



# On Call

## Protect your credibility through careful proofreading

As I was preparing to write this essay, my mind flashed back to a previous relationship ... with a bank.

We'd been connected since I was teenager. I remained a loyal customer even as what began as a savings and loan was swallowed by one banking institution after another. Questionable management decisions and declining customer service eventually sent me elsewhere.

There also were the little things, such as this sign on the bank's door one day: "For your convenience, we will be closed on Labor Day."

What the bank meant was, "For your convenience, you should know ahead of time that we will be closed on Labor Day." But that is not what the bank's shorthand message said.

Such poorly worded sentences are too common. Here is one from my days as a newspaper editor: "Adults can eat all the strawberries they want for \$4 and children ages 2 through 8 for \$2." I caught that one before we told readers that adults could eat children for \$2.

We all make errors in our writing. We have brain freezes. We're tired. We're rushing. We're distracted. We hit the wrong keys. Or, sometimes, we don't know better.

Thus, it is essential that we productively proofread our work before we send it on its way. Our personal credibility, and that of the school district, is at stake.

This is why I started with the bank anecdote. The bank's inept communication was one more little irritation that helped push me more over the top. The same thing can happen inadvertently in our dealings with staff or the public.

If we misuse words — lay/lie, eager/anxious, who/whom and many others — we create errors within our writing, undercutting our validity and reliability.

Our mistakes — unclear sentences, misspellings, improper punctuation, wrong words, and the like — also can have significant legal and ethical ramifications. Many a court case has turned on that lack of clarity.

Yet the more we pore over our work, the less likely we are to spot our glitches. I came across a Wired magazine story from 2014 that explains this conundrum. The article begins: "You have finally finished writing your article. ... You comb for errors, and by the time you publish you are absolutely certain that not a single typo survived. But, the first thing your readers notice isn't your carefully crafted message." [www.wired.com/2014/08/wuwt-typos](http://www.wired.com/2014/08/wuwt-typos)

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(Over)

Rather, “it’s the misspelled word in the fourth sentence.”

The article quotes psychologist Tom Stafford from the University of Sheffield. He actually studies typos, and he says our brain focuses on the higher-level meaning we’re trying to impart. The brain knows what we intended to say, so we fall into autopilot as we’re proofreading.

“The reason we don’t see our own typos is because what we see on the screen is competing with the version that exists in our heads,” says the article by Nick Stockton.

I think that is similar to why we mangle sentences, as in the bank and strawberry examples. We know what we mean! It’s obvious!

Not really.

Misplaced modifiers are a prime culprit. Consider this example I use when teaching grammar: “Originally from Arizona, the cold Oregon weather bothered the cross-country runner.”

As written, the sentence says the cold Oregon weather is from Arizona. The intended meaning is that the runner is from Arizona.

This might not seem like a big deal, because the meaning becomes clear on the second or third reading of the sentence. But every time, we force the reader to stop, we create uncertainty — and we risk losing the reader. Someone once said, “Nothing is easier than stopping reading.”

Here are tips from psychologist Stafford, writers and editors about proofreading your work (<http://bit.ly/2Rba4tF>):

- Don’t skimp on proofreading the small, supposedly quick items, such as emails, text messages and social media. They can come back to bite you.
- As you write and afterward, use the spellcheck and grammar check tools in your word-processing program. But don’t depend on them. Spellcheck only tells you whether it’s a correct spelling of a word — such as “wail” or “whale” — not whether it’s the word you want.
- Devote extra attention to double-checking article titles, photo captions, and graphics. Errors often show up there. I’ve found that to be particularly true of textbooks.
- Consider downloading and using a well-regarded grammar-checking application. Some are free. Learn to use one before you need it.
- Read your work aloud, slowly and audibly, so you are forced to focus on each word and punctuation mark. If you make a change during proofreading, read that part aloud again.

I recently lost my voice due to a cold, which made my self-editing extremely difficult during that time.

- Recognize what works for you. Some experts recommend reading your work aloud from bottom to top, from the final word to the first word. I lack the patience to do that.
- Change how you’re reading the piece. Print it out. Or change the font and appearance on

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the screen. Some applications have a “focus” feature, which can be useful.

- Take a break in a manner that shifts your brain from writing. A five-minute walk is good; letting the piece sit overnight is even better.
- Pay particular attention to your beginning and ending.

“The first paragraph and the last paragraph are where a lot of mistakes hide. It’s easy to read right over them after a while because you’ve practically memorized them,” says Amy Morgan, a former copy editor. <https://n.pr/2RAI7KZ>

By the way, Morgan says her grammar pet peeve is “misplaced modifiers like ‘Covered in hot cheese, we ate the pizza.’”

- Make lists of your unhelpful tendencies, such as words and phrases you overuse, words whose correct usage gives you trouble, and names and words that often are misspelled. Do the same for words and terms that, for whatever reason, you want to avoid. Use the search function to check for them.
- Keep a trustworthy dictionary, such as Merriam-Webster, and other reference books handy, including Strunk and White’s classic, “The Elements of Style.”
- I prefer using printed books, but I also keep several dictionary apps on my phone.
- Partner with a colleague to proofread one another’s work. Give that person adequate time and give equal devotion to proofreading that person’s writing.
- Bookmark or keep a list of trustworthy grammar, punctuation, word usage, and self-editing websites (<http://bit.ly/2C9JztY>) that you can use on deadline. Get to know them when you’re not in a rush. I’m a fan of Purdue University’s Online Writing Lab (OWL), <https://owl.purdue.edu>.

And if you fall short in your proofreading, give yourself some grace, briefly evaluate what went wrong, and do better next time.

As for me, I hope I’ve caught all my typos in this essay. I keep finding one more, right after I hit Send. Time to take a break.

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