

Guidance on the Use of Proofreaders

Introduction

The assessment process is facilitated when work is presented in a comprehensible form. Whilst academic staff/markers/examiners may highlight occasional lapses in spelling or grammar, their focus will normally be on the academic content of a student's work, not on detailed and extensive correction of spelling and grammar. It is important, therefore, that students develop as part of their academic practices an ability to identify flaws and errors in their work, and recognise that it may be necessary to take deliberate steps to develop these skills. The College also acknowledges that in some circumstances proofreading (the technical correction of a text) by third parties can perform a valuable and useful role in this process. Just as a researcher would expect to have a paper proofread before publication, it is reasonable and sensible for students to seek to have their assessed work reviewed for syntax, spelling and flow before submission. The major proviso is that it is neither appropriate nor acceptable for a student to ask or to allow someone else to make material changes to their work, for example by rewriting passages of text or making adjustments to formulae or code, since any submitted work must represent a student's own effort and abilities.

Definitions

Proofreading - is the systematic checking for and identification of errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar and sentence construction, formatting and layout in the text of a student script. The script might be an essay, report, project, dissertation, thesis or any other form of written assignment. A student should proofread their own work but may also ask third parties to do so.

Third-parties - persons other than the academic supervisor, tutor, lecturer, marker or examiner, who might offer to proofread a student's text in the sense given above. Such third parties may be fellow-students, friends and family, or professional proofreaders.

Editing - any material amendment to the presentation of the text which exceeds proofreading, as defined above. In particular, it includes any alterations which substantially change, correct, expand upon or condense the academic content of the work.

Peer/Academic Review – the provision of feedback on draft scripts prior to formal submission by either other students (peers) or from academic staff. The University expects that the process of peer review will result chiefly in the provision of comments and advice regarding the content, logic and clarity of the arguments advanced in the work under review. It must not include directly writing, re-writing, editing or amending the work, including any figures, notation and sequences of code, as well as text. Although the review may include attention to standards of written English and presentation, the role of the reviewer does not normally extend to the systematic correction of grammatical and spelling mistakes, or typographical errors.

The student as sole author

In all cases ultimate responsibility for deciding how best to respond to a reviewer's comments rests with the student as author. Students should be aware that collusion in the preparation of work for assessment is regarded as academic malpractice; thus they must ensure that any contributions or amendments resulting from peer or academic review does not compromise their role as the sole author of the work. Regardless of whether a student has or has not used the services of a proof-reader, the work they submit for assessment must represent their own effort and abilities.

When is the use of a proof-reader allowed?

Allowable - In some assessments, it is predominantly or exclusively the student's ability to undertake analysis, synthesise ideas and construct a reasoned argument that are being assessed, and the appropriate use of a proof-reader may be permitted. Postgraduate research students are encouraged to use a proof-reader for their final thesis, and are permitted to do so for papers prepared for annual progress review or probationary meetings. If students on programmes with a taught element are unsure as to whether they may use the services of a proof-reader, they should consult their Programme Leader/Course Leader.

Not allowed - For some assessments, the learning outcomes which are being assessed include the student's ability to express themselves in the written language (typically English but may also include other languages) or to record information (such as numerical data) accurately and here it may be appropriate to expect that a student will not make use of a proof-reader. In cases where assessments fall into this category, Programme Leaders/Course Leaders should make this clear in their Module Outlines and/or in written guidance provided to students with regard to assessments.

Collusion

The integrity of the awards that the University makes rests upon the principle that work submitted for assessment represents the student's own effort and their own understanding, without falsification of any kind. It is, therefore, not appropriate or acceptable for a student to ask or to allow someone else to make material changes to their work, for example by rewriting passages of text or making adjustments to formulae or code. The College and the wider academic community regard this as inappropriate academic conduct – known as collusion – and it may result in disciplinary action as set out in the College's Policy on Plagiarism and Collusion.

Aims of proofreading

A student's work should represent their own effort and reflect their own understanding of the topic being assessed. Students must take responsibility for their own work and actively participate in the proofreading process by considering the suggested corrections and highlighted errors **and deciding whether or not these are appropriate and should be adopted**. A proof-reader will make no changes to a text, but will simply suggest alternatives/corrections.

The aims of proofreading work should be to **identify**:

- spelling, formatting or typographical errors within the specific piece of work;
- areas of frequent errors, which the student should then use as a learning tool;

- grammatical errors within the specific piece of work;
- passages where the meaning is unclear and which the student should review and revise themselves.

What proof-readers may and may not do

A proof-reader may:

- identify a spelling mistake or typographical error;
- identify poor grammar with an indication of what the error is (e.g. “tense”);
- point to formatting errors;
- flag errors in the labelling of diagrams or figures;
- highlight a sentence or passage that is overly complex or where the intended meaning is unclear and include an explanation of the reason why the sentence or passage is unclear or what the alternate interpretations might be;
- note errors in cross referencing.

