

Proofreading tips

from [Text Wizard Copywriting](#)

Why bother?

If you care, you'll check.

The fact is, you've written something magnificent and you want to publish it right away. But wait; haste is your enemy. Give it a few more minutes and you'll be publishing a much cleaner document.

Allow another 24 hours, follow the tips below, and you could be publishing something that justifies your pride.

Get into the habit

Checking your written work isn't something you do as a penance during Lent. Get into the habit, make it part of your life, and it'll come naturally. Your written words speak as much about you as they do about your subject matter. Let the subtext be: 'I'm someone who pays attention.'

Use your spellchecker

Running a document through your spellchecker is the minimum you should do. It's free and it's quick. Ignoring your spellchecker is a crime against technology.

Having said that, spellcheckers aren't much good at catching errors – great for a first pass over a piece of work, but no substitute for human intervention.

And take your spellchecker's grammatical hints with a pinch of salt. Even if it did give reliable grammatical advice (which it doesn't), it pays to break the rules when you want to liven up your copy.

Buy a new dictionary

That dictionary you saved from school days is useless. Spellings have moved on. New words spill off the street every day; old ones shrivel with age. The most common change is for separated word pairs to draw closer via hyphenation towards eventual joined-at-the-hip concatenation: *proof reader* becomes *proof-reader* becomes *proofreader*.

So buy the biggest and best dictionary you can afford. Since no two dictionaries are the same, choose the one you like best. And then, for the sake of consistency, stick with it. The only time you need to change your dictionary is when your favourite publisher releases a new edition.

Refer to your dictionary frequently when proofreading. Even if you spell well, you can become out-of-date. For instance, if you're still writing *mediaeval* – or even *mediæval* – you run the risk of sounding out of touch. It's not wrong (you might prefer *mediaeval* for any number of personal or commercial reasons), it's just that modern dictionaries quote *medieval* as the most common spelling.

Hard copy for proofing

Text is more easily read and checked in hard copy. It's old-fashioned and a dreadful waste of resources, but you'll do a better job if you print your document – and then find somewhere comfortable to read it.

Ask a trusted colleague to help

The problem with checking your own work is that you read what you expect to read, not what's on the page. The most efficient proofreader is someone who's new to the text. Ask someone else to proofread for you – and then check it again yourself.

That final, self-checking thing is about you taking responsibility for your work. You can't shift the blame if your colleague misses something. It's still your written piece: the errors are always yours.

Take a fresh look

Take a break before you do your proofing. The longer the break, the fresher the copy will seem. Take it slow, and roll every word around in your head as if you've never read it before. Avoid going on autopilot, because you'll read what you intended to write, not what you actually wrote.

Use a ruler

This may seem juvenile, but it really does help. Your eye can't race ahead to the next line if you cover it up with a ruler or a sheet of paper. Wait till you've read to the end of the line before you move your ruler down to the next one.

Read out loud

This is another trick for slowing your reading down. Maybe not such a good idea in a quiet office, but embarrassment-free at home.

When you read out loud, you stumble over awkward phrases. You'll be surprised how much you want to rewrite when you speak your words out loud.

Call in a voice robot

An alternative to reading out loud is to set up Word (plus G Docs and possibly other word-processing apps) to read your copy back to you. The voice is robotic, but no one else will hear if you use headphones. Since a robot only ever reads what's on the page, you won't miss a single word.

Try combining the robotic read-back with hard-copy reading. That's a sure way to overcome the temptation to read what's in your head.

Take nothing for granted

This is the hard bit. How do you know that what you've written is accurate? Where did you get the data from? Who told you that last year's sales were £2.5m, or that John Smyth spells his name with a 'y'?

There's no way out of this: you have to check the facts yourself. Go back to the source for verification. The source could be anything: published annual accounts ... the subject's own website ... an encyclopedia ... government statistics. Don't rely on word of mouth or someone else's poorly-researched report. And don't take the first lacklustre answer that comes off the web.

Do whatever it takes to get your facts right. You are responsible for what goes into your document. If it's wrong, you have no one to blame but yourself.

Columns of data

Get a friend to help. Your friend reads the original list out loud (stops you reading what you thought was there), you check it on your copy.

Consistency is as important as accuracy

You see this all the time: one paragraph says *e-mail*; the next, *email*. Inconsistencies are inevitable when several people contribute to a project. Someone has to pull those different spellings and styles into a coherent whole. And then everyone else has to follow the style.

There's only one way to do this. You compile your own house style and in-house dictionary (see below). And if you enjoy being unpopular, you volunteer to police it.

Checking for inconsistencies is unlike any other kind of proofreading. There may not be a right or wrong answer (both *e-mail* and *email* are acceptable), but there will only be one consistent answer. And that's the way you wrote it yesterday ... or last week ... or last year.

Dealing with revisions

Documents that go through numerous revisions can be tricky. Save time by leaving the proofreading till the end, so long as you let everyone know that the document hasn't been checked.

If there are subsequent changes, you'll have to proofread the entire document afresh, not just the element that's been revised. Check that the revisions haven't introduced inconsistencies, and that there aren't changes elsewhere that no one's told you about.

Codify your house style

House style is your corporate style extended to the written word. If you're already maintaining a strong visual corporate identity, you've every reason to keep your content consistent.

Your house style can be as detailed as you want. And it can cover whatever you want: from maximum sentence length (great for curbing your colleagues' excesses) to formats for displaying dates and times.

Compile an in-house dictionary

Every industry has a set of terms that are commonly used, but rarely found in dictionaries. Some are jargon, some are just plain new – but the way you apply them reflects on your corporate professionalism. When you use your own industry terms inconsistently, it tells everyone that you don't really know your business. IT companies are the worst offenders. How many times have you seen *website*, *Website*, *web site*, and *Web site* on the same ... er website?

It doesn't matter which spelling you choose – just stick to it. Write your key business words into a dictionary, and add some definitions if you're not convinced that your colleagues understand them. When everyone follows the spellings, you present a seamless professionalism that'll be the envy of your competitors.

Publish with pride

You've done everything you can – now's the time to release your work to the world.