Proofreading your own writing? Forget it!

KENNETH D. MAHRER, *U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, Denver, Colorado, U.S.*

First, let's define the difference between proofreading and editing your work. Editing is revising to improve abstract and opinion-rooted characteristics like clarity, flow, organization, and development. They are easy to name and hard to identify, but you know them when you see them abused in someone else's writing. Proofreading is much more straightforward: It is finding and correcting mistakes. This includes misspellings (or correctly spelled words used in the wrong place, the bane of computer spell chequers, sic), sentence fragments, punctuation, subject-verb agreement, word omissions, all those things on which teachers drilled us in school. Too often, these overzealous teachers stressed correctness over content. Both are important, but not at the expense of the other (a topic for another day). Proofreading is typically the last stage before you dance the "I'm done!" jig, or it should be. But if you rely on your own eyes and brain to ferret out those mistakes, you may be making another mistake.

Let me show you an example. Test your ability to recognize on demand. Count the number of "f's" in the following sentence:

Finishing files are the result of years of scientific study combined with the experience of years.

Did you count six? If not, you probably missed the "f's" in the "of's." The experts tell us that most readers skip the word "of" in English because, as a mere connecting word, it is implied and, therefore, overlooked. This type of "blindness" is not uncommon when proofreading our own text.

Consider now the following passage floating around the Internet. Read it; it may be a bit difficult to start, but most likely you'll get in its flow.

I cdnuolt blveiee taht I cluod aulaclty uesdnatnrd waht I was rdgnieg. The phaonmneal pweor of the hmuan mnid. Aoccdrnig to a rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer inwaht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoatnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be in the rghit pclae. The rset can be a taotl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey lteter by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe. Amzanig huh? yaeh and I awlyas thought slpeling was ipmorantt

How did you do? Even if you struggled with this, its content is quite interesting. To me, it invoked a mixed response. First, since I could read it, it did say to me how difficult it is to proofread, a struggle that is amplified when proofreading one's own writing. Next, we can read this not only because of correct first and last letters, but also because we follow the context and know what to expect, another source of proofreading difficulty. I say this because if you look at individual, scrambled words out of context, deciphering is more difficult. I recently tested some students and found this to be the case. They had no trouble reading this but found it much harder to unscramble isolated words. (Personally, I have great trouble finding words in scrambled letters and for that reason, I rarely play Scrabble with players over 12 years old.)

If proofreading is so tough, what's one to do? Since I'm as inept as anyone, I went for help—the Internet! Google got me to Purdue University's Online Writing Lab, OWL, which suggested some good strategies.

OWL offered two categories of strategies—general and personalized. In the general category, it recommended taking a break and distancing yourself from the manuscript. Even a five-minute break helps you return with a fresh eye and mind. You may also want to read something else during the break to get your focus away from the original topic. Next, OWL stressed slowing down! This will help find mistakes that at your normal reading speed you jump over—remember the "f's" above.

Another strategy is to read aloud. This encourages you to read what's on the page and not what you *think* is on the page. You may even want to point to each word as you read. I recently used this strategy in a technical writing class and the students were really surprised how, when they read their own works aloud, it enabled them to find both mistakes they'd failed to find in earlier (silent) proofreadings,

plus more profound difficulties that required revising. You may want to slide a piece of paper down the page as you read. This will encourage you to focus on a line-by-line review.

Another suggestion (not OWL's) is read paragraphs at random. This will tend to keep you from getting into a flow and speeding up.

A favorite personal strategy is read the manuscript backwards! This will tend to isolate words and punctuation from the context and allow you to identify anomalies. It will also keep you from getting into a flow.

OWL's personalized strategies include:

• Find the sentence (or two) that gives the thesis of your document. Can't find it? Then structure one into an appropriate place. Readers need this cue.
• Locate the main or key point of each paragraph. If you can't find one, imagine how lost your readers are in trying to identify key issues. Fix it; restructure to include a main point sentence or statement for each paragraph.
• Think of the most common mistakes you find in your returned manuscripts (e.g., sentence fragments, left-out words, run-on sentences, incorrect syntax, improper parallels, etc.) and go through sentence by sentence looking for one common error with each pass through. Tedious? Yes! Necessary? Only if you want a clean manuscript.

Note, that the first two of these border on revising, but what the heck, the goal is a readable, useful document.

A Virginia Tech Web site on proofreading says that most errors in writing are made unconsciously (Really? And all this time I was putting my errors in knowingly; silly, silly me!). Nevertheless, there are two sources of unconscious errors: First, faulty information from your kinesthetic memory. In simple terms, if you have always misspelled a word, you will unthinkingly do it again even after you know better. The second source is a split second of inattention. The mind works far faster than fingers on a keyboard or pushing a pen. The lesson here is to work from a printout copy, not from the computer screen. It's too easy to drift in front of a computer screen. (Of course, I am saying this as I work from a computer screen but I have backup—those super editors at the *TLE*. They catch me all the time!)

And my final point is that spell checkers and grammar checkers are not a reliable line of defense. They are wonderful compared to what it was like without them, but they will not reliably save you from yourself. A case in point: I proofread and spell checked this manuscript many times. Each time through I found more mistakes (e.g., I called a run-on sentence a rub-on sentence). Nevertheless, the final defense, those wonderful *TLE* editors, found things I missed. They do an incredible job! So, if you want to turn out a correct manuscript, you must rely on more than yourself. Find a tough individual or group of individuals who love finding errors. Don't take what they do personally—remember it's not a spawn, it's a document—consider their contribution a step toward a successful final product, a product from which you get the credit! It works great! T|E

Corresponding author: kmahrer@do.usbr.gov