Proofreading and Editing

Proofreading means putting writing under a microscope to identify and correct common errors. This includes checking for simple ‘typos’, for example, typing form instead of from, but also correct sentences and using the right words. The aim is to make your writing more presentable and reader friendly, eliminating mistakes that jar the reader.

Editing refers to looking at the bigger picture: the overall organisation of a text, whether it moves smoothly and logically from one paragraph to another.

It doesn’t matter which you do first; some people find it easier to examine the macro and then the micro. Others may find the opposite. Proofreading and editing shows that you are serious about what you do, and you can expect it to be taken seriously.

General Tips

- Read a printed copy, it’s easier to spot problems than on screen.
- Read your work out loud to yourself. Some people even suggest reading it backwards!
- Use a piece of paper to mask the text and read only one line at a time.
- Go through the text several times; once to check at sentence level, then again for paragraph level, then layout. Don’t try to look for everything at once.
- Ask someone you trust to read it. Try not to be too downhearted or defensive about their comments, or they’ll refuse to help you the next time.

Proofreading for common errors: by now, you will know from feedback from your tutor what kind of errors you typically make. Some examples follow (all taken from students’ writing!)

1. **Faulty agreement.** The subject and verb in a sentence must ‘agree’ in terms of number and case.
   X Trafficking illegal immigrants are against the law. Incorrect. The subject here is ‘trafficking’ (i.e. singular) not ‘immigrants’ (plural).
   Corrected. Trafficking illegal immigrants is against the law. ✓
   Check for the right word when using, e.g. much/many/few/less/a great deal of/a large number of etc.
   X The amount of people who were surveyed was significant. Incorrect.
   Corrected. The number of people...

2. It is important to write in complete sentences and avoid sentence fragments.
   Examples:
   X Although in the early days video games were created for children and teenagers. Incorrect. ‘although’ links 2 clauses in a sentence. Here there is only one.
   Corrected. Although in the early days video games were created for children and teenagers, increasingly adults are the target audience. ✓

   X Also, to encourage people who suffer from allergies to seek help. Incorrect. Who or what is encouraging people to seek help?
   Corrected. Also, the aim of the programme is to encourage people who suffer from allergies to seek help. ✓

3. **Run-on sentences** are often a problem of faulty punctuation. Run-ons are caused by using commas where a full stop should go (also known as ‘comma splicing’).
The system of ID cards was estimated to cost £10.6b, the cost may be passed on through tax, this becomes a burden to taxpayers. **Incorrect**

**Corrected.** The system of ID cards was estimated to cost £10.6b, which may be passed on through tax and will become a burden to taxpayers. √ OR

The system of ID cards was estimated to cost £10.6b. This may be passed on through tax and will become a burden to taxpayers. √

4. ‘Orphan’ pronouns.

X The ID card scheme could be exploited to monitor consumer habits. They have a great appetite for this kind of data. **Incorrect.** ‘They’ refers to someone. But who?

5. Faulty parallels: forms of speech should be consistent or ‘parallel’, e.g.

X The elements of good essay writing are first, being critical in use of sources, second to develop a good argument and third, present the work professionally.

**Corrected:** The elements of good essay writing are first, being critical in use of sources, second developing a good argument and third, presenting the work professionally. √

6. Faulty word choice. The spellchecker will not help you with confusion between there/their, weather/whether, or its/it’s. (HINT – it’s can only mean it is or it has – use the full forms!). There may be many words you think you know, but should double-check. It’s good to be **erudite**, but avoid being **loquacious**, **superfluous** or just plain **erroneous**.

7. Wordiness: using two or more words where one will do.

X This has caused much debate and discussion among individuals within society. ‘Debate’ and ‘discussion’ are synonyms. ‘In society today’ and ‘among individuals’ are totally unnecessary. Cut, cut, cut!

8. Repetition: check that you don’t use the same word(s) too many times with no variety (use a Thesaurus!), or paste a sentence more than once in different parts of the essay, by mistake.

9. Dangling modifiers: e.g. X We observed the birds using binoculars. This sounds silly. Birds do not use binoculars!

**Corrected:** With binoculars we observed the birds. √

10. Misuse of ‘the’. A typical error is to miss ‘the’ from phrases such as ‘the majority of...’. See Purdue’s helpsheet on articles (‘the/an/a’) at [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/)

11. While we’re about it, use **gender-neutral language**. Sentences such as ‘The tutor marks his essays according to specifically determined criteria’ assume that all tutors are male, men. Sensitive writers avoid this by making the subject plural, e.g. ‘Tutors mark their essays ....’

12. Is the **style** appropriate? Have you avoided the use of contractions (isn’t, can’t etc), or addressing the reader as ‘you’? See A Guide to Style in Academic Writing.

Our writing skills improve as a gradual process throughout our lives. Making mistakes is part of that process. Focus on maximising your marks in assessments!
Editing

1. Read through the text paragraph by paragraph. Does each paragraph contain one whole idea? Make a brief outline for the paper. Does it make sense? The reader must be able to see your main points and follow your argument.

Ideally paragraphs start with a topic sentence to express the main idea. This sentence should be able to stand on its own. Then that idea is developed with evidence. It is important to comment on the evidence to show how it supports or develops the main idea. If appropriate, bring in other evidence (examples/studies/experiments/interpretations) to widen the discussion. Look back to your topic sentence: how have you moved on / developed the main idea in it? Where are you going next?

2. Are there any paragraphs which are too short (one or two sentences only) or too long? (3 paragraphs to a page is about right). Don't have ‘scrappy’ paragraphing – don’t start a new line unless starting a new paragraph.

