

Strategies for Proofreading

NC State Writing and Speaking Tutorial Services * NC State Graduate Writing Center
go.ncsu.edu/wsts * 919.515.3163 * go.ncsu.edu/gwc

- 1. Check for word choice.** Say what you mean, not what you think “sounds better.” Don’t try to use words from a thesaurus to sound more formal; make sure you know what other words mean and that you have used them correctly. Try not to be repetitive. If you’ve used the same word multiple times in a sentence or paragraph, find a different way to say it.
- 2. Highlight all the “be” verbs:** *is, am, are, were, was, been, being*. Sometimes “be” verbs are necessary, but they lack action. This can often form sentences that are passive rather than active. Try to find the action in the sentence and make that the main verb of the sentence.
 - There **was** a cat who liked to sleep. → The cat **liked to sleep**.
 - The cake **has been eaten** by my cat. → My cat **ate** the cake.
- 3. Look at all the prepositions.** Prepositions describe *where, when, and how* the subject accomplished something. This can be described in terms of location and direction (*where*), the time or duration (*when*), and the way (*how*) the action was completed. Try to reduce too many prepositional phrases in your writing to make it easier on the reader.
 - The ball rolled **under** the table **in** the house **on** the street **in** the city **during** July **of** 2013. (5 prepositions) → **During** July **of** 2013, the ball rolled **under** the table. (3 prepositions)
- 4. Avoid delaying the action verb with personal qualifiers.** If you start a sentence slowly, you weaken the main action. Try to leave out phrases such as:
 - The first reason is that...
 - The point I want to make is that...*Say whatever comes after “is that” to make the sentence stronger.
- 5. Vary sentence structure.** You want to include a variety of sentence types (simple, complex, compound, and compound-complex) so that the reader doesn’t get bored with the repetitive structure.

These are all simple sentences:

 - “I like math. Calculus is my favorite. My teacher is Mrs. Johnson. She has lots to teach us. She helps students after school. She won the “Best Teacher” award. Learning math became fun.”

This sentence structure is varied:

 - “My favorite subject in school is calculus because it is taught by my favorite teacher, Mrs. Johnson. Mrs. Johnson has been successful in making math class fun. She is caring, and she helps students after school when they are struggling to learn the material, and this makes learning easy. Because of her hard work, Mrs. Johnson won the “Best Teacher” award at our school.”

For more information on this topic see our handout on sentence variety.

6. Remove clichés and informal speech.

- a. Clichés: He had to **start from scratch** after his file was deleted. → He had to **redo** all his work after his file was deleted.
- b. Clichés: It is **plain as day** that Smith, Young, and Chen **have high hopes** that their project will succeed. → **Clearly**, Smith, Young, and Chen **hope** that their project will succeed.
- c. Informal Speech: **That whole** researching **thing** was getting **kinda** boring. → Researching physics **bores** me.
- d. Informal Speech: He **found out** that his hypothesis was **good**. → He **discovered** that his hypothesis was **correct**.

7. Check vague pronouns.

- a. Mr. Davis and Mr. Gupta discussed the Civil War test that the HIST 304 classes were scheduled to take on Friday, but *he* thought it was best to postpone it. (Is *he* *Mr. Davis* or *Mr. Gupta*?) → Mr. Davis and Mr. Gupta discussed the Civil War test that the HIST 304 classes were scheduled to take on Friday, but *Mr. Gupta* thought it was best to postpone it.
- b. Sandra and Anton brought Lucia and Dean to the party, but *they* were lonely. (Is *they* *Sandra and Anton* or *Lucia and Dean*?) → Sandra and Anton brought Lucia and Dean to the party, but *Lucia and Dean* were lonely.

8. Look for missing commas after introductory clauses.

- a. After the **rain they** went outside. → After the **rain, they** went outside.
- b. To reach a wider **audience Alma** made a commercial. → To reach a wider **audience, Alma** made a commercial.

9. Punctuate independent clauses correctly. An independent clause has both a subject and predicate. They can stand alone as a “complete sentence.” There are three ways to combine independent clauses.

- a. Period: Time was flying by. It was almost midnight.
- b. Comma + FANBOYS conjunction (for, and, not, but, or, yet, so): Time was passing quickly, and it was almost midnight.
- c. Semi-colon: Time was passing quickly; it was almost midnight.

10. Proofread every line of the paper. Check that the font and size are the same. Check for correct indentations. Check each individual sentence for words typed twice, homophones, spelling mistakes, missing words, punctuation, and citations. If you read the paper backwards or aloud, it may help you disconnect from your work in order to catch simple mistakes.

11. Look up any questions you have about grammar. Some resources: Purdue OWL, UNC Chapel Hill Writing Center, Grammar Girl, and Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*.

12. Make your own editing checklist. If you know that you tend to make certain mistakes more than others, take note of them and read through your paper looking for one mistake at a time.