

# 12 Tips for Avoiding Embarrassing (and Expensive) Typos plus Proofreading Checklist

By Dianna Huff

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If you are a professional marketing writer or have ever worked within marketing communications, you know typos are the bane of everyone's existence. Whether you're creating trade show panels, print newsletters, or Web content, typos can be difficult to catch and expensive to fix.

Mistakes will always happen, but the following proofreading tips can help minimize errors. I've also included a "clip and save" proofreading checklist that you can keep by your side as you proofread documents.

Do you have a tip you don't see here? Send it to me and I'll include it.

## 1. Don't proof your own work.

No matter how good you are at spotting other people's errors, it's very difficult, if not downright impossible, to see your own. It's even harder when you've been working on a piece for hours or even days; because you know the copy by heart, you tend to scan the words quickly and miss errors. **Before sending copy to your client, your boss, or the publication, get someone else to read it.**

## 2. Don't rely on spell-check.

The spell checkers that come with word processing programs can't tell when you've used "form" instead of "from" or "principle" instead of "principal." I've learned from talking with other professional writers that we're all having difficulty finding common typos such as "its" vs. "it's," "your" vs. "you're" and "to" vs. "too." (If you're like me, your fingers type faster than you think.) **Catch these common errors by not proofing your own work, by consulting a dictionary when in doubt, and by using the tips outlined herein.**

## 3. Don't proofread on the computer screen.

It is very hard to see errors on the computer screen. Whether you're working from a PDF or a Word document, **print it out and proofread the hardcopy!**

I was working at a small writing firm and needed to hire an office assistant ASAP. I placed an ad in the Sunday Tampa Tribune, being careful to make sure everything was spelled correctly.

Monday morning I came in to a phone ringing off the hook with calls from fax machines.

Guess what? I had put our phone number in the ad instead of our fax number! I quickly devised a plan to \*69 each fax call and fax them back a message with the correct number, but it was a total pain.

I learned my lesson – get someone to proof EVERYTHING!

Mandy Minor  
J. Allan Writing and Design Studios

The project came from another department and never went through Marketing for proofing. The publication was about identity theft and security issues. The numbers for the three reporting credit bureaus were listed. Well, almost. The creator of the copy, in handwriting the phone numbers for the three agencies, miswrote a phone number.

Sad to say, the number listed on the final printed product (hundreds of thousands of copies), which was already in its second distribution cycle, was for a phone sex line. Ahem.

No apologies from the person who hadn't bothered to proof the project. We just halted distribution, reprinted an entire order, and went back to distributing the information as if we'd not sent a prior mailing.

The great thing . . . at least in my world . . . is that it wasn't MY mistake. Whew!

--Name withheld

The most expensive typo I have found is that of a client's phone number. If you get that wrong, you can throw away everything you have spent on an ad, direct mail piece or press release. My tip is to literally call the number on the piece before it goes to print.

Randi Winterman  
Winterman Ink

I like to think that typos are God's way of keeping us humble. I am a good proofreader BUT I am not perfect. When I get arrogant and think I can't make an error, that's when errors occur. So, my big rule is "avoid arrogance."

Judy Baehr  
Baehr Communications

#### **4. Shut your door. Don't answer your phone.**

You simply cannot proofread a document and be constantly interrupted. **Carve out quiet time, take a deep cleansing breath, and focus on the task at hand.**

#### **5. Proofread each word s-l-o-w-l-y.**

Our eyes like to "fill in" missing letters and they don't "see" typos like "your" instead of "you're." To catch these and other errors, you need to **read each word slowly and carefully.** Otherwise – true story – you're going to get back from the printer 3' x 5' four-color posters with the "n" missing from "technology." D'oh!

#### **6. Proofread finish to start.**

One sure way to catch errors is to read your document backwards. Instead of beginning with the first word in the document, **start at the last word and work your way to the beginning.**

#### **7. Test all phone and fax numbers, URLs, and email addresses.**

Another true story: A company printed 10,000 catalogs. It wasn't until after the catalogs had been shipped to the U.S. sales reps that the error was found – **the toll-free order number went to a girlie-hotline.** (The designer had hand-typed the number, rather than cutting and pasting it from the copy deck, and no one had bothered to test the number.) The marcom person was able to get labels printed and placed over the incorrect number, but it took a great deal of scrambling . . . and a lot of money.

Before a project goes to press, **call all phone and fax numbers and test URLs and email addresses.** If you want people to respond via fax, make sure you have your fax number, not your phone number, on the response mechanism.

#### **8. Pay special attention to people's names and titles.**

It's very easy to misspell someone's name . . . and when you do, people get upset (and understandably so). **Always do a double check on a person's name, job title, and gender.** Send a quick email or call the person on the phone. The extra time is worth the effort – and the person will be so happy that **you** got his or her name right.

The worst was when I misspelled my General Manager's name on the cover of our Country Club newsletter. We do a management spotlight piece from an executive level manager in each issue. It's located on the right hand corner of the cover page and we include a photo of the manager and we write it in the first person. My GM's name was misspelled under his photo! I had five people in my office proof it, and no one caught it . . .

