



Best Practice: Proofing Work

Seeking Perfection on the Printed Page

A misspelled word or glaring error in a printed piece is simply embarrassing. Proofing is a serious part of any publishing process. Our editors compiled the following tips to help writers and marketers of all skill levels improve their proofing skills.

1. Read for comprehension.

Does it make sense? Don't rewrite a sentence just because you don't like it, but if it stops you or seems unclear, see if there's a quick fix. Many times, the solution is simply cutting a sentence in half, re-arranging it, or adding a word. Be careful that you don't change the meaning or implication of the sentence.

2. Read for spelling.

If anything looks funny to you – even if you're 99 percent sure it's OK — take a second to look it up. A pocket dictionary is great for this. A favorite copy-editing tip if you have time is to read a story backwards, which helps you separate the words from their context. If a name is repeated often in a story, make sure it's always spelled the same way.

3. Read for punctuation.

Some of the most common errors:

- **Commas:** The best rule about commas, though it's not infallible, is to put one wherever you feel like the sentence needs a pause. Use this with caution, though. Common usage: After dates, after states, between a quote and its attribution, after all but the next-to-last item in a series, etc.
- **Hyphens:** Missing hyphens are a frequent but minor error. When in doubt, the dictionary will often tell you if a word like multitalented should be hyphenated. (It shouldn't.) Also, if you have an adjective made up of another adjective and a verb, it should be hyphenated (e.g. a well-dressed woman). An adjective made up of an "ly" adverb and a verb should not be hyphenated (e.g. badly dressed man).

4. Read for design/visual things.

Examples include: extra spaces, missing spaces, machine quotes (straight) instead of smart quotes (curly), really bad breaks, things that should be bold, periods at the end of captions that are complete sentences, extra periods, inconsistent size of dashes.



5. Read for style, otherwise known as consistency.

So many people think this is unimportant, but it's one of the best ways to tell the difference between a professional publication and an amateurish one. The easiest thing to do is to follow Associated Press (AP) style, and then make up your own rules for things you disagree with or are not in the book. Some very common AP style things:

- State abbreviations (don't use postal codes)
- Dates are written as Jan. 25, 2007 (not January 25th), times are 8:30 a.m. or 7 p.m. (not 7:00 p.m.)
- Numbers higher than nine should be numerals (11, 20, 100), under that are spelled out. Percent should be spelled out instead of using the symbol.
- Titles of songs, books and TV shows and movies are in quotes, while magazines and newspapers are italicized. (Some publications have their own style on this. We do a hybrid.)
- Job titles are lower case if they follow the person's name and upper case if they precede it. (The former is preferred, especially with a long title.)
- For the most part, always use a person's last name on second and subsequent references. (Exceptions are young children and really soft pieces.)

There are also consistency things that aren't necessarily style: Make sure you're consistent with says/said. If you decide to hyphenate a word a certain way, make sure you find all the occurrences and change them. Decide whether or not to capitalize every word in a subhead and stick with it for every story and every issue.

6. Don't get drunk on the power of the red pen.

Remember that in every round of changes, there's a lot of opportunity to introduce errors. For that very reason, you should NOT be re-writing sentences on the third or fourth copy-edit. If they didn't bother you the first couple reads, leave them be. It's a prime opportunity for an eleventh-hour mistake. With that in mind, the number one rule of copy-editing is, "Never introduce an error." It's easy to get caught up in the process, and drunk on the power of the red pen. Remember, when proofing, your job is to fix, not screw it up.

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