

Ten Tips for Proofreading Effectively

There's no foolproof formula for perfect proofreading every time. As Twain realized, it's just too tempting to see what we meant to write rather than the words that actually appear on the page or screen. But these 10 tips should help you see (or hear) your errors before anybody else does.

1. Give it a rest.

If time allows, set your text aside for a few hours (or days) after you've finished composing, and then proofread it with fresh eyes. Rather than remember the perfect paper you meant to write, you're more likely to see what you've actually written.

2. Look for one type of problem at a time.

Read through your text several times, concentrating first on sentence structures, then word choice, then spelling, and finally punctuation. As the saying goes, if you look for trouble, you're likely to find it.

3. Double-check facts, figures, and proper names.

In addition to reviewing for correct spelling and usage, make sure that all the information in your text is accurate.

4. Review a hard copy.

Print out your text and review it line by line: rereading your work in a different format may help you catch errors that you previously missed.

5. Read your text aloud.

Or better yet, ask a friend or colleague to read it aloud. You may hear a problem (a faulty verb ending, for example, or a missing word) that you haven't been able to see.

6. Use a spellchecker.

The spellchecker can help you catch repeated words, reversed letters, and many other common errors--but it's certainly not foolproof.

7. Trust your dictionary.

Your spellchecker can tell you only if a word is a word, not if it's the right word. For instance, if you're not sure whether sand is in a desert or a dessert, visit the dictionary (or our Glossary of Commonly Confused Words).

8. Read your text backward.

Another way to catch spelling errors is to read backward, from right to left, starting with the last word in your text. Doing this will help you focus on individual words rather than sentences.

9. Create your own proofreading checklist.

Keep a list of the types of mistakes you commonly make, and then refer to that list each time you proofread.

10. Ask for help.

Invite someone else to proofread your text after you have reviewed it. A new set of eyes may immediately spot errors that you've overlooked.

affect/effect

Affect is a verb that means “influence.” (“The decision could *affect* the company’s stock value.”)
Effect can function as a noun that means “result” (“The decision had a positive *effect*”) or as a verb that means “bring about” or “cause.” However, avoid *effect* as a verb when you can replace it with a less formal word, such as *make* or *produce*.

The new manager will ~~effect~~ make several changes to improve morale.

all ready/already

All ready is a two-word phrase meaning “completely prepared.” *Already* is an adverb that means “before this time” or “previously.” (“They were *all ready* to cancel the order; fortunately, we had *already* corrected the shipments.”)

all right

All right means “all correct.” (“The answers were *all right*.”) In formal writing, it should not be used to mean “good” or “acceptable.” It is always written as two words, with no hyphen; *alright* is nonstandard.

all together/altogether

All together means “all acting together” or “all in one place.” (“The new employees were *all together* at the orientation.”)

Altogether means “entirely” or “completely.” (The trip was *altogether* unnecessary.)

allude/elude/refer

Allude means to make an indirect reference to something. (“The report simply *alluded* to the problem, rather than stating it explicitly.”)

Elude means to escape notice or detection. (“The discrepancy in the account *eluded* the auditor.”)

Refer is used to indicate a direct reference to something. (“She *referred* to the merger during her presentation.”)

allusion/illusion

An *allusion* is an indirect reference to something not specifically mentioned. (“The report made an *allusion* to metal fatigue in the support structures.”)

An *illusion* is a mistaken perception or a false image. (“The manager is under the *illusion* that the reorganization will cost very little.”)

awhile/a while

The adverb *awhile* means “for a short time.” The preposition *for* should not precede *awhile* because *for* is inherent in the meaning of *awhile*. The two-word noun phrase *a while* means “period of time.”

Wait ~~for~~ awhile before sending the email
Wait for ~~awhile~~ a while before sending the email.

bad/badly

Bad is the adjective form that follows such linking verbs as *feel* and *look*. (“We don’t want to look *bad* at the meeting.”) *Badly* is an adverb. (“The shipment was *badly* damaged.”) To say “I feel *badly*” would mean, literally, that your sense of touch is impaired.

be sure to

The phrase *be sure and* is colloquial and unidiomatic when used for *be sure to*.

When you sign the contract, be sure ~~and~~ to keep a copy.

besides/besides

Besides, meaning “in addition to” or “other than,” should be carefully distinguished from *beside*, meaning “next to” or “apart from.” (“*Besides* two of us from Marketing, three people from Production stood *beside* the president during the ceremony.”)

between/among

Between is normally used to relate two items or persons. (“Preferred stock offers a middle ground *between* bonds and common stock.”) *Among* is used to relate more than two. (“The subcontracting was distributed *among* three firms.”) *Amongst* is a variant, chiefly British spelling.

between you and me

The expression *between you and I* is incorrect. Because the pronouns are objects of the preposition *between*, the objective form of the personal pronoun (*me*) must be used.

both ... and

Statements using the *both...and* construction should always be balanced grammatically and logically.

To succeed in management, you must be able *both* to develop writing skills and ~~mastering to~~