	first	plus
especially	for example	such as
except	including	

## Practice 7

Directions: Return to Practice 1 and Practice 2 and proofread your writing samples for sentence fragments.

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# PERSONAL PROOFREADING GUIDE

Keep this book open to this section as you proofread. Before starting to proofread, look over the examples briefly to remind yourself what types of errors to look for.

## PROOFREADING FOR SPELLING

After using the computer spell checker, proofread for the kinds of "typos" described below.

Caution! These can be hard to find, so go slow!

- One correctly spelled word substituted for another.

Example: There is only one think I need. (think should be thing)

Examples from your papers:

- Unnecessary letters or words added.

Example: Your recent orders was delayed. (orders should be order)

Examples from your papers:

- Necessary letters and words left out.

Example: You request will be considered. (You should be Your)

Examples from your papers:



## PROOFREADING FOR SENTENCE ENDINGS

Look for these in your own papers:

- Comma splice:

### Example:

My term paper is due, I need  
to run to the library.

### How to fix:

--Use a period instead of  
comma.

My term paper is due. I need  
to run to the library.

--Use connecting words  
(sometimes with the comma).

My term paper is due, so I need  
to run to the library.

### Examples from your papers:

- Sentence fragments

## **PROOFREADING FOR OTHER TYPES OF ERRORS**

Record here any other common types of error you and your instructors locate in your papers.

Examples:

How to fix: