Self-Editing: Proofreading Your Own Writing
for Grammar, Punctuation, and Other Problems

It's often easy to spot problems with grammar or punctuation when you’re reading someone else’s writing; it’s harder to see problems when you’re looking at your own. Proofreading your own work requires some patience and determination; you have to read deliberately and know what kinds of problems you’re looking for.

The following are some of the most common problems with grammar, sentence structure, word choice, punctuation, and mechanics. If you know you often make a particular kind of error when writing, ask yourself the questions listed for each sentence of your writing (that may require much patience). You can also use this a refresher of common problems before you sit down to do one last read-through before handing in your work.

GRAMMAR, SENTENCE STRUCTURE, WORD CHOICE

1. VERBS
Do tenses agree? Do tenses make sense?
You met my sister’s boyfriend when he dropped her off at our house.
I had already gone to the store when Mom realized we needed milk.

Does each verb agree with its subject in number (singular/plural)?
The flowers need only water, but the grass needs fertilizer.

Is the subjunctive “were” used after “wish” or “if” clauses?
I wish I were done with school.
If he were a better student, he wouldn’t have any incompletes.

2. VOICE
Is the sentence written in the active rather than the passive voice? That is, is someone doing something in the sentence? Is there a subject and an action verb?
The law was passed in Michigan. ➔ Michigan voters passed the law.

Look for “to be” verbs and the preposition “by” as clues to the passive voice.
The Exit Exams were graded by different instructors. ➔ Different instructors graded the Exit Exams.

3. PRONOUNS
CASE:
Is each pronoun in the right case?
SUBJECT=I OBJECT=me POSSESSIVE=my REFLEXIVE=myself

Are subject pronouns (I/he/she) doing the action in a sentence?
She and I will work on the project together.

Are subject pronouns needed after forms of “to be”?
Can I speak to Dawn? This is she.

Are subject pronouns needed for an incomplete construction?
Chad has more plaid shirts than I [do].

Are object pronouns (me/us/her) receiving something or following prepositions such as between, among, with?
Just between you and me, I’m sending the loudmouth in the car with him.
Are possessives (my/your/their) used before gerunds (-ing words used as nouns)?
   Would you please stop his yelling?

**AGREEMENT:**
Does each pronoun agree with its antecedent in gender and number?
   Zach and Selina exchanged their papers.

Do words such as somebody, anyone, everything, and each call for singular pronouns and verbs?
   Someone needs to move his or her car.
   Someone needs to move her car out of the sorority house lot.
   Each student should bring his or her laptop to class.

Does all need a singular or a plural verb?
   All of the assignments are five to six pages long.
   All of the course is lecture.

**WHO/WHOM:**
Is who working as a subject only?
   Who’s going to the concert?
       The nurse called the patient who looked the most injured.
       Write down the name of whoever finishes first.

Is whom the object of an action or preposition?
   To whom are you giving the award?
       The authors whom we studied were all European.
       We’ll give the prize to whomever we rank highest.

4. **PARALLELISM**
Are all items joined by and or in a list written in matching forms (ex. all –ing words or all infinitives)?
   I need to run to the bank, to go to the store, and to pick up the cleaning.

Are all words joined by and or in a list the same part of speech?
   The applicant we’re looking for must be well-educated and after success. →
   The applicant we’re looking for must be well-educated and ambitious.

5. **SPLIT INFINITIVES**
Are there any adverbs or other words intruding between to and a verb?
   You should try to not split infinitives → You should try not to split infinitives.
   I’m going to eagerly await your reply. → I’m going to await your reply eagerly.

6. **MISPLACED OR DANGLING MODIFIERS**
Do descriptive phrases come near the words they describe?
   The elk frightened the baby with big antlers →
   The elk with big antlers frightened the baby.

Is there someone or something in the sentence actually being described by the phrase?
   Turning toward the west, the sun glared on the car’s windshield. →
   When we turned to the west, the sun glared on the car’s windshield.
7. WORD CHOICE

CONFUSED WORDS
its= possessive, belonging to it
it’s= it is
who’s= who is, who has
whose= belonging to who
there= not here
could have, not could of
their= belonging to them
should have, not should of
eye’re= they are
would have, not would of

FILLER WORDS
Do searches in your documents (CTRL + F) for
very, really, literally, actually, amazingly, basically, great, nice, fun, a lot, etc.
→ eliminate or choose a more specific, descriptive word

EXPLETIVE CONSTRUCTIONS
Do searches for
There is/ There are/ There was/ There were/ There have been/ There will be
It is/ It was/ It has been/ It will be
→ eliminate where possible and choose a specific subject and strong verb

PUNCTUATION and MECHANICS

8. COMMAS
If a comma is used between two independent clauses [complete thoughts, each with a
subject and verb], are the thoughts also joined by a conjunction?
I ran to the store, but I left my list at home.
I ran to the store but left my list at home.

Are commas used to separate items in a list, and is a comma used before and or or?
Remember to bring your laptop, ethernet connector, and cables.

Are commas used to separate nonessential information?
My sister, who lives in Oregon, is getting married next week.

Are commas used after introductory phrases that set the scene (time, place, concurrent
action) or introduce the context of the sentence’s main idea?
When I walked in the room, everyone pointed and laughed at me.

9. SEMICOLONS
Is a semicolon used between two complete thoughts that are not joined by a conjunction?
I ran to the store; unfortunately, it was closed.

Is a semicolon used to separate items which already have commas as part of each item
[cities and states, dates, etc.?]
Our team will play matches in Arlington, Virginia; Ponca City, Oklahoma; and
Shreveport, Louisiana.

10. COLONS
Is a colon used to introduce a list that is not already introduced by a preposition or a
verb?
Please remember to bring the following: shorts, sandals, and swimsuit. 

BUT: Please remember to bring your shorts, sandals, and swimsuit. 

We are going to Aspen, Vail, and Copper Mountain.

Is a colon used to introduce some surprise, revelation, or new information at the end of a sentence? 

The answer is clear: we must take back our offer.

Is a colon used to introduce a formal quotation? 

The opening of Sylvia Plath’s poem, “Cut,” shows the intersection of pleasure and pain: “What a thrill/ My thumb instead of/ An onion.”

11. APOSTROPHES 

Are apostrophes being used to show where letters are missing in contractions? 

You shouldn’t be afraid to use contractions in your writing.

Are apostrophes being used to show possession? 

David’s costume shocked us all. 

David’s whining is getting tiresome.

Are apostrophes being incorrectly used to make plurals? 

My family lives next door to the Jones’s. ➔ My family lives next door to the Joneses.

12. QUOTATION MARKS 

Are quotation marks being used around dialogue or the use of someone’s exact words? 

The professor reminded us, “You must turn in your paper by Friday.”

Are quotation marks used around the titles of smaller, self-contained works of art (poems, songs, essays, articles, short stories)? 

We read O’Hara’s poem, “Why I am Not a Painter,” for class last night.

Are quotation marks used to call attention to certain words or phrases? 

Please quit using the phrase “a lot” in your essays.

Are single quotation marks used when a quoted item falls within a larger quotation? 

Dr. Velie reminded us, “Read ‘The Lottery’ by tomorrow.”

13. ITALICS/UNDERLINING 

Are italics or underlining used for the titles of longer works of art (novels, magazines, journals, plays, movies, paintings, sculptures)? 

We watched *Apocalypse Now* in class yesterday.

Are italics or underlining used to set off foreign words or phrases which are not commonly used in English? 

The French word for nightmare is *cauchemar*. 