

sfep FAQsheet 2: Proofreading

What does a proofreader do?

Unleash your Inner Stickler

Lynne Truss

Proofreading involves much more than simply correcting spelling and typing errors. The proofreader's role is to check that the editor, designer and typesetter have done a good job and to use judgement in marking amendments in order to minimize costs and delays. In contrast to the relatively 'fluid' state of raw copy, where changes can be made easily, at proof stage the production process is well advanced and the work is now relatively 'fixed'.

Professional proofreaders will:

- compare proofs with edited copy or previous proofs
- or, if requested, proofread 'blind', i.e. without reference to copy or previous proofs
- check consistency and accuracy of text, typography and design
- on hard copy, mark amendments using standard symbols and apply colour coding to differentiate editorial and typesetter's errors if costs are to be apportioned
- alternatively, if requested, mark proofs in electronic form ('PDFs') using special software
- follow the style guide supplied by the client or the copy-editor, or compile one to ensure consistency
- consider the implications of any changes for costs and timing
- check that the layout is aesthetically pleasing and logically arranged
- liaise with the copy-editor and/or the author to resolve queries or bring them to the client's attention
- if required, collate the author's changes with their own, rationalizing or querying conflicting instructions if necessary.

A proofreader's tasks are described in more detail in 'Can I do it myself?' below.

What does a proofreader not do?

- Editing (see *SfEP FAQsheet 1: Copy-editing*). Changes on proof are relatively expensive, so should be kept to a minimum. Corrections to grammar and spelling, application of house style and especially restructuring or rewriting should have been tackled at the copy-editing stage, before the text was typeset and the pages laid out
- Indexing
- Seeking permission to use copyright material. Permissions should be obtained before typesetting, if at all possible: denial of permission at this late stage can have a serious effect on the page layout if, say, an illustration has to be withdrawn
- Making layout changes to proofs in electronic form.

Many professional proofreaders also have the skills to perform these services, if requested, but they require separate negotiation and briefing.

Why do I need a proofreader?

It is a truism that no one can reliably proofread their own work: no matter how many times you check it, there will invariably be an obvious error that you miss. Your eye sees what is on the page but your brain interprets what it wants or expects to read, not always what is actually there, and it takes a 'fresh eye' to break this pattern.

Only in the ... appendix do errors seem to creep in ... more poof [*sic*] reading would have improved things here.

Review of aviation book

A professional reader will be familiar with the production process, and will know what needs to be checked at each stage, which changes are uneconomic and how to minimize the effects of necessary corrections.

How much does it cost?

The Society for Editors and Proofreaders cites recommended hourly rates on its website (www.sfep.org.uk). The National Union of Journalists (www.nujbook.org/freelance/) lists similar rates. You will be able to find proofreaders who will work for less but they may be untrained or inexperienced.

Can I do it myself?

Proofs provide the first opportunity for you, the author, to see your words integrated with the other elements (such as illustrations) into a coherent whole. You will want to check them yourself, but consider commissioning a professional proofreader as well. The guidance below assumes that the book has been edited to an adequate standard. (Read *SfEP FAQsheet 1: Copy-editing* to understand what this entails.) If extensive changes are needed at proof stage, you are recommended to consult a professional proofreader or copy-editor.

- Compare the proofs with the edited copy line by line – it helps to use a ruler to expose one line at a time as you move down the page. This way you are more likely to read every word.
- If you are proofreading 'blind' (i.e. not against copy), use the ruler method to stop yourself skipping words unconsciously, especially at the ends of lines; it is easy to miss a word that has been repeated at the end of one line and the start of the next, for example.
- Check that page numbers are consecutive and running headings are correct. Right-hand pages always have odd numbers. Preliminary pages are often given roman numbers.
- On hard copy, identify changes, preferably using the standard marks (BS 5261C-2: 1976), but this is not essential as long as your marks are readable and unambiguous.
- If proofs have been provided in electronic form ('PDFs'), they can be printed out (using Acrobat Reader, free from www.adobe.com) and marked up in the usual way. Proofs can be read on-screen, but most people find that they pick up more errors on hard copy. If you want to annotate proofs electronically, you will need the full Acrobat software or similar. Check whether the designer/typesetter is happy to accept proofs marked in this way.
- Don't be tempted to re-edit the work at this stage: acceptable changes are corrections to typographical errors and minor adjustments to grammar, spelling and inconsistencies, but not restructuring or rewriting.
- Mark amendments accurately and consistently, taking into consideration the budgetary implications of any changes. Bear in mind that adding or removing even a word may, in some circumstances, have a 'knock-on' effect that drastically alters the page layout, resulting in unacceptable costs and delay.
- Follow the style guide if supplied, or compile your own list of preferred spellings and hyphenation to ensure consistency.

- Watch out for typographical and design inconsistencies as well as textual ones.
- Cross-check chapter titles against the table of contents; check that end-matter corresponds with the text.
- Check or insert numbers in cross-references.
- Eliminate inelegant or confusing page breaks, column breaks and word breaks (a dictionary of word division is useful here). 'Widows' and 'orphans', i.e. the last line of a paragraph appearing at the top of a page or the first line of a paragraph at the bottom of one, are undesirable. It may be necessary to adjust the text to correct these.
- Ensure that illustrations and their legends and labels correspond with each other and with the text.
- Check that each page is aesthetically pleasing and logically arranged; as a general rule, tables and figures look best at the top or bottom of a page.

Where can I find a proofreader?