3. Does the essay or report have a central thesis? Is this summed up in a sentence in the introduction?

4. Does the introduction say what the paper will discuss and in what order?

5. Check the use of references in the text and at the end of the text. Do they match? Check that the list of references is in alphabetical order. Still confused about the Harvard system? Click on the link to view the library site’s Referencing Guide

6. The conclusion should sum up the main points you have made. A conclusion may indicate the way forward, but not introduce new material.

Layout

7. Line spacing: the majority of assignments require 1.5 or double line spacing. The list of references at the end of the document should be on a new page, in single line spacing with a line between each item.

8. Include a header or footer in a smaller font (as on this page) with your name, and insert page numbers.

9. Include a cover page with your name, title of assignment, name of tutor, electronic word count (if required), and date.

That’s it! Well done!
A page of exercises follows. PRINT out page 4. Answers are given on page 5.
Proofreading Exercises. PRINT this page, complete, then check your answers on page 5.

**Exercise 1.** Which of these are complete sentences?

Yes/No  a) Although it would be beneficial to the public.
Yes/No  b) Whereas in the UK independent study is the emphasis.
Yes/No  c) Understanding the mental states of others, and realising they can differ from our own, is known as theory of mind.
Yes/No  d) For example, the increase in the cost of the project.
Yes/No  e) And outlines seven key recommendations.
Yes/No  f) Anti-biotic-resistant bacteria such as MRSA tend to be associated with hospitals.
Yes/No  g) By moving computing online.
Yes/No  h) If students can adapt themselves to the new system and be aware of difficulties that might happen during their studies.

**Exercise 2.** Identify and correct the errors that follow in these extracts.

a) Computer games are widely used, as it helps people relax.
b) Women nowadays seems to have higher expectations...
c) However, in the western educational system they encourage students to be creative and think with their own brains.
d) There are many effective ways to study: improvement in ability in English, acquiring detailed information, adjust for the new environment, and handling stress.
e) Concerns have raised in recent years....
f) Due to deforestation there are less trees to absorb C02.
g) Objective criteria was used to identify performance...
h) But evidences show that this might not be true...
i) This article is basically based on many concepts and ideas.
j) Surveys maybe used to assess the effectiveness of the scheme.
k) PC's in the 1990's had more limited functions.
l) Proofread carefully to see if you any words out
m) If you re-read your work, you may find on reading that a great deal of repetition can be avoided by re-reading and editing.

**Exercise 3**

Proofread the following text for errors. There is one mistake in each line (e.g. spelling, misuse of punctuation, wrong form of a word, or wrong linking word. **Underline** the mistake and write the correct version in the column on the right.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mistake</th>
<th>Correct</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In most capital <strong>citys</strong> which were built long before the invention of</td>
<td><strong>cities</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private cars, their is rarely enough space for moving traffic, and</td>
<td>2.</td>
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<td>certainly not enough for parked vehicles. Encouraging more comuters</td>
<td>3.</td>
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<td>to abandon public transport and banning private vehicles form some</td>
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<td>areas may help, but such solutions does not actually diminish the number</td>
<td>5.</td>
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<tr>
<td>of cars coming into the city centre. However, some argue that the</td>
<td>6.</td>
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<td>congestion charge has now failed in London because it has not acheived</td>
<td>7.</td>
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<td>it's purpose of traffic reduction. A cultural shift is needed for the motoring</td>
<td>8.</td>
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<tr>
<td>public to realise what the private car does not have number one priority.</td>
<td>9.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The city should be a focus for business and social life not for traffic.</td>
<td>10.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Answers to Exercise 1. Which of these are complete sentences?

No  a) Although it would be beneficial to the public.
No  b) Whereas in the UK independent study is the emphasis.
Yes  c) Understanding the mental states of others, and realising they can differ from our own, is known as theory of mind.
No  d) For example, the increase in the cost of the project.
No  e) And outlines seven key recommendations.
Yes  f) Anti-biotic-resistant bacteria such as MRSA tend to be associated with hospitals.
No  g) By moving computing online.
No  h) If students can adapt themselves to the new system and be aware of difficulties that might happen during their studies.

Answers to Exercise 2. Corrected sentences:

n) Computer games are widely used, as they help people relax.
o) Women nowadays seem to have higher expectations...
p) However, in the western educational system students are encouraged to be creative and think with their own brains.
q) There are many effective ways to study: improving ability in English, acquiring detailed information, adjusting for the new environment, and handling stress.
r) Concerns have risen in recent years....
s) Due to deforestation there are fewer trees to absorb C02.
t) Objective criteria were used to identify performance...
u) But evidence shows that this might not be true...
v) This article is based on many ideas.
w) Surveys may be used to assess the effectiveness of the scheme.
x) PCs in the 1990s had more limited functions.
y) Proofread carefully to see if you missed any words out
z) If you re-read your work you may find a great deal of repetition can be avoided.

Exercise 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In most capital cities which were built long before the invention of private cars, their is rarely enough space for moving traffic, and certainly not enough for parked vehicles. Encouraging more commuters to abandon public transport and banning private vehicles from some areas may help, but such solutions does not actually diminish the number of cars coming into the city centre. However, some argue that the congestion charge has now failed in London because it has not achieved its purpose of traffic reduction. A cultural shift is needed for the motoring public to realise what the private car does not have number one priority. The city should be a focus for business and social life, not for traffic.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. cities</td>
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<td>3. commuters</td>
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<td>10. life,</td>
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