Revision Strategies: Proofreading

This handout explains how to proofread a paper. Proofreading involves checking for surface-level errors, including errors of spelling, sentence structure, and writing mechanics (capitalization, punctuation, etc.). Before you proofread a paper, you should address potential content-related issues in the paper. For example, you should ensure that the paper includes a well-developed thesis statement, that the ideas are well-supported with evidence and discussion, and that the discussion is well-organized and coherent. Once you are satisfied with the content of the paper, you can move on to proofreading. Always proofread your writing before you submit it!

General Strategies

Use your resources: Most word processors have a function that checks for spelling and grammar mistakes. Although you should not rely on this function for all of your proofreading, you should use it to help identify issues with spelling and sentence structure. Also consider asking a friend, classmate, or professor to read your paper and provide feedback, or reach out to a writing consultant at Graduate Support. If you are unsure if something is right, look it up. The CTL website has some great resources to help with writing revision (https://ctl.unm.edu/graduate-students/resources/index.html). Other helpful websites include the Purdue OWL (https://owl.purdue.edu) and the UNC Writing Center (https://writingcenter.unc.edu/).

Proofread at the right time: Wait to proofread until you're satisfied with the content and organization of the paper. Proofread when you are alert, well-fed, and focused. Make sure to give yourself enough time to proofread each paper multiple times, as you may catch new things each time you read through.

Focus on issues with sentence structure, spelling, and punctuation: When you proofread, you should focus on sentence-level and word-level issues. To catch these issues, consider reading the paper out loud or printing a physical copy of the paper to mark with a pen, highlighter, or marker. Proofread sentence by sentence by copying and pasting individual sentences into a separate draft, reading the paper backwards (starting with the last sentence), or using a ruler or blank sheet of paper to obscure the sentences you are not focused on. Make sure to mark where you are so you can come back to the same location as needed.

Be aware of areas needing improvement: Focus on things that you know you struggle with, such as spelling or citations. Consider feedback you've received about your writing in the past, especially feedback from the same reviewer or faculty member that will be reading your paper. Pay attention to patterns of error that arise while using the spellcheck in your word processor. Use underlining or highlighting to identify consistent errors or repetitive language. For example, you could highlight comma errors in blue, or highlight every time you use a certain word or phrase.

Prioritize issues that affect reader understanding: Keep in mind that poorly structured sentences, mixed-up verb forms, and inaccurate citations are more likely to confuse your reader than a missing comma or a non-capitalized letter.

Focus on one issue at a time: Don't look for every possible problem at once. Choose one type of error to focus on each time you read through the paper.

What to Look For

Streamline your writing: Make sure your writing is clear and concise.

- Cut out wordiness and redundancy before cutting content.
- Consider putting expository info or examples in a footnote or an appendix rather than in the body of the text. Ask yourself if the information you've included is essential to your argument, or if you could include it in the supplementary materials.
- Ask yourself if a direct quote is necessary – can you communicate the same idea more succinctly by summarizing in your own words?
- Aim to use active rather than passive voice in your sentences to make your writing more precise.
    - Passive voice: "The test was conducted by the researchers under three different conditions".
    - Active voice: "The researchers conducted the test under three different conditions."
- Leave out words and sentences that don't add anything meaningful to the discussion.
    - You can usually leave out hedges ("I think", "It seems", "In my opinion").
    - Leave out unnecessary intensifiers (words like "really", "very", and "so"):
        - Okay: "The conference was really good."
        - Better: "The conference was excellent."
    - Leave out 'announcements' about your writing ("In this paragraph, I will.." "Now I will explain…"). Instead, use transitions to create links between paragraphs. You can also clearly establish the different topics in your paper by delineating separate sections with headings and subheadings to clearly establish the different topics in your paper.
    - Leave out redundant words/phrases.
        - Redundant: "The class had many necessary requirements."
        - Not redundant: "The class had many requirements."

Fix issues with sentence structure: Make sure each sentence is well-formed, with one main subject and one main verb. Make sure the verb in the sentence corresponds in form with the sentence subject. Make sure the verb in the sentence is in the appropriate tense.

- Identify fragments and run-on sentences.
    - Fragments are incomplete sentences.
        - "Running to the store." is a fragment – there is no subject of the sentence. Who is running to the store?
        - Correct: "He is running to the store."
    - Run-on sentences are sentences that have too many subjects or verbs that are not properly connected.
        - "He was running to the store he got there at four." is a run-on sentence. It has two main ideas ("He was running" and "He got there"), so it needs to be separated into two sentences or the ideas need to be joined with a word like "and".
        - Correct: "He was running to the store. He got there at four." Or "He ran to the store and got there at four."
- Check your verbs.
    - Make sure the subject of each sentence agrees with the verb.

- "He **was** running to the store." ← subject: he
- "They **were** running to the store." ← subject: they

- Make sure each verb is in the right tense.
  - When talking about general truths, use present tense: "Child poverty **is** an ongoing problem."
  - When talking about past research, use past tense: "The researchers **measured** rates of child poverty."
- Check for parallel structure. Verb forms should be consistent when you write a list, or when you are discussing an event/series of events that happened in the same time frame.
  - Incorrect: The officer cited him for speeding, he ran a red light, and was failing to keep a proper lookout.
  - Correct: The officer cited him for speeding, running a red light, and failing to keep a proper lookout.

Fix issues with spelling and punctuation. Carefully read each sentence to ensure the words are spelled correctly and the sentence has appropriate punctuation. For more information, see the ESOL: Common Errors handout on the CTL website, which covers many spelling, punctuation, and word choice issues in greater detail:
https://ctl.unm.edu/assets/docs/resources/esol-common-errors-and-challenges.pdf

- Check for spelling, especially commonly confused words (spellcheck won't always catch these).
  - there, their, they're
  - its, it's
  - your, you're
  - effect, affect
- Check all the punctuation.
  - Make sure all sentences are marked by periods and capital letters.
  - Make sure you've used commas, colons, semicolons, and hyphens appropriately.
- Use the Find & Replace function your word processor to quickly locate issues that need fixing. For example, this function is useful if you know you commonly misspell the name of a certain author or place, or if you want to check for consistent capitalization of a term.
- Make sure your paper corresponds with the requirements of the relevant style guide. For example, you may be asked to write a paper in APA, MLA, or Chicago style (among others). Use the official style guide as a reference to ensure your paper is formatted correctly. Style guides have regulations for citations, spelling, and punctuation, including standards for the use of ellipses, capitalization, and formatting of translations and quotations. Style guides can usually be found through a quick internet search.