



# 10 Proofreading Tips for Error-Free Writing



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## **10 Proofreading Tips for Error-Free Writing**

The modern administrative assistant is expected to produce documents, dictations and marketing materials that are as close to perfect as humanly possible. With all of the various spelling and grammar checking tools that are readily available to the general public, this is a much easier task than it ever was. However, there are some mistakes that a computer simply will not catch.

Scanning a document is not enough; the eye and the mind can both be very easily fooled into thinking that a mistake is correct, especially if you have not had the time to rest before you begin the proofreading process. God forbid you be asked to type up a marketing report or dictate a budget or tax document and misplace a decimal point without catching it during the proofreading process!

Proofreading is like buying home insurance for your first piece of real estate; if you are going to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on a home, then what is it to spend a few extra thousand dollars in order to protect the entire investment? If you take the time to proofread effectively and thoroughly, you will do yourself as well as the professional colleagues who depend upon you a huge service.

The outstanding administrative assistant exercises a very precise and human touch over the materials that he or she produces in order to make sure that they are truly error free. Below are 10 tips to aid the admin in this endeavor.

**One - Wait until the end of the actual writing and editing process before you begin the proofreading process.**

Proofreading is as important an aspect of the editing process as is the composing and the sharpening of the ideas within a document; it should be treated as such. Also, you must give yourself time to rest before beginning the proofreading process in earnest, especially if there is no one else to check over the document. This means that the proofreading process cannot be done during the writing process or even during the editing process. Do not suppose that just because you were able to catch a couple of errors on the fly and correct them that you have caught everything. This is a mistake that far too many administrative assistants make far too often.

The writing and editing process should be completed to the best of your ability in order to shorten the proofreading process. If you write your document while keeping to the rules of good grammar and edit it with the intent of creating a clearer read, then the proofreading process will go much faster. Proofreading should be last in the process because the ideas should be completely fleshed out before the mechanical part of the writing development takes place.

Waiting until the end of the writing and editing process to proofread will allow you to follow the advice in the following tips to the best of your ability, increasing your ability to create a perfect document. It will also allow you to view the document from a fresh perspective, allowing you to view more mistakes that you would have otherwise missed.

If you can, wait a few days so that you can come back to your document with completely fresh eyes. However, if you must proofread your document within the same day as you write or edit it, then make sure that you have had something to eat and that you have water nearby. The brain works best when the body is not dehydrated and the stomach is not distracting mental resources away from the thinking process.

## **Two - Get away from technology in order to proofread most effectively.**

The real proofreading that you will be performing comes after the automatic spell and grammar checking of the various word documentation software programs. These programs are great for finding common spelling errors; their grammar checkers leave something to be desired, especially if you are typing something that is in a foreign language or has elements that are not normally included in a document such as paragraph symbols, math symbols or law symbols.

Once you have done all of the proofreading that you can possibly do within the word processing program, print out your document and take it away from the computer so that you can proofread it the old fashioned way. While you are doing this, you will also want to turn away from all other distractions including TV, radio, video games, friends on social media and basically anything with a moving screen that might take your attention away from the proofreading. You want nothing that is more attention grabbing than the document itself.

Turn off the phone and perform the proofreading at a time that you do not have to check email. Lunch is a great time to proofread documents as an admin because you do not have to worry about any other responsibilities from work. If you do not have the ability to proofread at work, then you may have to take it home in order to proofread the document correctly.

You should proofread the document yourself without asking for assistance from anyone, at least at first. Because proofreading is as much an art form as a science, another person might want to proofread the document using a different system or re-editing things that you have already gone over. There are many grammar systems as well as proofreading systems that may confuse your efforts if another person uses a different methodology from you. This will only extend the process and will not help to create the most professional document. You may have another person proofread the document after you have finished your proofreading process, but do not mix cooks while you are still finishing the dinner.

