

Catch your **GOOFS** in time

By Tobie Hewitt

"WHEN SOMETHING CAN be read without effort, great effort has gone into its writing," wrote Spanish writer Enrique Jardiel Poncela. If, on the other hand, it becomes an effort for an editor to wade through an error-filled query or manuscript, even the best ideas can end up rejected.

As a proofreader for a major law firm, it is imperative that I detect and correct errors in the documents I proof. It is not so easy, however, to see the errors in my own work. With a little patience and concentration, though, I am able (for the most part) to submit error-free manuscripts to potential editors.

When you write, your brain, intoxicated with the brilliant prose you've just typed, may be unable to detect the errors you'd otherwise find glaring back at you from the screen or paper. Proofreading your own work requires using a variety of techniques to try to see the piece with fresh eyes. Here's a summary of some tricks I've learned:

Delayed reading. Make sure you leave plenty of time to actually proofread what you have written. Twenty-four hours is a good gap in the process, and allows your brain to forget what you wrote. Otherwise, if you proof too soon after writing, your eyes see what your brain wants them to, rather than what is actually on the page or screen. Give your brain a vacation, so it can see your writing in a refreshed state of mind. Unfortunately, writers are often up against deadlines, and so the next three techniques will work even in a time crunch.

Reading aloud. Read your work aloud slowly, focusing on every word and listening to what you are saying. Read it as though you have never seen it before and are reciting it to someone who desperately needs its information, and I promise that you will catch most, if not all, errors.

A related technique is to over-enunciate each word or to read in an accent different from your own. This forces your ear to hear what you are reading and your eye to see when the words fail to match up.

Reading backwards. Read the piece from end to beginning to catch spelling errors. A spell-checker is nice, but it is not infallible. Reading backwards will help your eyes see the actual words that are on the page and their spellings.

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Watching for gremlins. While your spell-checker is a dandy tool, it is not your brain, and does not know whether you wanted "its" or "it's," or "there" or "their." Gremlin errors occur (and remain behind) when we fail to give our works a final close reading. Read your work with a mind to what you meant to write, concentrating on meaning. Stay aware of words you often misuse or misspell.

Calling a friend. Sometimes you'll find yourself up against a deadline and in need of a fresh pair of ears to make sure your work is error-free.

A proofreader at a major law firm shares a few tricks for meticulously checking your work before you send it off

As a last resort, find someone who loves you, or at least likes you a lot, and ask him or her to listen to you read your work aloud. Perhaps you could offer a bribe, like a good cup of coffee and some biscotti (for a short piece) or dinner (longish piece). Just be sure to pick someone you trust, who is a good enough writer to catch a grammar error on the fly.

Seasoned writers as well as beginners need to remember

that presentation can be as important as content. Typos and grammar, spelling or punctuation errors raise a question about the writer's professionalism and distract from the message. When we present a clean, accurate copy of our work, we increase the chances we'll make a sale.

And now—I will stop and put this article aside for 24 hours.

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Tobie Hewitt is a writer, editor and proofreader. Her recently published book, *The Profession Manual*, is available at createspace.com/3595261 and Amazon.