Marion J. Champion  
Indian Palms Country Club & Resort

In writing and managing a major project for the engineering school of a local university, NO ONE, myself included, noticed that the "dean's" name was spelled incorrectly in the opening "Dean's Message"! The dean himself didn't catch the error until we got the page proofs back from the printer! Fortunately, we caught it before all the copies were printed, but as you know, it cost us money to fix it because we had already gone to "blue-line."

--Name withheld

Many years ago I was the editor of the monthly newspaper of a business organization. I wrote an article about a state agency that would mediate disputes between businesses. I carefully proofread the article, as did my assistant.

Then I realized that I had room for a pull quote. So I wrote: "The agency will mediate disputes between businesses." I didn't give it a second look or show it to my assistant.

When the issue came back from the printer, I left copies out for my co-workers. A few minutes later, there were people in my doorway saying, "Ommmm."

Mara Braverman  
Director of Communications  
Miss Porter's School

## 9. Ensure images are the correct images.

Sometimes you have to wait for an image – whether it's a picture of a product that isn't quite ready or a "data" or screen shot from new software. So, instead of holding up the design process, a designer will often add a "placeholder" (a colored box) in the space where the image will appear. This is perfectly fine . . . except when you're on a tight deadline and the marketing product manager sends you the wrong image from the research group. But you don't know it's the incorrect image of scientific data because you're a writer, not a PhD scientist. And, no one catches it because you're on this deadline and the entire sales and marketing team is at the sales meeting in Europe waiting for the brochure. Moral: Even if it takes extra time, **have at least two knowledgeable people look at your document with all the images in place.** (And, get their sign-off, too.)

## 10. Proofread the ENTIRE document.

If you're looking at a final PDF from the designer, proofread the entire document (see the checklist in the next section). Look for inconsistencies such as sub-heads formatted differently (ie., one has a period, the others don't); typos in headlines, pull quotes, and photo captions; and the correct company address, phone number, copyright, and publication data in the "boilerplate."

## 11. Use these special tips for PowerPoint presentations.

- Just as you would a print document, print out all the slides in a presentation and proof hardcopies.
- In order to catch operational "bugs" and other errors, go through the presentation on the big screen, using the projector, remote control, and other tools, before presenting it "live" to your audience. One company didn't discover, until their salespeople were in the field, that the pale blue font they used was virtually invisible when viewed "full size."
- Have more than two people view the presentation with you. What you think is a logical progression of information may be confusing to other viewers.

## 12. Call the folks at Proofreadnow.com.

Full disclosure: The only relationship I have with this company is that I pay them to proof my documents – and they do a fabulous job. Their rates are reasonable and they turn things around pretty quickly. I highly recommend them!

## PROOFREADING CHECKLIST

Years ago I did a pro bono assignment for the Massachusetts Hospital Association. My job was to create brief, one-page summaries of the achievements of “Blue Ribbon Winners” – healthcare institutions recognized for outstanding work in public health. These were compiled in a brochure to be distributed at the annual conference in Boston.

On the day of the conference, I raced to the appropriate booth and greedily scanned the new brochure. Suddenly, sweat broke across my brow. In a headline that should have honored the award-winner for “treating the medically underserved” was this colossal (and very politically incorrect) error: “treating the medically *undeserved*.”

Once back at my office, I opened my deck to see if I had submitted the mistake; fortunately, I hadn't. I'm guessing that the production manager ran my copy through MS spell check and simply followed its prompts without question . . .

Jonathan Kranz  
Kranz Communications

\_\_\_ **Carefully read all headlines and sub-heads.** Are the names of persons or products spelled correctly? Does the headline have the proper punctuation? Are all words spelled correctly?

\_\_\_ **Read the entire document from back to front.** Read each word s-l-o-w-l-y to ensure each one is spelled correctly. Pay particular attention to words that have been graphically treated, pull quotes, and photo captions. Look for missing periods, spaces, and letters that should or should not be capitalized.

\_\_\_ **Consult your corporate style guide.** If your company has a style guide, keep it available as you proof your document. If your company doesn't have one, ensure consistent spelling of words like “email” or “e-mail,” “Web site” and “Website” by creating your own reference sheet.

\_\_\_ **Pay careful attention to formatting.** Ensure consistent formatting in your document by checking the following:

- **Sub-heads:** Is each word capitalized or not? Periods at the end of each one or not? Numbered or not? Are the numbers in order?
- **Bullets:** Are all bullets visible? Are all the same color and size?
- **Photo captions:** Are captions italicized or not? Periods at the end of the caption or not?
- **Pagination:** Are page numbers in order? If an article is continued on another page, is the “continued on page x” showing the correct page number?
- **Columns and margins:** Are columns and margins the same width throughout the document?
- **Font:** Does the font change or look “funny” anywhere in the document?
- **Extra spaces:** Look for extra spaces between words and after periods. The standard is now one space after a period, not two. (The use of two spaces creates “rivers of white” that are clearly visible once the document is designed.)

\_\_\_ **Double-check proper names, scientific notation, and images.**

- Verify that names of persons, cities, states, and countries are spelled correctly.
- For scientific notation, send the document to a technical person with the scientific notation highlighted and a note: “Please confirm notation is correct.”
- Confirm that pictures of person(s), product(s), or data are correct.