### **Three - Forget the topic of the document and read it as mechanically as possible.**

In order to maximize your ability to proofread the document, you should forget the purpose of the document and read it as mechanically as you possibly can. Many of the best professional administrative assistants have found that reading the document backwards actually helps in this effort. The point is that you do not want to be distracted by the connotations of words or by the other aspects of the document that might need to be cleaned up later. You are focusing specifically on the mechanics of the document so that you do not have to worry about those things in the later processes and editions of the document.

Although the meaning of the document does affect how some words interact with each other, this part of the process should be taken care of during editing. If there is still an issue here, then you should go back to the editing stage.

Many professional administrative assistants also advise that proofreading should be done sentence by sentence. This also helps to dissociate the proofreader from everything but the mechanics of the document. Concentrate on each and every sentence specifically so that you are sure that you do not have to come back to it at a later point. There should be no backtracking in the proofreading process, nor should there be any part of the document that you are unsure about after you determine that you have proofread and corrected it into perfection.

Yet another way to focus on the mechanics of the document is to read the document out loud to yourself as you are going over the sentences individually. Reading a document as well as looking at it for corrections tends to focus the mind in a way that performing only one of these actions simply cannot accommodate.

**Four - Work on finding one type of error at a time. Make several passes until you have gone over all of the different types of errors that may be in the document.**

Depending on which professional proofreading system you choose to employ, you will have a different methodology for the order and the way that you look for errors. These systems may tell you to proofread many times through looking for each type of error one at a time; however, even if you are not using a "professional" standard for proofreading, you should only look for one type of error at a time. Most professional admins will begin by looking for obvious errors such as spelling and ending with more difficult grammar concepts such as forming sentences and paragraphs with correct parallel structure.

One of the errors that are usually never checked thoroughly enough is the misplaced word. A misplaced word is not misspelled; it is usually a correctly spelled word that is used incorrectly in a sentence. The automatic grammar checkers in word processing programs are very bad at catching these types of errors; humans are also incredibly bad at finding these types of errors unless the process is done very precisely.

Once you are done with the entire proofreading process, you will have gone through the document at least five times, once each for a different type of error and once for a general error check as an insurance policy to your efforts. You should find that your document is shorter than before, as good grammar in most professional documents tends to shorten ideas as well as eliminate frivolous and redundant statements. Your document should read well out loud and you should be able to imagine it being looked at and easily understood by a decision maker.

Every admin has errors that he or she is more adequate at finding. If you do not know which errors these are, you must make a note of them so that you will know which errors that you usually miss. Take special notes to find these errors. You may have to go through the document twice in order to make sure that you catch them all.

## **Five - Take notes for issues that you are unsure of.**

While you are perusing your document for a particular kind of error such as spelling or parallel structure, you are likely to catch other types of errors along the way. This is natural; however, you should follow the process that you have set out for yourself to check and correct for one type of error at a time. It is this discipline that will focus your mind and allow you to catch the maximum amount of errors in all aspects of your document instead of randomly catching errors here and there because you are relying on an unscientific method.

Instead of stopping every single time that you find an error that you are not looking for at that particular time, take a note so that you do not forget where you found this error. Keep a notebook and write down the line and the type of error that you find. Some professional admins have come up with their own type of shorthand for these types of notes; others use the symbols that are in one of the major proofreading systems.

Make sure that you mark off each note as you come back through your document looking for that particular type of error. You may even want to decide which error to look for next by the type of random error that you take your first note on; this will keep your mind moving in a natural way without you losing focus on the particular task that you are performing at that time.

You should also take notes on any word, phrase or grammar check that you have to look up in a professional reference tool such as a dictionary, thesaurus or grammar index. You should definitely not stop your process in order to look up the correction to an error that you are not focusing on at that moment.



