



## **Eight Tips for Proofreading a Moving Target**

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When you try to proofread, do you find yourself pushed by deadlines and going so fast that it feels as though you're proofreading a moving target? When you've given a document a quick look and sent it on, inevitably someone brings it back (perhaps with a wicked gleam in their eye) to point out something you missed.

A weekly paper in Clermont Florida included this statement on the front page: *If you find mistakes in this publication, please consider that they are there for a purpose. We try to publish something for everyone, and some people are always looking for mistakes.*

Think about how much you write every week. Writing is a big part of my work and, like many of you, I am the proofreader and editor of everything I write. That is, unless I can interest one of my children in catching my errors. With that motivation, they become terrific proofreaders!

Proofreading is a thankless task because, when you do it well, it's invisible. This week I'll share some of my favorite tips for improving proofreading skills and making the process a bit less painful.

1. Keep a good dictionary and style manual close at hand. You need to be able to instantly find: definitions, correct spelling and answers to grammar, style and usage questions. Many style books (like those we bought for college English courses) are too limited for business use. The **Gregg Reference Manual** is my favorite, though other business writers like the **Handbook for Office Workers**. Both are comprehensive and easy to use.

**Bonus tip:** Save money by buying a used copy that's in good condition. There are few changes in each new edition and none that affect most business writers.

2. Each time you begin proofreading a document, expect mistakes. This mindset will help you catch errors you would otherwise miss.

3. Set proofreading priorities when you're under time pressure. (That's always, for most of us.) By doing this, you'll focus your time and attention on the information that **MUST** be correct—dates, times, dollar figures, names, titles and headings. Priorities are different for everyone. You need to identify what, for your objectives, constitutes the **MOST** vital information. Then you can relax knowing the key information is correct. After that, if you have time you can look for less important errors.

4. Read aloud. This way you will catch **MANY** more wording errors, double words and things that don't make sense. You'll also find it easier to stay focused. If you can't read aloud, then **hear** your voice in your mind as you read.

5. When procrastination grabs you and won't let you begin, set a timer and commit to just 10 minutes of proofreading. You'll probably want to continue!

6. Carefully check the **camouflage zones**, where mistakes often hide. These include: cover pages, running headers and footers, beginnings and ends of sentences and pages, numbers, dollar amounts, dates, times, addresses, sidebars,

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captions, table text and charts. And there are two places we all know mistakes crop up: wherever a change or correction has been made and in leftover information from an old document that's being used as a template.

7. Remember when the English teacher wouldn't let you say, ***This is correct because it just sounds right?*** You've been reading and writing for many years; therefore, trust your hunches. Many times they'll point out mistakes and give you clues on how to make corrections.

8. Since there are twenty-six pages in the **Gregg** manual related directly to commas, practice the **Wizard Comma Rule**. Except for commas in numbers and where they can change a sentence's meaning, don't worry much about commas. When in doubt-- leave it out.

Finally, I hope you'll never let anyone make you feel bad about proofreading errors. There are different styles (Associated Press (AP) style, business style, legal style and literary style, to name just a few). Each style has quite a few rules unique to it. Also, the rules change over time. No one knows them all, and experts disagree on some of the grammar, style and usage rules.

I appreciate good writing and proper grammar, but life is too short to argue over minor points. Communicating with others goes much deeper than the grammar and usage rules our English teachers tried very hard to teach us.

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