PROOFREADING

You get your graded essay back from your instructor with a comment, "You need to proofread better." Why is it often hard for you to find errors in your own writing? **It is difficult because you did the writing in the first place!**

The Meramec English department teaches composition using both the process and portfolio approaches. Usually, you will write *at least* four or five versions of an essay before submitting it for grading:

brainstorming ideas
writing a first draft
revising the first draft
peer-editing the draft in class
editing a peer-reviewed draft
polishing a final draft
revising a marked essay for placement in a final portfolio

As you already know, by the time you've looked at your essay five or six times, two things have happened: 1) you're totally sick of it and 2) you've got most of it memorized!! That makes it very hard to be an *objective* proofreader.

"But I used the computer spell check. What more does my instructor want?" Remember, spelling and grammar checkers can't replace a careful, objective proofreading. So if you want better grades on your essays, you must learn to proofread. Why bother? First, your instructor expects that the essay you submit is your best effort. Second, many grammar errors—no matter how small—eventually annoy your instructor so much that your grade suffers. (Reading an essay that's riddled with ditsy errors is like being dive-bombed by hundreds of gnats.) Third, you'll improve your grammar knowledge by learning to proofread.

THREE HINTS FOR BETTER PROOFREADING

1. Read backwards.
2. Read aloud.
3. Read with a pencil.

READ BACKWARDS

No, this is not like watching a video backwards. You read the last sentence, second-last sentence, third-last sentence and so on back to the beginning of your essay. This simple trick takes sentences out of context so that you can concentrate on errors and awkward phrases. If you're like most students, when you reread your essay from beginning to end, your brain pays attention to the flow of ideas, skipping right over errors you need to fix.

The Bad News: Without years of practice, it's hard to turn off the part of your brain that listens for logical flow and turn on the part that listens for correctness.

The Good News: When you read backwards, your brain can concentrate on the sentence you're reading and notice errors.

READ ALOUD SLOWLY

Yes, you'll feel foolish, but remember why you're reading aloud: to catch errors that might lower your grade. You can hear sentences that don't sound right, so trust your ear. If you stumble over specific words or phrases, that's a tipoff you need to revise to make those areas clearer to your reader. **However, you must read exactly what's on the page—not what you *thought* you wrote, what you *intended* to write, or what you're *positive* you had written on an earlier draft.**

READ WITH A PENCIL

As you read aloud, track slowly, with your pencil moving underneath each word as you read it. This way, you'll catch errors, awkward phrases, or places where you left out words. This is *super important* because revising on a computer can actually increase your errors. Why? Grammar and spell checkers make writers lazy.

Relying on a computer's spell check is NOT proofreading. Do you check a dictionary to be sure the word you chose from the spell check list is the right one? For example, spell check lists these three spellings:
>weather
>whether
>wether

Which one is right? That depends on your sentence. Checking a dictionary, you read these definitions:
1. weather= the state of the atmosphere
2. whether= a conjunction indicating possibilities
3. wether= a neutered male sheep

Once you know the meanings, you can easily choose the right word. Remember, spell checkers search for letter groups like the one you typed—but they can't think for you.

Word processing programs make revision almost *too* easy. While revising on the computer, students make changes, but then sometimes delete either too much or not enough. The result is an unclear sentence or paragraph.

Here's the bottom line: Unless you proofread carefully, you're likely to submit an essay with errors you could easily have corrected.

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College Writing Center
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