Top 10 Proofreading Tips

Updated July 15, 2016.

Listen to what [Mark Twain](#) had to say on the subject of [proofreading](#), and then consider our 10 tips for proofreading effectively.

> *The difference between the almost-right word & the right word is really a large matter--it's the difference between the lightning-bug & the lightning.*

Twain's well-known observation appears at the top of the "Language/Writing" page of a university's continuing education website—just above a blurb for "Mistake-Free Grammar & Proofreading." Except that Twain's line is [misquoted](#), and the word *[lightning](#)* is twice [misspelled](#) as *lightening*.

Twain himself had little patience for such errors. "In the first place God made idiots," he once observed. "This was for practice. Then he made proof-readers."

Yet as an old newspaper reporter, Twain knew full well how hard it is to proofread effectively. As he said in a letter to Walter Bessant in February 1898:

> *You think you are reading proof, whereas you are merely reading your own mind; your statement of the thing is full of holes & vacancies but you don't know it, because you are filling them from your mind as you go along. Sometimes—but not often enough—the printer's proof-reader saves you—& offends you—with this cold sign in the margin: (?) & you search the passage & find that the insulter is right--it doesn't say what you thought it did: the gas-fixtures are there, but you didn't light the jets.*

No matter how carefully we examine a text, it seems there's always one more little blunder waiting to be discovered.

10 Tips for Proofreading Effectively

There's no foolproof formula for perfect proofreading every time. As Twain realized, it's just too tempting to see what we *meant* to write rather than the words that actually appear on the page or screen. But these 10 tips should

help you see (or hear) your errors before anybody else does.

1. **Give it a rest.**

   If time allows, set your text aside for a few hours (or days) after you've finished composing, and then proofread it with fresh eyes. Rather than *remember* the perfect paper you meant to write, you're more likely to *see* what you've actually written.

2. **Look for one type of problem at a time.**

   Read through your text several times, concentrating first on sentence structures, then word choice, then spelling, and finally punctuation. As the saying goes, if you look for trouble, you're bound to find it.

3. **Double-check facts, figures, and proper names.**

   In addition to reviewing for correct spelling and usage, make sure that all the information in your text is accurate.

4. **Review a hard copy.**

   Print out your text and review it line by line: rereading your work in a different format may help you catch errors that you previously missed.

5. **Read your text aloud.**

   Or better yet, ask a friend or colleague to read it aloud. You may *hear* a problem (a faulty verb ending, for example, or a missing word) that you haven't been able to see.

6. **Use a spellchecker.**

   The spellchecker can help you catch repeated words, reversed letters, and many other common slipups--but it's certainly not goof-proof.

7. **Trust your dictionary.**

   Your spellchecker can tell you only if a word *is* a word, not if it's the *right* word. For instance, if you're not sure whether sand is in a *desert* or a *dessert*, visit the dictionary (or our Glossary of Commonly Confused Words).

8. **Read your text backward.**

   Another way to catch spelling errors is to read backward, from right to left, starting with the last word in your text. Doing this will help you focus on individual words rather than sentences.

9. **Create your own proofreading checklist.**

   Keep a list of the types of mistakes you commonly make, and then refer to that list each time you proofread.

10. **Ask for help.**

    Invite someone else to proofread your text after you have reviewed it. A new set of eyes may immediately spot errors that you've overlooked.

Now, if you're ready to put these proofreading tips to the test, practice your skills with these exercises: