

Before You Hit “Send”: Proofreading Musts for Digital Copywriters

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9 minute read



Hitting “send” is a surefire way to spot a glaring mistake in writing that you can no longer take back. We’ve all been there.

The very nature of digital copywriting is that everything moves fast — and you can’t “undo” hitting that “send” button. Fortunately, there are ways to avoid this particular form of regret.

Often considered the least exciting step in the writing process, proofreading doesn’t get the love it deserves. You can craft the most brilliant, witty, and informative copy in the world, but if it’s riddled with errors or lacks clarity, you’re going to lose readers... and if that happens, you run the risk of losing clients.

The ability to edit and proofread your own copy is part of being a skilled writer. Crafting a brilliant draft is the first step, inspired copyediting is the second, and meticulous proofreading is the third and final piece in the trifecta that will get you across the finish line. These tasks go hand in hand, and in some cases overlap. It’s common to be copyediting as you proofread, and vice versa.

Copyediting, which includes changes in the content or information itself, is where you can make magic happen. As you improve the clarity, polish your tone, and smooth the flow of your writing, you often uncover ways to strengthen your original ideas.

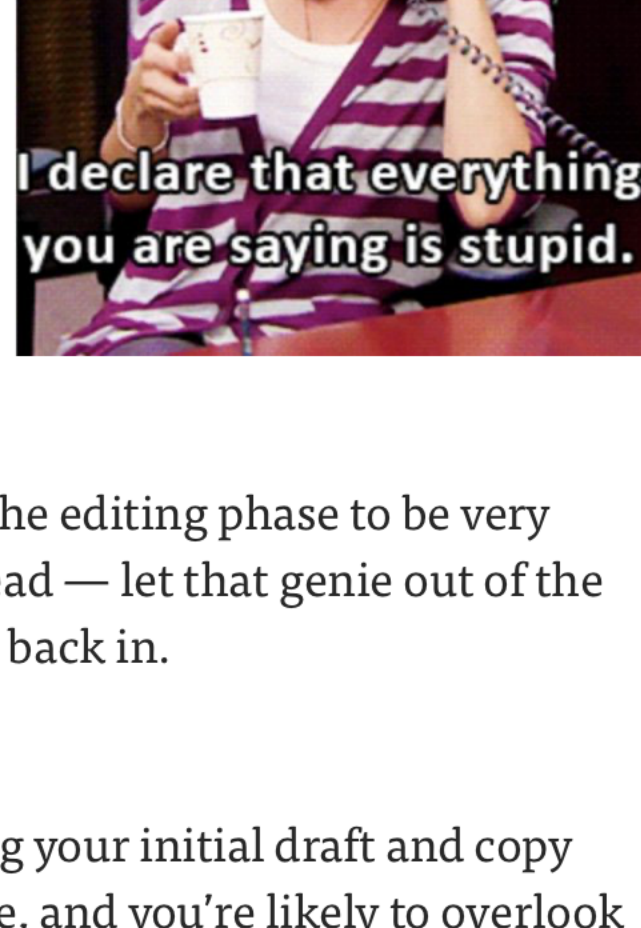
And proofreading, though it may seem dry as dust at first, wraps your work in a beautiful, concise, and well-formatted package for its final destination: your client and their readers. Proofreading eliminates distractions created by typos and other blips so your readers can stay engaged with your words.

With this in mind, let’s review best practices and perhaps some more unconventional ways to help you proof like a pro.

1. Listen to your inner critic

This piece of advice goes against everything you usually hear, but I swear by it. I call my inner critic April Ludgate after the ceaselessly negative character on *Parks and Recreation*. For those of you unfamiliar with April, she can suck all the air out of a room in an instant. You know the type. Maybe yours sounds like your mother-in-law, a frenemy from school, or your college English professor.

The usual advice is not to let this voice in because it can wreak havoc by causing impostor syndrome, stifling your creativity, and slowing down your writing process... if not trigger outright writer’s block.



However, I have found unleashing my inner critic during the editing phase to be very helpful when it comes to finding errors in my copy. Go ahead — let that genie out of the bottle until the proofreading is done — then pop that cork back in.

2. Take a break

It’s tempting to jump right into proofreading after finishing your initial draft and copy edits. Just one problem... Your brain is still in writing mode, and you’re likely to overlook errors. Instead, walk away from your computer and do something that clears your head.

Some of the best ideas and insights into what you have already written come when you are in the shower, walking the dog, or doing just about anything but sitting at your desk ruminating over Oxford commas. When you come back to your writing with fresh eyes, you’ll be more likely to spot problem areas and make improvements, as well as add any epiphanies that came during your downtime.

3. Use the tools at your disposal

It isn’t cheating to use the wealth of tools at your disposal. A plumber does not think twice about using a wrench, nor a cook a spatula. A spell-checker is your first and most obvious one to employ.

Grammarly and Hemingway Editor are two popular tools that can help you catch errors and improve your syntax. However, you need to deliberate about accepting suggestions rather than blindly follow their prompts.

Even the best tools flounder in trying to understand context. Use your own judgment and make sure that the changes you make are consistent with your brand’s voice and your own unique writing style. You don’t want to come off as if you’re trying to channel someone else.

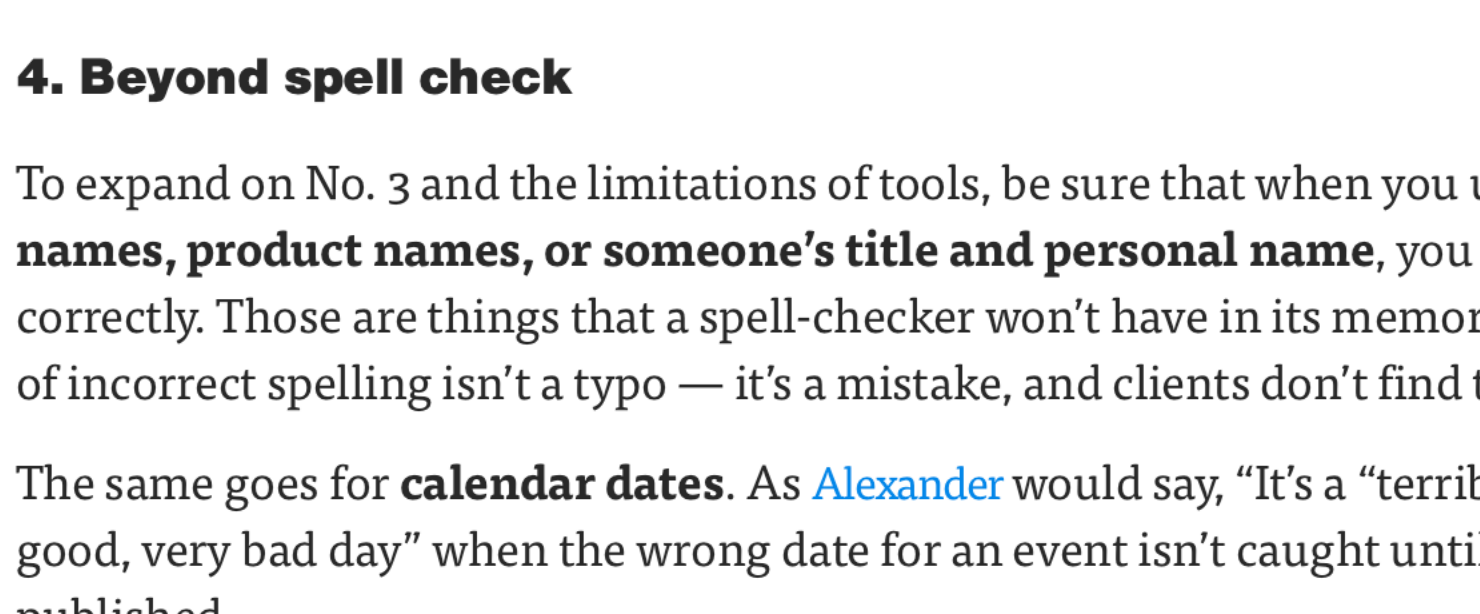
One of the biggest stumbling blocks with these programs is their failure to recognize homographs and homophones:

