Proofreading: A Late Concern

In a writing assignment, consider concerns such as focus, organization, and specific detail early in the revision process. Proofreading is a late concern, one to consider later in the revision process, after you have dealt with early concerns. The word “proofreading” refers to a final reading and correction of a draft, or proof, written to be published. Professional proofreaders are very concerned that what eventually appears in print is as clear and correct as possible. As a student, you also need to strive for clarity and accuracy in your written work.

Some Recommended Strategies

- Finish the draft a day or two before it is due, so that you can set the draft aside for a day before proofreading. Proofreading will be more effective if the draft is less familiar to you.
- Slowly read the draft out loud, listening to what your words actually say.
- Let someone else read your draft out loud. The reader might stumble over an error you have overlooked, and you will hear it.
- Use grammar check, but do not be overly dependent on it, as it operates on about a 6th grade level. Be sure you understand any suggestions, and make your own decisions about changes.
- Use spell check, but do not depend too much on it. It will have a limited vocabulary and will not detect homonyms (there/their/they’re; to/too/two) or typos (e.g. from/form).
- Look specifically for errors you know you often make.
- Read the draft through several times, each time looking only for a limited number of specific problems.
- Read the draft one sentence at a time from the end to the beginning, so that each sentence does not depend on a previous sentence for its meaning.

Basic Writing Problems to Consider

Sentence Fragments: Fragments are incomplete sentences—shown below in italics.

Problematic: Our new printer arrived yesterday. After we had waited for six weeks.
   Revised: Our new printer arrived yesterday, after we had waited for six weeks.
Problematic: One of my fondest wishes is a simple one. To learn how to play golf.
   Revised: One of my fondest wishes is a simple one—to learn how to play golf.
Problematic: Chris worked all day. Then danced all night.
   Revised: Chris worked all day and then danced all night.

Comma Splices and Run-on (Fused) Sentences: Commas splices occur when two complete sentences (independent clauses) are joined only by a comma, that is, with no additional connector such as and, or, or but. Fused (run-on) sentences occur when two complete sentences are joined with no punctuation.
Run-on sentences are not simply long sentences; long sentences are perfectly fine if they are clear and clearly punctuated.

Comma splice: We swam, then we went home.
   Revised: We swam, and then we went home.
   OR
   We swam; then we went home.

Fused (run-on) sentence: We did not want money we wanted food.
   Revised: We did not want money. We wanted food.
   OR
   Instead of money, we wanted food.

**Shift in Sentence Structure:** This problem occurs when a sentence does not end as its beginning indicates it will.

Problematic: By releasing the water at this stage in the process maintains product consistency.
   Revised: Releasing the water at this stage maintains product consistency.
   OR
   By releasing the water at this stage, workers maintain product consistency.

**Dangling Modifiers:** These phrases or clauses open a sentence but do not *logically* modify any word in the sentence. When a sentence opens with a modifier, readers expect the modifier to describe the subject of the main clause.

Problematic: Using my assignment sheet, the paper was easy to write. (Technically, the sentence *says* that the *paper*--the subject of the main clause--was using the assignment sheet.)
   Revised: Using my assignment sheet, I was easily able to write the paper. (This sentence correctly says that *I* was using the assignment sheet.)

**Problems with Subject-Verb Agreement:** Singular subjects require singular verbs; plural subjects require plural verbs. This problem often occurs when the subject and the verb are separated by phrases or clauses, as occurs in the examples below.

Problematic: The *goal* [singular subject] of the directives issued by the committee *were* [plural verb] to improve working conditions.
   Revised: The *goal* [singular subject] of the directives issued by the committee *was* [singular verb] to improve working conditions.
Problematic: Many *singers* [plural subject] in the choir *takes* [singular verb] singing lessons.
   Revised: Many *singers* [plural subject] in the choir *take* [plural verb] singing lessons.

**Problems with Pronoun Reference:** Pronouns and their antecedents (the specific words to which they refer) should agree in number (singular or plural).

