

# Win the War Against Typos

*These tried-and-true tactics can give you the edge.*

BY PATTY MARTINO ALSPAUGH

“I can’t proof my own work; I’m too close to it...I always find someone else’s mistakes more easily than my own.”

These are the familiar laments of nearly everyone who writes, even professional writers and editors. And, unfortunately, most people *do* spot others’ typos more easily than their own. It’s as if the typos are camouflaged—until they get into someone else’s hands, that is.

Secretaries often are the ones on the frontlines of the typo battle—whether it’s proofreading their executives’ correspondence, departmental reports, or corporate publications. They’re also the people who may have input the text of the communication in the first place, making it far more difficult to catch every typo—despite those handy spell-check programs, which are *not* foolproof in catching every type of error.

To make sure you’re proofreading thoroughly and accurately, here are some tried-and-true guidelines.



## Basic training

Here are the basics for every office professional whose aim is flawless proofing:

- ✓ **Read through the material you are proofing twice.** It's easy to overlook something in the first reading. By reading it twice you are, in effect, doubling your odds of finding all the typos.
- ✓ **Place a check mark next to executed edits.** Checking off each edit on the marked-up version as you proof it against the cleaned-up version is about as foolproof as you can get.
- ✓ **If in doubt, look it up.** If you have any doubt about the use of a word—grammar, syntax, etc.—consult the appropriate source.
- ✓ **Use the standard proofreading marks.** Just as nations have universal languages, editors have standard editing marks. And just like languages, these marks are necessary for effective communication. You can find these standard proofreading marks in style manuals and in some dictionaries.
- ✓ **Make all edits in a contrasting color.** This will help ensure the edits are seen. It's also a good idea to put an "x" or to repeat the proofreading mark in the right-hand margin, as well. Circle the edit if it's easily overlooked, like a comma or a hyphen—especially if you are planning to fax the edits. And, if you're making lengthy edits, use an erasable pen—you'll appreciate being able to rethink (erase) your own edits.
- ✓ **Take pride in your work.** If you care about your work, you'll do a better job. It takes a dedicated and somewhat compulsive individual who strives for uniformity and perfection to be an editor.
- ✓ **Always, always use a spell-check program.** This applies to anyone using a word-processing program. Never leave a file without spell-checking it—even if you are only making a few edits. But, remember, spell-check programs will not catch improper word uses, grammar errors, punctuation, and so forth.
- ✓ **Read good writers.** Over time, you'll assimilate some of the writers' styles and more easily recognize awkward or ineffective language use when you're proofing.
- ✓ **Enlarge your vocabulary.** Increasing your vocabulary increases your understanding of the things around you.

And, the more well-rounded your thinking is, the more help you can be to the writer. If you don't understand what's being said, how can you know if it's being said *properly*? When reading, don't ignore unknown words—look them up, write them down, and refer back to them. Buy vocabulary books. Listen to vocabulary-building cassette tapes. You'll find the challenge will

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not only improve your depth of understanding, but will improve your verbal and written skills, too.

- ✓ **Use a systematic approach.** For instance, if you are executing someone else's edits, first make all the edits without really paying attention to anything else. Next, check to make sure you made all the edits. Finally, read through the document to check for errors not picked up by the other proofreader(s).

### First aid

Keep these supplies on hand for every proofreading job:

- ✓ **A dictionary**—preferably a comprehensive one. Become familiar with how your particular dictionary works, because they aren't all alike. The front of the dictionary explains how you should interpret it.
- ✓ **At least one style manual**—This is a must—especially if you are proofreading something for publication in the print media. Style books answer such ques-

tions as: Do I put a colon before or after the quotation mark? Is north capitalized when it's used as a region?

- ✓ **Grammar books**—As a reference book, Hodges' *Harbrace College Handbook* is great. The comprehensive index makes looking up anything easy. A good grammar review book is *Short Cuts To Effective English* by Harry Shefter. Shefter gives you a *simple* way to figure out the proper way.

- ✓ **A secretarial handbook**—The indexes generally are laid out well, the material is up-to-date, and they include a wide variety of information geared specifically to the office person. Professional Secretaries International® (PSI®) is among publishers of secretarial handbooks.

- ✓ **Condensed encyclopedia-type books**—These books don't cover the breadth that encyclopedias do, but they're a handy and compact source you can keep nearby. They reference everything from people to events to historical data. There are many to choose from, including *The New American Desk Encyclopedia*, *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy*, and *Benet's Reader*, to name a few.

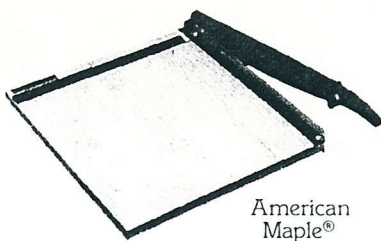
Additionally, don't forget these resources:

- ✓ **Your local library**—The literary sections of most libraries are great sources for grammar questions. Most grammar hotlines are located at libraries.
- ✓ **Seminars**—Many offer great one-day refresher courses. There are seminars specifically on editing and proofreading, including those often conducted at the PSI International Convention. And most cost only \$59 to \$99.

