

Want to Know More?

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Practice

Ear Training

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Words of Wisdom

Editing your own work is like removing your own tonsils—possible but painful.

Anonymous

Punctuation, grammar, and spelling are not things that only happen to other people.

Terry Pratchett

Be Your Own Proofer

Proofing your own writing is not for the faint-hearted. It's hard to spot differences between what we meant and what's actually on the page. If we leave out a word, our brain supplies it. If we write *they're* instead of *their*, we often overlook the error.

Argue with Your Word Processor

Naive writers might trust their spelling and grammar checkers to find mistakes. However, language is so complex that some errors are missed, and correct writing can be flagged as wrong. "How was your son's wedding?" baffled the grammar checker in Microsoft Word 2003. The software suggested "How your son was's wedding?"

Most users would feel confident enough to override the grammar checker on that one. However, many of us will do whatever it takes to make the little green squiggles go away. "Grammar check lies," I tell my students. "You can't trust it more than you trust yourself."

By all means, run spell check and grammar check. Just be aware that they're fallible. Your word processor can tell you whether *they're* is spelled correctly, but not whether you need *there* or *their* instead. So don't rely too heavily on your spell checker.

If you tend to have trouble with words that have similar sounds but different meanings, brush up on homonyms. Check a list of words that are commonly misused, such as Charles Darling's Notorious Confusables. Put the ones that give you trouble on a personal hit list. Then, after you spell-check a document, use Find and Replace to check your troublemakers.

The Find feature is usually found in the Edit menu. Choose Find and type a troublemaker like *there* in the search box. The software will find every place you've used that word. Ask: do I mean *there* (a place), *they're* (they are), or *their* (belonging to them)?

Use Your Ears

Another proofing strategy is to read what you've written aloud.

If you find yourself running out of breath before you come to a period, you probably have a run-on sentence. Reread the long group of words. This time, listen for places where your voice drops and you make a definite pause. Put periods there, and check: is each complete thought now set off by a period?

If you find yourself pausing too often, you probably have sentence fragments. Look for places to connect them.

This method works only if you read what's actually on the page. Follow the punctuation marks. When you come to a period, lower your pitch and pause. (Or imitate comic Victor Borge's Phonetic Punctuation.) With question marks, raise your pitch and pause. If there's no punctuation, read on without a pause.

Because we tend to read what we meant instead of what we wrote, professional proofers often read a paper backwards. To use this strategy, start at the end of the paper and identify every closing punctuation mark—period, question mark, and exclamation point. Find the words that go with the mark. Are they a sentence?

Test for Complete Sentences

If you're not sure, try Rei Noguchi's sentence tests:

- Turn the words you're not sure about into a *yes/no* question. (Fragments can't be turned into questions.)
- If you can add a tag like *isn't it* or *all right*, you've got a sentence. *There and they're are often confused, aren't they?* (passes the test)
- You can also try fitting the words you're testing into a frame, such as *I know that _____*. Words that fit the frame are a sentence: *I know that there and they're are often confused.*

These proofing strategies can't guarantee perfect writing. But they can help you shift readers' attention away from mistakes and onto your message.

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