

Self-Editing: Proofreading Your Own Writing for Grammar, Punctuation, and Other Problems

It's often easy to spot problems with grammar or punctuation when you're reading someone else's writing; it's harder to see problems when you're looking at your own. Proofreading your own work requires some patience and determination; you have to read deliberately and know what kinds of problems you're looking for.

The following are some of the most common problems with grammar, sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and mechanics. If you know you often make a particular kind of error when writing, ask yourself the questions listed for each sentence of your writing (that may require *much* patience). You can also use this a refresher of common problems before you sit down to do one last read-through before handing in your work.

GRAMMAR, SENTENCE STRUCTURE, WORD CHOICE

1. VERBS

Do tenses agree? Do tenses make sense?

*You met my sister's boyfriend when he dropped her off at our house.
I had already gone to the store when Mom realized we needed milk.*

Does each verb agree with its subject in number (singular/plural)?

*The **flowers need** only water, but the **grass needs** fertilizer.*

Is the subjunctive "were" used after "wish" or "if" clauses?

*I **wish I were** done with school.
If **he were** a better student, he wouldn't have any incompletes.*

2. VOICE

Is the sentence written in the active rather than the passive voice? That is, is someone doing something in the sentence? Is there a subject and an action verb?

*The law was passed in Michigan. → **Michigan voters passed the law.***

Look for "to be" verbs and the preposition "by" as clues to the passive voice.

*The Exit Exams were graded by different instructors. → **Different instructors graded the Exit Exams.***

3. PRONOUNS

CASE:

Is each pronoun in the right case?

SUBJECT=I OBJECT=me POSSESSIVE=my REFLEXIVE=myself

Are subject pronouns (I/he/she) doing the action in a sentence?

***She and I** will work on the project together.*

Are subject pronouns needed after forms of "to be"?

*Can I speak to Dawn? This is **she**.*

Are subject pronouns needed for an incomplete construction?

*Chad has more plaid shirts than **I** [do].*

Are object pronouns (me/us/her) receiving something or following prepositions such as *between, among, with*?

*Just between **you and me**, I'm sending the loudmouth in the car with **him**.*

Are possessives (my/your/their) used before gerunds (-ing words used as nouns)?

*Would you please stop **his** yelling?*

AGREEMENT:

Does each pronoun agree with its antecedent in gender and number?

*Zach and Selina exchanged **their** papers.*

Do words such as somebody, anyone, everything, and each call for singular pronouns and verbs?

*Someone needs to move **his or her** car.*

*Someone needs to move **her** car out of the sorority house lot.*

*Each student should bring **his or her** laptop to class.*

Does all need a singular or a plural verb?

*All of the **assignments are** five to six pages long.*

*All of the **course is** lecture.*

WHO/WHOM:

Is who working as a subject only?

Who's going to the concert?

*The nurse called the patient **who** looked the most injured.*

*Write down the name of **whoever** finishes first.*

Is whom the object of an action or preposition?

*To **whom** are you giving the award?*

*The authors **whom** we studied were all European.*

*We'll give the prize to **whomever** we rank highest.*

4. PARALLELISM

Are all items joined by *and* or in a list written in matching forms (ex. all -ing words or all infinitives)?

*I need **to run** to by the bank, **to go** to the store, and **to pick up** the cleaning.*

Are all words joined by *and* or in a list the same part of speech?

The applicant we're looking for must be well-educated and after success. →

The applicant we're looking for must be well-educated and ambitious.

5. SPLIT INFINITIVES

Are there any adverbs or other words intruding between *to* and a verb?

*You should try to not split infinitives → **You should try not to split infinitives.***

*I'm going to eagerly await your reply. → **I'm going to await your reply eagerly.***

6. MISPLACED OR DANGLING MODIFIERS

Do descriptive phrases come near the words they describe?

The elk frightened the baby with big antlers →

The elk with big antlers frightened the baby.

Is there someone or something in the sentence actually being described by the phrase?

Turning toward the west, the sun glared on the car's windshield. →

When we turned to the west, the sun glared on the car's windshield.

7. WORD CHOICE

CONFUSED WORDS

its= possessive, belonging to it
it's= it is

who's= who is, who has
whose= belonging to who

there= not here
their= belonging to them
they're= they are

could have, not *could of*
should have, not *should of*
would have, not *would of*

FILLER WORDS

Do searches in your documents (CTRL + F) for

very, really, literally, actually, amazingly, basically, great, nice, fun, a lot, etc.

→ eliminate or choose a more specific, descriptive word

EXPLETIVE CONSTRUCTIONS

Do searches for

There is/ There are/ There was/ There were/ There have been/ There will be

It is/ It was/ It has been/ It will be

→ eliminate where possible and choose a specific subject and strong verb

PUNCTUATION and MECHANICS

8. COMMAS

If a comma is used between two independent clauses [complete thoughts, each with a subject and verb], are the thoughts also joined by a conjunction?

*I ran to the store, **but** I left my list at home.*

I ran to the store but left my list at home.

Are commas used to separate items in a list, and is a comma used before *and* or *or*?

*Remember to bring your laptop, ethernet connector, **and** cables.*

Are commas used to set off nonessential information?

*My sister, **who lives in Oregon**, is getting married next week.*

Are commas used after introductory phrases that set the scene (time, place, concurrent action) or introduce the context of the sentence's main idea?

***When I walked in the room**, everyone pointed and laughed at me.*

9. SEMICOLONS

Is a semicolon used between two complete thoughts that are not joined by a conjunction?

I ran to the store; unfortunately, it was closed.

Is a semicolon used to separate items which already have commas as part of each item [cities and states, dates, etc.?]?

Our team will play matches in Arlington, Virginia; Ponca City, Oklahoma; and Shreveport, Louisiana.

10. COLONS

Is a colon used to introduce a list that is not already introduced by a preposition or a verb?

Please remember to bring the following: shorts, sandals, and swimsuit.
BUT: Please remember to bring your shorts, sandals, and swimsuit.
We are going to Aspen, Vail, and Copper Mountain.

Is a colon used to introduce some surprise, revelation, or new information at the end of a sentence?

The answer is clear: we must take back our offer.

Is a colon used to introduce a formal quotation?

The opening of Sylvia Plath's poem, "Cut," shows the intersection of pleasure and pain: "What a thrill/ My thumb instead of/ An onion."

11. APOSTROPHES

Are apostrophes being used to show where letters are missing in contractions?

You shouldn't be afraid to use contractions in your writing.

Are apostrophes being used to show possession?

*David's costume shocked us all.
David's whining is getting tiresome.*

Are apostrophes being incorrectly used to make plurals?

My family lives next door to the Jones's. → My family lives next door to the Joneses.

12. QUOTATION MARKS

Are quotation marks being used around dialogue or the use of someone's exact words?

The professor reminded us, "You must turn in your paper by Friday."

Are quotation marks used around the titles of smaller, self-contained works of art (poems, songs, essays, articles, short stories)?

We read O'Hara's poem, "Why I am Not a Painter," for class last night.

Are quotation marks used to call attention to certain words or phrases?

Please quit using the phrase "a lot" in your essays.

Are single quotation marks used when a quoted item falls within a larger quotation?

Dr. Velie reminded us, "Read 'The Lottery' by tomorrow."

13. ITALICS/UNDERLINING

Are italics or underlining used for the titles of longer works of art (novels, magazines, journals, plays, movies, paintings, sculptures)?

We watched Apocalypse Now in class yesterday.

Are italics or underlining used to set off foreign words or phrases which are not commonly used in English?

The French word for nightmare is cauchemar.