

## How to Avoid Costly Proofreading Blunders

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.

This *TechTopics* will be helpful to anyone who is responsible for final approval of documents for publication.

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.

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 for 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."

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 the writers look foolish.

**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."

**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" and "Two Sisters Reunited after 18 Years in Checkout Counter."

**6. Misstated headlines.** You see them regularly in local and metropolitan newspapers: "A Guide to Pinpointing Your Child's Leaning Problems," "Volunteers Search for Old Civil War Planes."

**7. 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 and a thesaurus close at hand as well as a stylebook that is appropriate for your business. *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *The Associated Press Stylebook* are recommended.

- **Get rid of distractions and potential interruptions.** Switch off the cell phone, shut the door and stay away from your email. If you don't have an office, go to the library or a coffee shop. A change of venue will give you a fresh perspective.

- **Spell check just once.** Use a spell and grammar checker for only a quick first look at your document—then forget it!

- **Don't try to proofread on a computer screen.** Print a copy and read it aloud and then silently. 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 to be printed should be proofed on paper. Text and graphics on a computer screen don't always look the same on a printed page.*

- **Start at the end.** Proofread an article by starting at the end of the piece. When we read backwards, we're not reading for content, so we're not sidetracked by the temptation to edit the copy.

- **Proof the body of the text first.** Then go back and check your headlines and subheads. Although they command attention, headings are easy to overlook, and sometimes boldface type mistakes are harder to spot.

- **Proof spelling first.** Don't proof for every type of mistake at once. Do one proof for spelling. Do another proofing for errors like changes in fonts and font styles, missing or extra spaces or incorrect spacing between headlines and text or gutters between columns of text.

- **Double-check the little words.** "Or," "of," "it" and "is" are often interchanged.

- **Read the fine print.** Tiny type can give readers fits. If it's too hard for you to read, consider bumping the size up one or two points for easier reading.

- **Beware of contractions and apostrophes.** People often mix their and they're, its and it's, your and you're, etc. Remember that the apostrophe is never used to denote plurals.

- **Check—and then recheck—proper names.** Misspelling of individuals' names, places or organizations can be disastrous. If you are at all in doubt, contact someone who can give you the correct spelling.

- **Verify technical and scientific data.** Mistakes in numbers, symbols and units of measure in formulas, equations and recipes are very difficult to catch and can have disastrous consequences. If possible, ask subject matter experts to review technical information.

- **Watch out for captions.** Proofread captions to ensure that they are correct and match the pictures or artwork. Make sure that the number of names matches the number of people shown in photos and that photos are not reversed.

- **Check all the numbers.** What is the population of China: Is it 1,200,000 or 1,200,000,000? Make sure that all of your numbers are correct. It's also a good idea to check the math. Closely review page numbers and other footer and header material for accuracy and correct order.

- **Confirm the accuracy of URLs.** Manually enter the URLs in your document into a browser to see that they are correct.

- **Get outside help.** The more eyes you have proofing your work the better. Find a friend or colleague to proofread for you. Consider using a person not closely associated with your product or service who can find writing content that is out of context or confusing. You'll be amazed at the mistakes you've missed. Better still—hire a pro. Catching one major error will more than pay for the proofreader's fee.

*Note: Recruiting another set of eyes to review your document will give you needed perspective on content and readability.*

While it's not glamorous and can cause headaches and back pain, proofreading your document is definitely worth the hassle. The time and inconvenience doesn't compare with the disaster that a serious error would create for you.

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*Portions of this bulletin were adapted from an article by Steve Druley published by Article Resource Association.*

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