A proof-reader should not:

- rewrite passages of text in order to clarify meaning;
- rewrite formulae, equations or computer code;
- change the words or figures or notation used by the author (except to identify the correct spelling of the word used);
- rearrange passages of text, sequence of code or section of other material;
- reformat the material;
- contribute additional material to the original;
- check calculations or formulae;
- re-label figures or diagrams.

Who can proofread?

- In addition to planning, researching and drafting, it is considered good academic practice for students to review, revise and proofread their own work. The use of spelling and grammar-checking software is often useful in this respect. However, students should be aware of the limitations of such software and the risks of becoming over-reliant on automatic proofreading systems. Students are encouraged to seek support in developing their skills in academic writing from, for instance, their lecturer, supervisory team, Personal Tutor or the HE Support Tutor.
- Peers/other students¹ – this excludes those who are completing the same assignment. Unauthorised collaboration of this kind may be deemed to be collusion and may result in disciplinary action in accordance with the College’s Policy on Plagiarism & Collusion.

¹ There may be some contexts where a student may ask another student on the same module to proofread their work. Examples might include instances where the students are on the same module, but completing different questions within an assessment strategy, or working collaboratively in project teams. In the latter, mutual proofreading may be an expected and entirely routine aspect of the learning process. Students should always seek guidance from their Programme Leader/Course Leader if they are unsure what legitimate use can be made of proof-readers as part of the learning process on the module.

- Another third party, such as a friend.
- Professional proofreading service.

Guidance Framework

Effective proofreading should encourage and support students in the development of their own writing style, by permitting them to identify weaknesses and ways of addressing these. The following sets out a guidance framework within which proofreading may appropriately be undertaken.

(a) For all students:

1. Students may be permitted to use proof-readers for summative assessments (assessments where marks “count”) including written assignments, presentations, projects, dissertations and theses.
2. For students completing a dissertation, it is considered good practice to ask others to proofread their work.
3. Students should not use proof-readers for formative assessment (work where marks do not “count”). This enables markers to identify and offer appropriate advice on areas for a student’s academic development.
4. A proof-reader must not materially amend text in such a way that the meaning of the original is changed. Nor is it appropriate for a proof-reader to comment on the quality of analysis or understanding of content. Where there is a lack of clarity in the meaning of a passage, the proof-reader may indicate this in their comments and provide guidance in respect of the alternative ways in which the passage of text could be understood by a reader (but not provide suggested corrections).
5. The use of proof-readers will not be permitted where a learning outcome of the assessment task is to test the written language (typically English but may also include other languages), including the ability to write accurately and clearly or to demonstrate quality of expression. Some professional bodies may specify particular assessment requirements in this aspect of practice.
6. Students should clarify with the proof-reader (whether a friend or a professional service) in advance the nature of the service to be provided.
7. Students who elect to use a proof-reader (whether a friend or a professional service) must retain copies of all draft material sent to the proof-reader, showing their original material. Similarly, copies of the annotations/corrections made by the proof-reader must also be retained. Failure to retain copies of such drafts or to produce them when requested to do so as part of any plagiarism/collusion investigations may weigh against a student in any subsequent Plagiarism Meetings.
8. Students are not required to indicate on their work where a proof-reader has been used.
9. Using a proof-reader where not permitted to do so will be classed as collusion and may be pursued in accordance with the College’s Policy on Plagiarism and Collusion. If students on programmes with a taught element are unsure whether the use of proof-readers is permitted with a particular

assessment, they should seek confirmation from the Programme Leader/Course Leader.

(b) For Programme Leaders/Course Leaders:

11. Programme Leaders/Course Leaders are expected to clarify in their module outlines and/or assessment briefing documents provided to students whether the use of proof-readers is permitted in relation to specific assessments.
12. Where the use of a proof-reader is permitted, students should be informed by academic staff (e.g. Programme Leaders/Course Leaders) of what is and is not permitted by the proof-reader. It should be emphasised to the students that the work they submit for assessment must represent their own effort and abilities.
13. Programme Leaders/Course Leaders must clearly indicate within marking schemes where poor grammar and spelling will be penalised, and will have in place mechanisms for ensuring that students with specific learning difficulties are not unfairly impacted by such marking schemes.
14. Where a marker suspects plagiarism or collusion, the Plagiarism Officer may ask a student to produce draft material and evidence of the changes suggested or made by the proof-reader. Failure to retain copies of drafts or to produce them when requested to do so by the Plagiarism Officer may weigh against a student in any subsequent Plagiarism Meeting.