

Revision and Proofreading

Although writers often try to **revise** and **proofread** at the same time, the two are separate operations. Revision is still an important stage of composition; writers revising drafts normally concentrate on omission of evidence, weak logic, poor management of transitions, wordiness, and general stylistic awkwardness. Proofreading is the careful examination of a revised final copy for errors in typography, spelling, punctuation, and grammar. By the time proofreading begins, major revision has already been dealt with.

Dividing the tasks is important: In making substantial changes, writers often create small problems. Changes in sentence structure can produce agreement errors and faulty pronoun reference; additions to the sources or evidence cited may make the reference format inconsistent; thus, **proofreading**--unlike **revision**--must be the *final* task.

1. Revising a Draft

To revise a draft is to see it with a fresh gaze (*revise* derives from the Latin *revidere*, "to see again"). Renewing your own gaze is difficult; if you can, convince others to lend you their eyes--*after* you have done what you can. Use three readers for a serious project: a colleague engaged in the same research, someone from the field but outside your area, and a third reader unconnected with the field. The first will point out content blunders, the second will recognize failures to explain key features of your research, and the third will concentrate on the tangled obscurity of your writing. Before you approach anyone else, you must first work through the standard stages of revision, ensuring that your manuscript is satisfactory in its

- sequence of parts;
- completeness of content;
- economy of expression;
- agreement between text, data tables, and lists of authorities;
- and format.

2. Hints for Successful Proofreading

One of the great pitfalls of proofreading your own work is that *you know what you mean*. You will find that you correct your words unconsciously as you read; this will hide many errors that would be obvious to another reader. There are only two ways of protecting against this: reading *slower* than you would normally and making your own words *unfamiliar*. These are the goals of the following techniques:

- putting your work aside until it has become less familiar;
- reading very slowly;
- reading aloud;

- reading your sentences backwards, from the last to first (this will help you only with mechanics, of course);
- actively seeking mistakes, especially ones you habitually make;
- proofreading more than once (if possible, work with someone else);
- and correcting *printed proofs* of your work (the computer screen hides errors).

When you read normally (for content), you often see only the shells of words--the first and last letters, perhaps. You "fix" your eyes on the print only three or four times per line, taking in the words between the fixation points with peripheral vision *and assuming they are correct*. Peripheral vision is a poor proofreading tool: In normal reading, only the word nearest the fixation point is viewed accurately. When proofreading, you must force yourself to fix your eyes on almost *every word* and resist the natural impulse to skim over familiar matter.

a.) Notes on errors

Data tables are the most accurate portions of scientific writing, whereas citations and quotations have high error rates. One study found major errors in 30 per cent of references, and other studies have revealed misquotation rates ranging from 12 to 27 per cent. (see J. Matthews et al., *Successful Scientific Writing* 146-47). While the most common error remains misspelling (in spite of word processors), the most dangerous is the failure to cite accurately.

These tendencies have already created "research folklore" in several fields, among them psychology, as the famous story of the conditioning of "Little Albert" reveals. A troublesomely imperfect experiment by J. B. Watson and R. Raynor conducted in 1920 ("Conditioned Emotional Reactions," *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 3:1-14) was "sharpened" by successive reports until it no longer reflected the real nature of the original; it had become an exemplary study of conditioned response (for a full account of this, see Chapter 6 of Thomas Gilovich's *How We Know What Isn't So*). A more rigorous approach to citation (one that involved reading the *original* source) would have prevented such a myth from developing.

b.) Checklists

Checklists encourage you to concentrate on specific problems. In a large project, they also help you document the stages of composition. You might wish to include two lists of errors in your checklists: one consisting of those errors important to your audience (the ones they will focus on), and one consisting of those important to *you* (the ones you habitually make). The personal error list not only makes you aware of your habits but also helps you to change them. You should update this list each time you proofread. The second list should include a good selection of the general categories on the sample proofing sheet.

3. Professional Publishing

Proofreading is hard work. Professional editors proofread a *finished* version of a manuscript as many as ten times. Publishers hire teams to work in pairs, reading aloud, but (as you have probably noticed) errors still appear in printed texts. For more information about how to spot common errors in your completed essay, visit the Quicknotes pages on wordiness and common writing errors.