## **Six - Re-check any paragraph that you make a last minute change in.**

Part of the reason that proofreading is so difficult is that fixing one error can cause another because of the relationship between the words. Part of proofreading is making sure that the errors that you create by fixing other errors are also corrected. This means that if you make a last minute change to any sentence, then you should most likely check that entire paragraph for new errors that might have been created. For instance, getting rid of a hanging preposition can change any indefinite pronoun in that sentence from singular to plural. Changing those pronouns can create subject verb agreement errors that must be fixed. Fixing those errors can cause sentences to be out of sync in other ways, and so on and so forth.

If you find an error that you know will result in other errors but you are checking for other types of errors at that time, then make a note of it and come back to it later.

## **Seven - Check for common errors first; keep special text for later.**

In order to expedite the proofreading process, professional admins usually focus on the common text at first, leaving the special text such as dates, quotes, references and text boxes for later. These types of special texts usually do not have as much of a relationship to the main text; they are usually independent and therefore do not cause errors if they are fixed. This means that they can be saved for later because they do not take as long to correct, nor do they have as big of an effect over the entirety of the document. They are still quite important, though.

Each one of the special texts should be checked independently of each other. Though this can take quite a while, things such as resources can be incredibly important in a document, especially if it has to do with research or finance. Be sure to triple check all of your resources for spelling and make sure that you have the right resource in the first place! This is the only time when turning your computer on is acceptable as it is usually the only resource that allows an admin to check the validity of resources in a time efficient manner.

## **Eight - Check the format of your document last.**

Every document has a particular format. Some emails that have pictures are in need of text wrap. Certain clients may want indentations in their paragraphs. You may have to insert a different formatting around a bullet list if you need to fix it. It is difficult to fix the more complex grammatical errors when you have to fix the formatting errors over and over again because changing the grammar in a document shifts it.

Formatting is important as well, so make sure that you do not forget the rules by which you plan to format. Choose the appropriate formatting structure to fit your proofreading structure so that the errors you correct do not make the process harder.

A format check is the next to last run through that you should make on your document. Once you get to this point, then you know that you are almost done with your work!

## **Nine - Do anything that you possibly can to remain focused and monitor yourself.**

When you go through the sometimes monotonous proofreading process, you are bound to lose focus at some points. The best admins come up with their own methods to make sure that they stay completely focused throughout the entire process.

As mentioned before, reading out loud is a great skill to practice during proofreading. However, reading out loud does not only help you to remember errors, it also helps you to stay mentally awake during proofreading. Reading each sentence independently is another way that helps professional admins stay awake for long, hard proofreading sessions. If this does not work, try physical movement such as tapping your foot in rhythm or slapping your hands together every so often. However, do not turn on any music - it can be a distraction!

Monitor yourself by analyzing the amount of errors that you make in any given document after the process is over. Note where those errors were made and what types of errors they were. If they were errors that were not on the list that you made earlier of errors that you often look over, add them to that list. Be sure to go over this list before you proofread your next document.

## **Ten - Get a second opinion.**

Once you have finally finished with as much proofreading as you possibly can, then the last step in giving yourself the best chance at a perfect document is to let someone else proofread it as well. However, only perform this step once you have fully completed your own proofreading process. As mentioned before, other proofreaders may have completely different methods for editing a document from you. If you do not finish as much as you possibly can by yourself first, your proofreading help may change some of the things that did not need to be changed. Worse, they may make changes that require you to make even more changes later because of the relationship between words and phrases.

It is always best if you are able to obtain an opinion from a professional editor. In case you cannot find or afford one, however, simply getting an opinion from another professional admin that you trust is the second best option. A professional admin will be much better able to determine your methodology and be able to proofread your paper along the same lines as you do.

If you hire a professional proofreader, make sure that they have a specific system that they use. Ask them about this system and if it coincides with the system that you have been using, and then you can be sure that proofreader will be most effective for your future edits.

Proofreading is the last step in creating a document that is as close to perfect as it can possibly be. Make sure that you complete the process as thoroughly as possible so that you can give your employers and partners the absolute best documents.