The best place to look is the Society for Editors and Proofreaders' *Directory*, available from the society's office or website (www.sfep.org.uk). You can search the *Directory* free online or use the indexes of subjects, skills, media, software and location in the printed version. Inclusion is restricted to members who have demonstrated an acceptable level of skill and experience. Other online and printed directories are listed in 'Where can I find more information?' There are also several online agencies that offer freelancers' services but not all of these vet proofreaders' abilities with sufficient rigour.

Vivian Cook's *Accommodating Broccoli in the Cemetery: Or Why Can't Anyone Spell English?* is, like his title, full of intentional spelling mistakes. You can guess what the conscientious typesetters did.

The Bookseller

What should I look for in a proofreader?

- *Training in proofreading* – ideally by the Society for Editors and Proofreaders or the Publishing Training Centre, although other courses are available.
- *Proofreading experience* – preferably in your subject area.
- *Specialist knowledge* – desirable if your text is aimed at professionals.
- *Communication skills* – proofreaders require tact in raising queries, as well as an eye for detail.
- *Knowledge of English* – not only ability in spelling and grammar but also an awareness of the evolving nature of English.
- *Good judgement* – the ability to assess when to make changes without incurring excessive costs/delays. This is where experience shows. Pedantry is an occupational hazard but should be tempered with common sense.
- *Knowledge of the production process* – familiarity with the technical requirements of editing, design and typesetting is a bonus.
- *Punctuality* – in raising queries and meeting deadlines.

What should I tell the proofreader?

You may discuss the work initially by phone or in person. If so, follow up by email or letter right away with what you've agreed. When you send the job to the proofreader, include the following information:

- *List* – of enclosures and outstanding material (and date expected).
- *Tasks to be performed* – read against copy/previous proofs or 'blind'? Differentiate editorial and typesetter's errors using colour coding? Collate proofreader's and author's proofs?

- *Important features* – who is the target audience? Is the book in a series? Is there a house style or design specification (enclose, if so)? Are there any exceptions to the house style? Is the work to be published in electronic form?
- *Illustrations* – are labels on line drawings to be proofread? If any illustrations are copyright, has permission for reproduction been obtained? Do any acknowledgements need to be added (publishers sometimes require specific wording)?
- *Relevant background* – have you any specific requests? Has anything been decided of which the proofreader should be aware? With whom should the proofreader liaise over queries (give all contact details)?
- *Agreed dates, fee, expenses* – when are the proofs to be returned? What is the agreed fee (hourly rate with estimated hours, page rate or lump sum)? Which expenses will be reimbursed (e.g. postage, copying, phone, travel, printer consumables)? Ask the proofreader, on sight of the job, to confirm any estimate given in advance and to contact you immediately if unforeseen problems come to light that might affect the schedule or budget.
- *Administrative requirements* – you should insure against loss or damage to original material, but the proofreader should keep copies of electronic files and correspondence for at least six months after publication.
- *Payment period* – arrangements for payment (including instalments if appropriate) should be agreed with the proofreader before work begins, and the proofreader should be paid promptly and in full, in accordance with the agreement. The Late Payment of Commercial Debts (Interest) Act 1998, amended and supplemented in 2002, applies to agreements made between businesses.

What if it goes wrong?

Sadly, from the very first page, this book is littered with howlers which even cursory proofreading should have picked up.

Review of ornithology book

If you are unfortunate enough to have a bad experience with a proofreader, take a step back and ask yourself why. Re-read your brief: was it clear and complete?

If the proofreader has marked changes with which you disagree, ask for an explanation. If the changes cannot be justified to your satisfaction, negotiate a further proofread or do it yourself – many can be changed with a general instruction to the typesetter, who can do a global search. Do not withhold payment unless you can prove negligence on the proofreader's part.

What if it goes well?

The proofreader would appreciate *constructive* feedback, positive and negative.

Where can I find more information?

Finding a proofreader: online

- Society for Editors and Proofreaders
www.sfep.org.uk use Directory link
- National Union of Journalists
www.freelancedirectory.org
- Publishing Training Centre
www.train4publishing.co.uk use Freelance Directory link
- Electric Editors
www.electriceditors.net use Members' Links (not searchable)

Finding a proofreader: in print

- Society for Editors and Proofreaders' *Directory*
(SfEP, Riverbank House, 1 Putney Bridge Approach,
London SW6 3JD. Tel: 020 7736 3278; email: administration@sfep.org.uk)
- *Directory of Publishing: United Kingdom, Commonwealth and Overseas*
(Continuum International, The Tower Building, 11 York Road,
London SE1 7NX. Tel: 020 7922 0880; email: info@continuum-books.com)
- *Directory of Publishing in Scotland*
(Scottish Publishers Association, Scottish Book Centre, 137 Dundee
Street, Edinburgh EH11 1BG. Tel: 0131 228 6866;
email: info@scottishbooks.org)
- *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook*
(A&C Black, 37 Soho Square, London W1D 3QZ.
Tel: 020 7758 0200; email: customerservices@acblack.com)

Proofreading symbols

- British Standards Institute
<http://bsonline.techindex.co.uk>
- *Copy-editing* (3rd edn) (extracts on pp. 421–434)
Judith Butcher
Cambridge University Press, 1992

Reference works

- A good dictionary – Oxford, Chambers or Collins
- *Oxford Dictionary for Writers and Editors*
Robert Ritter (ed)
Oxford University Press, 2000
- *Oxford Guide to Style*
Robert Ritter
Oxford University Press, 2002

sfep

society for editors and proofreaders
upholding editorial excellence

Society for Editors and Proofreaders
(SfEP)
Riverbank House
1 Putney Bridge Approach
LONDON SW6 3JD
Tel: 020 7736 3278
Fax: 020 7736 3318
Email: administration@sfep.org.uk
Web: www.sfep.org.uk