Written Assignments

Proofreading

Proofreading your work can make a significant difference to the grade an assignment receives – as much as 15%, or from a pass to a 2:1; for subjects where accuracy is an issue, a difference of three classifications has been known.

What do we mean by proofreading?

For academic writing, effective proofreading can usefully be understood as the following three-part process.

1 Editing

Addresses problems with:
- responding to assignment and assessment criteria
- content
- argument (including use of citation and sources).

2 Sub-editing

Looks at structure:
- organisation of material
- presentation (including correct referencing and consistency of style in typography, headings, line spacing)
- paragraphing
- sentence structure.

3 Proofreading for errors

Tackles:
- spelling, punctuation, grammar
- typing mistakes
- page numbers.

What areas of weakness do you need to address?

It is important to assess your skills and get help if necessary, e.g. from ASK or your faculty learning support tutors. Efficient writers learn which parts of the process are problematic for them and which they can reliably do automatically.

As you try to establish yourself as an effective proofreader, you may need to go through your work three times, addressing each section of the process separately. This will be time consuming at first, but for many of us it can quickly become automatic.
1 Editing

Whatever your approach to writing tasks – whether writing straight from a rough plan to a fair copy, or working through several drafts – the editing process addresses the following issues.

a Have you responded appropriately to the assignment requirements, the expected learning outcomes and all the assessment criteria?

- Recheck and establish what each is (and its weighting in terms of marks).
- Check that every requirement has been met.
- Check exactly what was required. For example, if you were asked to consider two authors and refer to at least three theories, have you done so? Is your assignment within the word count?
- Check that every recommendation has been considered.
- Assess whether/what changes are needed.

b Have you done what you set out to do?

- Make sure the introduction and main text match.
- Make sure the introduction and conclusion tally.

c Is the content appropriate, accurate and cohesive?

- Have you used appropriate, up-to-date resources?
- Have you omitted any important issues, theories, models or research without explanation?

d What is your argument, if there is one?

- Has it been introduced clearly?
- Are ideas/points clear, logical, sequential and properly referenced?
- Is the argument valid, and why?
- Does your conclusion draw together the points you have made? (It should not include any new information.)

e Are your citations and references complete and correct?

- Are your citations appropriate and properly located in your text to assist the argument/assignment?
- Does the bibliography reflect the assignment requirements and what you set out to achieve?
- Is the bibliography (reference list) at the end of your work complete and accurate?

f Remember: any changes you make always entails the next stage of the proofreading process: sub-editing

- Major changes – if major changes are necessary, you should go through the editing process again and then check the structure, paragraph by paragraph.
- All changes – are likely to have an impact on grammar, paragraphing and sentence structure.
2 Sub-editing

Where any editorial changes have been made (especially where material has been moved around, e.g. cut and pasted) sub-editing is vital.

Sub-editing is best done on a printed version, as computer formatting often produces a different print layout (affecting things such as page breaks).

a Identify and locate changes, then check for consistency and flow

• Check that paragraphs link.
• Check sentence structure, especially compound sentences.
• Check agreement of verbs and tenses.

b Check formatting

For example, check that headings and subheadings have a consistent format and are not split across pages or printed at the bottom of a page.

c Make sure your presentation follows any guidelines given in the course handbook

For example, check style of contents pages, typography and line spacing.

d Citation and references

• Is citation accurate and correct (including all punctuation)? Check against http://referencing.port.ac.uk or the Library Guide.
• Is the bibliography (reference list) complete, accurate and properly punctuated?

3 Proofreading for errors

These are sometimes referred to as ‘transcription’ errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and presentation.

a Learn which transcription errors are characteristic of your writing

These will differ according to:

• whether English is your native language
• your level of skill in spelling, punctuation and grammar
• how comfortable you are with the content of your writing
• your IT or typing skills
• visual skills and awareness
• external factors such as time constraints and stress.

Establish what your own weak areas are and learn how to spot and correct them.

b Allow enough time

How you approach a writing task will impact on the amount of time needed for proofreading for transcription errors. Serial writers and drafters may proofread for errors as they go along, but most people find this impossible, especially with long assignments.
Try to finish an assignment at least a week ahead of deadline, then put it aside. When you come back to proofread your work it will seem fresh, and you will more easily spot errors.

c  **Tips for improved error checking**

- Do not proofread on screen – what you see on screen may be what you remember writing or think you remember, not the actual text saved there.
- Trick your brain into believing that you are examining a new document by printing it in an unusual typeface or on coloured paper.
- Check for academic style (e.g. do not use contractions or slang and use first person only when directed); refer to the handout *Academic writing style* for further information.
- Check suitable elements together (e.g. check all commas, brackets, researchers’ names).
- Do not proofread when you are tired.
- Swap assignments with a friend/housemate and proofread each other’s.

**English language competence**

It is important to understand your own level of competence in, and to establish strategies for learning:

- spelling
- punctuation
- grammar.

Your proofreading skills will be hampered if you are unclear about any of the following.

- Words, such as dependent and dependant, that are commonly confused. (Refer to the handout *Some commonly confused words* for a list of these.)
- How commas can change the meaning of a sentence. For example (Truss, 2003), the difference between:
  - The giant panda eats, shoots and leaves.
  - The giant panda eats shoots and leaves.
- The role of apostrophes. For example, the difference between:
  - Residents refuse to be put in bins.
  - Residents’ refuse to be put in bins.

**English for speakers of other languages**

If English is not your first language or you are bilingual, you should follow all the advice given above. In addition you should:

- Check errors that are common in your native language group.
- Ensure you select the correct tenses and verb forms.
- Be aware of academic English. It does, for example, often require the use of the passive voice.
- Contact EAP about courses and workshops ([www.port.ac.uk/eap](http://www.port.ac.uk/eap)) to improve your English.