- Homograph — A word that is spelled like another but has a different sound and meaning
- Homophone — A word that sounds like another but has a different spelling and meaning *or*
- A word that is spelled and pronounced like another but has a different meaning (both a homograph *and* homophone)

Are you still with me? For laughs and giggles, I entered challenging sentences into Grammarly that used some of these words as well as some words that were just a letter off from the ones that would make sense. The program did not flag any as problematic, although a human proofreader would (or should) catch them immediately.

- For breakfast, she eight nine grapes.
- The boys took a talk to get some fresh air.
- The gardener planted his weeds in the ground.
- The fun was shining brightly.

You can see in this image that Grammarly also did not understand my use of an idiom, “For laughs and giggles,” in the context of the piece.



4. Beyond spell check

To expand on No. 3 and the limitations of tools, be sure that when you use **company names, product names, or someone’s title and personal name**, you have spelled them correctly. Those are things that a spell-checker won’t have in its memory bank. This type of incorrect spelling isn’t a typo — it’s a mistake, and clients don’t find that amusing.

The same goes for **calendar dates**. As *Alexander* would say, “It’s a “terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day” when the wrong date for an event isn’t caught until after it’s been published.

Let’s not forget **acronyms**. Remember, even when you are writing to a specific audience, not all of them will know what an acronym stands for. Be sure to spell it out the first time it is used... and be sure to get it right!

5. Style guides

Take into consideration whether a particular style guide is appropriate for the type of project you’re working on. Some companies even have their own internal style guide that reflects their brand voice. In any case, consistency is key.

Most writers will encounter four commonly used guides:

- [Associated Press style](#) for journalism (AP style is the industry standard for journalism and most blogs and content marketing. As a digital copywriter, you’ll likely use this most frequently.)
- [Chicago Manual of Style](#)
- [APA style](#) (from the American Psychological Association)
- [MLA style](#) (from the Modern Language Association of America)

When in doubt about which style you should use, ask your client about their preferences.

6. Read out loud

This tried-and-true method is one of the most effective ways to catch errors and improve the flow of your writing. When you read silently, your brain can skip over errors and fill in missing words. My brain gets ahead of itself all the time.

Though I may attract some attention if anyone else is around because of the fact that I am having a very animated conversation with myself, reading aloud forces me to slow down and pay attention to every word. I can try on a different tone or cadence while I’m at it. Does the writing sound snooty, too casual, or too stiff? Am I stumbling over a sentence? Hearing the copy can help me identify awkward phrasing, repetition, and other issues.

- If you think your brain is still missing something when you read out loud, you can have a text-to-speech tool read to you. Programs such as [NaturalReader](#), [Speechify](#), [TTS Reader](#), or [Google Text-to-Speech](#) can give you a hand, and there are free versions. You can drag and drop your files into the software or cut and paste. From there, you can select from a host of voices, tone, genders, and languages, as well as the talking speed of the reader.
- If you your Microsoft Word, your version may have a text-to-speech tool built in. Check your review tab for a “Read Aloud” button.

7. Get a second opinion

It’s challenging to proofread your own writing objectively. Even if you use a text-to-speech tool, you may still benefit from getting a second human’s opinion. Of course, figuring out whom to ask to read your work and provide feedback can be a tricky thing in and of itself.

- The first choice would be to hire a professional proofreader or ask a trusted colleague. Someone you respect, who has some actual experience in the field you’re writing about, and who maybe owes you a favor. Kidding about that last one... sort of.
- The second choice is asking a friend. One who might use the product or service, or have personal experience with whatever your topic is would be most useful. Try to avoid someone who is tempted to tell you it’s terrible because you beat them in a heated game of pickleball last week. Bribe them with an overpriced coffee drink or other perk. Again, sort of kidding. Although it wouldn’t hurt.
- If you absolutely must, your third choice is a family member. If you have no other option, tread here with care. This person cannot be someone who will just tell you it’s perfect because they don’t want you to be angry at dinner.

