

## How to Avoid Proofreading Blunders

**WHO SHOULD READ THIS BULLETIN:**  
*Any person who creates documents for publication.*

As we have previously stated in our technical communications, it is extremely difficult to effectively proofread your own work. We encourage you to have someone else do your final proofreading. We also know that this isn't always possible.

This *TechTopics* will be helpful to anyone who is responsible for final approval of documents for publication. The issue is based on an article by Steve Druley that was published by the Article Resource Association.

For most people, writing is either a rewarding creative process or a laborious chore. Regardless of which camp you fall into, the tedious and tiring job of proofreading is a task few enjoy.

In business and professional writing, there are times when simple errors become memorable for the wrong reasons. Take the proofreading experience of Janell Wojtowicz, formerly an editor at a small Iowa newspaper.

While writing an article about a church event, Janell meant to type "United Methodist Church." Instead, she accidentally typed "Untied Methodist Church," warranting a call from the pastor a few days later. "He jokingly asked, 'Do you know something about my church that I don't?'" Wojtowicz recalls. "I learned an important lesson that day: spell check is not the answer to all our proofreading problems." *See back page.*

Following are tips to help you avoid embarrassing—and costly—bloopers and blunders.

### Mistakes to Avoid

**1. Stating the obvious.** This mostly appears in titles and headlines. "Rain Creates Wet Roads," "Winter Brings Colder Temperatures," and "Clothes Dry Faster in the Dryer, Survey Says" are statements that will certainly make you look silly—and it may even guarantee you a spot on *The Tonight Show's* Headlines.

**2. Inappropriate translations.** If you are not using a professional translation service or a native speaker for foreign language writing, you may want to squeeze them into your budget. Remember the infamous mistake made by Chevrolet when they tried to market their Nova model in Spanish speaking countries? If you don't, all you need to

know is that "No Va" in Spanish means "It does not go." Enough said.

**3. Poor math or wrong numbers.** 55 percent, 30 percent and 25 percent don't add up to 100 percent, so always do your math. Take note that most months of the year are 30 or 31 days long. This may seem incredibly elementary, but you'd be surprised at the number of retailers who have sales on the 31st of June or September.

**4. Bad choice of words.** You may not have intended the pun when you wrote "Automobile Plant Profits Crash," but it's one that is easy to overlook.

Here are some other examples from Richard Lederer's *Anguished English: An Anthology of Accidental Assaults Upon Our Language*: "Reagan Wins on Budget, but More Lies Ahead" and "Juvenile Court to Try Shooting Defendant."

**5. Confusing word order.** Here are some more examples from Lederer:

- "Enraged Cow Injures Farmer with Ax"
- "Stolen Painting Found by Tree"
- "2 Sisters Reunited after 18 Years in Checkout Counter"

**6. Photo or art errors.** A major midwestern newspaper once printed a story about a newspaper carrier who was murdered while on the job—and directly underneath it they had put a Help Wanted ad for carriers.

In another example, an advertising agency sent photographic artwork to a client for review, without realizing that the client's competitor was shown in the background of the photo!

These bloopers are worth a good laugh, but you don't want it to happen to you.

### Following are guidelines for more effective proofreading

- **Allow adequate time to proofread.** Write one day, let your brain rest, and proofread the next. And, remember... there's no substitute for having a second pair of eyes double-check your work.

- **Prepare yourself with adequate reference materials.** Computers are not always reliable in proofreading, so have a good dictionary on hand, as well as a stylebook that is appropriate for your business. *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Associated Press Stylebook* are recommended.

- **Look for one type of error at a time.** This will make things go fast and smooth when proofreading. For the first run through, look at the content closely to be sure you logically articulated what you wanted to say.

Secondly, check for grammatical errors in punctuation and sentence structure. Then do a third reading and look for any typographical or spelling errors.

- **Proof it on paper.** It's easier to become distracted when proofreading on a computer screen. Printing out your writing whenever possible makes it easier to concentrate on finding errors—and you can take advantage of the margin to make more detailed notes and corrections.

*Note: Any piece that will be printed should be proofed on paper. Text and graphics on a computer screen don't always look the same on a printed page.*

While it's not glamorous and can cause headaches, back pain and boredom, proofreading your documents is definitely worth the hassle.



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## Spell Checkers

Spell checkers can't be trusted to accurately proofread your documents. The following ditty by an unknown author explains why.

Eye halve a spelling chequer  
 It came with my pea sea  
 It plainly marques four my revue  
 Miss steaks eye kin knot sea.

Eye strike a key and type a word  
 And weight four it two say  
 Weather eye am wrong oar write  
 It shows me strait a weigh.

As soon as a mist ache is maid  
 It nose bee fore two long  
 And eye can put the error rite  
 Its rare lea ever wrong.

Eye have run this poem threw it  
 I am shore your pleased two no  
 Its letter perfect awl the weigh  
 My chequer tolled me sew.

Although amusing, this short poem illustrates the point. All the words are legitimate words of the English language, they just aren't used correctly. A spell checker may catch a couple of words...not because they're wrong, but due to the limitations of the built-in dictionary.

Our advice: don't ever trust a spell checker for final proofing.

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