UNIVERSITY OF BALTIMORE
SCHOOL OF LAW

# Legal Writing Center

Best Proofreading Practices for the Developing Legal Writer

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Proofreading can be time consuming and a tedious part of any writing process. Unfortunately, there is no way to skip the proofreading process entirely and still produce high-quality legal writing. However, a manageable framework of steps designed to organize your proofreading can help you make the most of your limited time. Developing a consistent proofreading practice will ultimately produce writing that is free of careless errors that can drag down the overall quality of your work.

*Distinguishing editing from proofreading.*

It is important to distinguish between the *proofreading process* and the *editing* of your writing. Editing is the process of improving the substance of your writing – the content, structure, and clarity of what you have written. Once you have determined that you are completely finished with the editing process, only then should it make sense to move onto proofreading. If you are still making large changes or additions to the substantive text of your work, any proofreading that you do may be edited out or substantially changed anyway, resulting in wasted time. Thus, proofreading should only begin once your substantive writing process is complete and you have taken some time away from your written work.  Ideally, you will be able to finish your editing process and put your work down for at least 24 hours before beginning to proofread.

*What is proofreading?*

Proofreading is the process of reviewing a completed written document for mistakes, including <u>spelling</u>, <u>grammar</u>, and <u>punctuation errors</u>, as well as <u>word inconsistencies</u>, <u>improper formatting</u>, and <u>typos</u>. This may seem like a lot of ground to cover, but reviewing for these mistakes can be made very simple by following some general principals and creating your own step-by-step proofreading process that will work for any writing assignment.

*How do I develop my own proofreading process?*

Here is some general advice that should help you to conduct an efficient and thorough proofreading process:

- **Start by taking a break**. As mentioned above, ideally, you should put your paper away for a day before proofreading it, but even setting it aside for 30 minutes can help if you are under stringent time constraints.

- **Printing out a hard copy**. Looking at a hard copy of your writing really is different from looking at your computer screen. Often, writers are better able to see mistakes on paper. Even if you are submitting your writing electronically, you should always print out a physical copy for the purpose of proofreading.

- **Read it**! This may seem obvious, but many developing legal writers never read through their final draft of their paper before submitting it! You must actually read your work at least once – *slowly* – to catch errors. A thorough writer will read through their paper multiple times during the proofreading process.

- **One step at a time**. Do not attempt to read through your paper and try to address every single error as you go! Create separate proofreading tasks that break up the work and allow you to focus on a single type of error before moving onto the next type.

- **Know thyself**. Are you aware that you consistently make the same sort of typographical error or misuse particular punctuation marks when you write? Devote a step in your proofreading process to specifically seek out and address certain errors that plague your own writing. Remember, this is *your writing* and *your proofreading* process – customize it to suit your individual needs!

Next, here are some steps that you might consider incorporating into your own proofreading process in order to address particular types or categories of mistakes:

- **Consistency.** Check your writing for consistent use of any defined terms. Should they be capitalized, and if so, are they? Are they used correctly and consistently? Did you use any synonyms instead of the proper defined term?

- **Headings.** Thoroughly review all titles, headings, and sub-headings present in your writing. Then, *check again*! These portions of your writing frequently contain errors/typos that are often skipped over during the proofreading process. These mistakes can easily be the most glaring and embarrassing to a legal writer.

- **Omissions.** Do a check for inadvertently omitted words and incomplete sentences by reading your writing aloud. This will help you to notice errors that your mind may otherwise compensate for if you are simply going through the motions in your proofreading.

- **Word usage.** Examine your writing for words that spell check misses or cannot distinguish, such as judgment/judgement, principle/principal, statute/statue, quite/quiet, hear/here, and council/counsel. These sorts of errors are *extremely* common among legal writers who do not take the time to read their "finished" product in its entirety, word-for-word.

    o **Pro tip**: use the "Find" function to quickly identify words that you consistently misspell or misuse, as well as other sorts of mistakes!

- **Punctuation.** Check for errors with apostrophes, commas, unclosed quotes and parentheses, and other types of punctuation marks. Stray or inconsistent punctuation can cause confusion or change the meaning of your words.

Sources: Anne Enquist & Laurel Currie Oates et al., Just Writing: Grammar, Punctuation, and Style for the Legal Writer 20–21 (5th ed. 2017); Laurel Currie Oates & Anne Enquist, The Legal Writing Handbook: Analysis, Research, and Writing 183–85, 221, 471–73 (6th ed. 2014).