Essays: Proofreading

Have I left enough time for proofreading? After you are finished with the paper, leave yourself enough time so that you can step away from the paper for a while and come back to it at a later date with a fresh perspective.

Have I looked for mistakes without relying on a Spellchecker? Spellchecker is a handy tool to use when looking at misspelled words, but it does not find everything. Spellchecker misses words that are spelled correctly but are out of place. Also, Spellchecker often is set to American Standard English as opposed to Canadian spellings.

Have I proofread a hard copy? Proofreading on a computer screen can be hard because you cannot refer back to changes you have made. It is much easier to print out a copy of the essay and then make changes on the page with a pencil.

Have I read my essay aloud? Take the hard copy and read the essay out loud. Many errors are missed when you read in your head; whereas, when you read out loud, you can see and hear when something is wrong, such as when a word has been left out or a subject and verb don’t agree.

Have I read every word? Don’t skim read. Make sure you are reading every word in the order it is found on the page. People have a tendency to correct their mistakes orally as they are reading and leave off suffix endings.

Example:
- In yesterday’s class, the teacher focus on the difference between transitive and non-transitive verbs. (incorrect – should be in the past tense since it was yesterday)
- In yesterday’s class, the teacher focused on the difference between transitive and non-transitive verbs. (correct verb ending)

Have I broken sentences down? If you have problems with things like subject-verb agreement, break questionable sentences down into their parts. Underline the subject of the sentence once, the verb twice, and make sure that they agree.

Remember that plural verbs have a singular ending and singular verbs have a plural ending.

Example:
- The girls walk...
- The girl walks...

Decide at the beginning of the paper if you are writing in present, past or future tense. Check your verbs to make sure that the tense remains consistent.
Have I checked my use of singular vs plural? Take a look at the nouns. Are you talking about just one, or many?

Example:
- The committee recommended many changes to address the problem that the GM factory was facing. (incorrect – probably talking about more than one problem)
- The committee recommended many changes to address the problems that the GM factory was facing. (correct – pluralized noun shows there were many problems)

Have I checked for correct capitalization? Capitalization may seem unimportant, but can save you easily lost marks. Only capitalize proper names and not general nouns.

Example:
- My college friends are visiting this weekend. (college is being used as an adjective here to describe what friends they were)
- Back when I was at Seneca College, I used to study in the library all of the time. (college is a specific noun here, so it requires capitalization)

Have I read my essay backwards? Work paragraph by paragraph. Start with the last sentence in the paragraph and read it for coherence. Does it make sense on its own? Is it an independent clause or does it rely on the sentence before it? (dependent clause)

- e.g. Because the pioneers relied heavily on the land. (Dependent clause also known as a fragment. This does not convey a complete thought.)

Am I following the guidelines of the styleguide? Pay attention to whether you are supposed to use MLA style or APA style or another style when writing. Each has specific rules for citation, bibliography, footnotes, quotations, etc. You can find online MLA and APA style guides.

Has someone else read my essay? A second person may catch things that you miss because you are too close to the writing and are already familiar with what has been written. A second person can also let you know if the paper makes sense to them and may notice incomplete sentences or small grammatical errors.