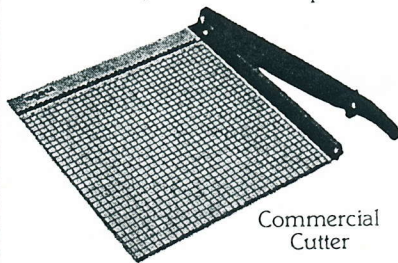
### Anticipation wins the war

Here are common—yet frequently missed—writing errors that you should anticipate every time you proof:

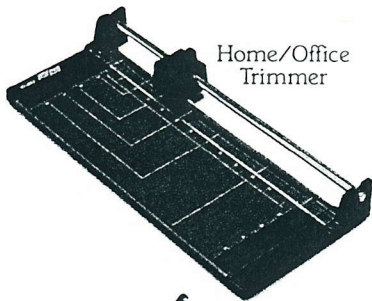
- ✓ **Watch out for job jargon.** Many of your industry's bywords probably aren't known to the general public. If addressing an audience outside of your own, explain (in parentheses) the first use of industry vernacular if the universality of a word or expression is in doubt.
- ✓ **Be on the lookout for domino-type changes.** For example, figure changes that affect cumulative figures elsewhere; changed headings that require changes in the table of contents; noun number changes that will affect verb tenses.



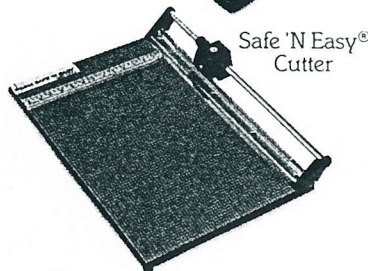
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✓ **Make sure the dates on letters are current.** Sometimes letters sit for a few days because of rewrites or routing. Take an extra second to double-check the date before sending out any letters.

✓ **Verify names.** This is critical if it's an important piece of correspondence. No one likes to see her name, or her company's name, spelled wrong.

✓ **Don't get sidetracked.** Sometimes the same sentence will have two typos, but you get so caught up in finding the solution to one, that you bypass the other. Read the sentence over again after fixing a typo.

✓ **Make it attractive.** How it looks—the layout is an important aspect of making the final text presentable. It might be typo-free, but if it looks shoddy (correction fluid globs, jagged edges), it's not presentable. Even the spacing between words—and lines—is important. Because, in the editing world, looks *do* count.

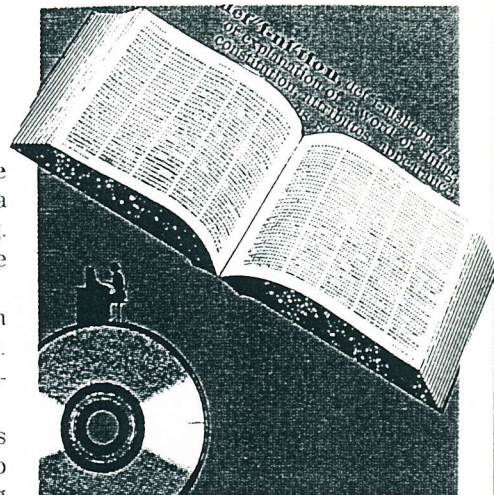
✓ **Be on the alert for double meanings.** One classic example is the Chevrolet Nova automobile. When the company tried to market the car in Mexico, they discovered that the name means "no go" in Spanish.

✓ **Slow down.** More mistakes are made because someone is in a big hurry to get something done and doesn't double-check the work. To paraphrase an old proofing expression: They can have it now, or they can have it right.

✓ **Don't assume.** If, when making edits, you have any contextual questions, flag those areas on the hard copy; don't assume if you're not sure. If it's a grammatical or spelling edit, go for it; but if it's a matter of making sense, always verify changes with the writer.

✓ **Make sure the punctuation is correct.** Punctuation marks are there to help guide the reader's comprehension. Missing and misused punctuation only confuses the reader. Keep an especially vigilant eye out for missing question marks and quotation marks, and misplaced commas.

✓ **Proof in pairs if it's really important.** If you are proofing something *really* important—for instance, a brochure that is ready to go to the printer and will ultimately become a printed piece sent to thousands—get someone to proof with you. One method of proofing in pairs involves having one proofer read every word aloud, indicating spaces, punctua-



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tion, capitalization, and so forth, while the other proofer follows with original copy. This is particularly effective when proofing names or figures that have been entered onto a computer from another source.

✓ **Proof the printout.** If proofing a file on a computer, print it out and proof it again. Mistakes are easier to spot on a hard copy.

✓ **Double-check all math.** Not only should you double-check the math, but you should attach an adding machine tape for verification (if you use the computer's math program to do your calculations, put a check mark next to the totals to let the writer know).

✓ **Be consistent.** Whatever you do, however you do it, do it consistently; for instance, parallel construction. If you list things beginning with verbs, don't change midway to nouns. And watch out for inconsistent bullet-point styles, i.e., beginning some bullet points with capitals and others without; ending some bullet points with periods and others without.

But remember, a typo may escape even your most thorough proofreading; they elude even the most experienced editors. So next time you find one after the fact, don't be too upset; just put yourself through the drills and prepare for your next battle. ■

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