Make sure you give any of the above proofreaders specific instructions on what you want them to look for, such as spelling errors, unclear descriptions, or grammar issues. Otherwise they may get too deep into editing territory or even start making suggestions on the direction of your entire draft.

8. Formatting: When in doubt, print it out

One of the best ways to spot formatting errors is to print your writing on paper and review it the old-fashioned way. Reading copy on a bright computer screen can make it harder to spot errors, and you’re more likely to skim over the text. Using a larger font when printing gives your eyes a rest — and allows you to catch issues with font size, spacing, and alignment.

Writing is easier to read when the headings, subheadings, and bullet points have consistent formatting. Also pay attention to how the images align with the text. A well-formatted piece of writing looks professional and makes it easier for your readers to engage with your content.

9. Take a systematic approach

Proofreading can be overwhelming, especially if you’re working on a long piece of writing. To make the process more manageable, take it step by step. Start with one aspect, such as spelling or punctuation. Then, go through your draft line by line, paying close attention to only that aspect. Once you’ve finished, move on to the next. This will help you stay focused and ensure you catch each specific type of error.

10. Double-check facts and links

If your piece contains facts and figures, it’s essential to double-check them. This includes making sure your hyperlinked text actually links to what you intend. You don’t want to send your reader on a road to nowhere, or down a rabbit hole unrelated to your subject. Especially a wildly inappropriate rabbit hole.

Nothing undermines your credibility more than inaccurate information. Make sure [the sources you’re using are reputable](#) and that the information you’re presenting is current. If you find gaps in your research, there’s still time to go back and beef up your citations.

11. Take note of your common errors

We all have our weaknesses. As you proofread, be on the lookout for errors you frequently make. For example, do you mix up “their,” “there,” and “they’re”? Do you struggle with subject-verb agreement? Once you’ve identified your common errors, make a list of them, and keep it handy. This will help you be more aware as you write, making it less likely that you’ll repeat them.

12. Proofread backward

Personally, I struggle with this one, but others swear by it. To be clear, this doesn’t mean reading your entire draft backward word by word. It means read the last sentence first, and so on. Reading this way takes you out of the context of the piece, and that helps you hear each sentence as it stands on its own.

This method is for checking grammar more than meaning. There’s some debate whether it’s reading backward that gives you an edge or really just the number of times you read your copy overall.

13. Review the first word in every paragraph

If you have too many paragraphs that begin with the same word, try a different approach. Visually, it becomes repetitive and dull, and the copy that follows may fall into the same rut. Mix it up. In a similar vein, make sure you aren’t using the same word over and over again throughout the body of your copy, when there are more imaginative ways to convey your thoughts.

Final thoughts

The proofreading process is critical to successful writing, yet one that many writers skim over or undervalue. It’s easy to grow too close to your copy and miss the opportunity to turn good writing into great writing. Proofing is not just about catching mistakes but about improving the overall flow and impact of your writing.

We all know that even a misplaced comma, period, or apostrophe can change the entire meaning of a sentence in both tragic and humorous ways. Here are a few examples:

Hyphens matter:

Twenty five-dollar bills **versus** twenty-five dollar bills.

There’s a man eating chicken **versus** There’s a man-eating chicken.

Commas matter:

Let’s eat Grandma! **versus** Let’s eat, Grandma!

I find inspiration in cooking, my family, and my dog **versus** I find inspiration in cooking my family and my dog.

Apostrophes matter:

Pie’s and burgers sold here.

Great taste deserves it’s own reward.

Learn to love proofreading, and you will be rewarded for the quality of your work. By taking a systematic approach and using these strategies along with the writing tools at your disposal, you can turn in polished content your editor or client can trust is ready to publish. Your words are your currency, so make sure they’re reliable and bankable!