Problematic: *Everyone* [singular antecedent] needs to bring *their* [plural pronoun] reports on Tuesday.
   Revised: *All students* [plural antecedent] need to bring *their* [plural pronoun] reports on Tuesday.
   Revised: *Everyone* [singular antecedent] needs to bring *his or her* [singular pronoun] report on Tuesday.
Additional Problems with Pronoun Use (who and whom; I and me): Who and I are used in the subject position; whom and me are used in the object position.

Problematic: Janet cooked dinner for Lisa and I.
   Revised: Janet cooked dinner for Lisa and me. (Ie is the object of the preposition for. Try the sentence without Lisa. Janet cooked dinner for me.)

Problematic: Whom did you say was calling?
   Revised: Who did you say was calling? (Who is the subject of the verb was calling.)

Errors in Using Possessive Apostrophes: Apostrophes show possession (ownership). The placement of the apostrophe depends on whether the word being used as a possessive (the owner) is singular or plural. For example: the parents' [plural] child pulled the puppy's [singular] tail. If the noun is plural before adding the apostrophe, place the apostrophe after the s. If the noun is singular before adding the apostrophe, place the apostrophe before the s.

Problematic: A single parents [singular] life is often difficult.
   Revised: A single parent’s life is often difficult.

Problematic: Many students [plural] records were lost in the fire.
   Revised: Many students’ records were lost in the fire.

Some Guidelines for Usage

Comma Usage: According to The Heath Guide to Grammar and Usage by Gerald P. Mulderig, published in 1995, major uses of the comma are as indicated below. (Commas are also addressed above, in the section on Comma Splices.)

• Between independent clauses linked by a coordinating conjunction.
  Ex: I saw an antique desk at a garage sale, and I knew I had to own it.
• To set off an introductory element.
  Ex: When I learned the price of the desk, I realized I could afford it.
  Ex: Driving very slowly, she made her way down the steep and winding road.
• To separate elements in a series.
  Ex: The sides, drawers, and feet of the desk feature hand-carved details.
• To separate coordinate (equal) modifiers.
  Ex: The clear, smooth finish of the desk’s top is particularly attractive.
• To set off a parenthetical element (one which could be placed in parentheses).
  Ex: This desk, in my opinion, is worth far more than I paid for it.
• To set off a non-restrictive modifier (shown below in italics).
  Ex: Desks like this one, which is constructed of solid oak, have not been made for decades.
• Do not use a comma with a restrictive modifier (shown below in italics)—a modifier that is necessary for meaning.
  Ex: Students who have missed ten classes will not pass this course.
Similar Words and/or Spelling Errors: Words may be used inappropriately because they are similar in sound or appearance to words that have quite different meanings and purposes. (Consider definitely and defiantly.) Many readers consider spelling errors as indicators of general sloppiness or laziness. Good spelling establishes you as a person who writes with precision and care.

accept (to receive; to believe to be correct) except (not including – preposition)
af-fect (to influence or touch the feelings of – verb) effect (result, consequence, impression—noun)
it’s (it is – contraction)
lay (to put down or set down; the past but not the present tense of lie: Please lay your books here.)
lie (to make an untrue statement; to recline: Doris and Angie planned to lie out in the sun all day on Saturday.)
lose (to be deprived of or cease to have: We do not want to lose our game today.)
loose (not restrained or confined; slack or relaxed: They turned the dogs loose.)
participate (to take part; join or share with others – verb)
participant (one that participates or takes part in something – noun)
passed (an action of passing which has already occurred: We passed the test.)
past (gone by in time: The history teacher reviewed the recent past.)
principal (the person in charge; a sum of money: The principal is your pal.)
principle (a truth or law)
than (introducing the second element of a comparison: We would rather have pancakes than cereal.)
their (belonging to them – possessive)
their (of or belonging to, possessive)
their (belonging to, possessive)

Remember that you will be able to spot only one or two types of problems in a single reading of your draft. Allow yourself enough time for multiple readings, focusing on one or two different problems each time.