Working with a proofreader

With the Writing Development Centre

Checking your writing before submitting it is an important part of the process. It can be challenging to proofread your own writing, and some people prefer to work with a proofreader. However, to avoid collusion, it is your responsibility to ensure that it is still your own work.

Your responsibilities

If you choose to work with a proofreader (either a professional or a friend), you will need to ensure that their suggestions don't change your work so much that it's no longer yours. Remember that proofreading is a significant amount of work, so if asking a friend as a favour, do be mindful of this. It is not the role of peer mentors, PASS advisors or WDC tutors to undertake proofreading.

Discuss with your proofreader the type of changes which you feel might be necessary and appropriate, in accordance with Newcastle University's Assessment Irregularities Procedure and the requirements of the assessment. If you aren't sure, ask your lecturer or supervisor. Make sure that you can see and approve all changes (using "Track Changes" or a similar markup). You could use proofreading as a developmental opportunity to identify your own common mistakes or stylistic quirks to improve, so that you become independent of the need for a proofreader.

Here are some suggestions to help you retain authorial control over your own work so that you don't run the risk of collusion, which is an academic offence.

Proofreading

These levels involve correcting accidental or minor features of the text and its language:

Level 1 errors

- Typing errors (typos)
- Inconsistencies (e.g. capitalisation, variant spellings, use of font and effects such as bold or italics, formatting issues such as margins, indents and line breaks, consistent presentation of references).
- Omitted elements (e.g. subheadings, labels for figures etc, page numbers, incomplete references)
- Adherence to house style in your assignment or module guide, or School handbook. This includes referencing styles.

It's not always possible to spot all your own errors. You might have a Specific Learning Difficulty or find it hard to get the distance from your work to see what it says, rather than what you think it says.

You could ask your proofreader to highlight instances of these errors so that you can become aware of them.

Level 2 mistakes (language competence)

- Spelling (including confusion of homophones which are those words that sound the same but have different meanings, such as there/their/they're).
- Grammar (including syntax, incomplete or run-on sentences, verb formation, subject/verb matching etc)
- Punctuation (including apostrophes, commas, semi-colons etc)
- Inappropriate word choice (including malapropisms).

In most instances, your proofreader can correct these issues without collusion. You might however ask your proofreader to give you an overview of your most common errors so that you can improve these areas in future. If you have Specific Learning Difficulties, you will have access to a paired proofreading with a specialist learning advisor who can advise you.

Check that language competence isn't part of the assessment criteria; in some subjects, for example, Modern Languages, this is what you're being tested on and corrections by someone else might constitute collusion.

Some mistakes, for example, commas or word choice, can actually change the meaning of your text. You could ask your proofreader to highlight instances, and explain the two possible alternative meanings, but not to make corrections or decisions about what your text means.

If your proofreader made extensive changes to your English language usage, these changes may not accurately represent your writing skills or meaning. Therefore, if you are a non-native speaker who would like to improve written fluency, you may seek advice from INTO or the University's Language Centre.

Editing

Level 3 academic style

The following two levels involve more major changes to the text's style and content:

- Inappropriate style for UK academic writing (which might include colloquialisms, emotive language, personal language where inappropriate, but also overly formal registers etc.)
- Lack of cohesion or 'flow' in structure or argument
- Clumsy, repetitive or wordy expression
- Ambiguous or unclear meaning
- Lack of structure, inappropriate, repetitive or unclear structure

Academic writing is a specific style, and one of the skills that you learn at university. It reflects the objective, logical and critical nature of your thinking, and the structure of your argument. It also varies between different genres of assignment, and according to the subject you're studying and level of study. It's important that any proofreader is familiar with UK academic writing in your discipline so they don't make inappropriate suggestions. It's important that the writing genuinely represents your voice, and your structure. Ask your proofreader to identify areas where your writing wasn't clear or sounded wordy, but anything which changes the meaning or structure of your writing might be problematic. In terms of collusion, your proofreader might make suggestions, but take these critically and reflect on them before you implement them.

Level 4: content and meaning

- Factual and interpretative accuracy
- Content and meaning
- Irrelevant or missing material
- Missing references or other evidence, plagiarism
- Quality of aim, discussion, argument or conclusions
- Selecting material to delete to meet word count (beyond making style more concise)
- Accurate paraphrasing of sources
- Whether it meets the aims/assessment question or marking criteria

These should only be undertaken by yourself, in discussion with a lecturer, Specialist Learning Advisor or Writing Development Centre tutor.

The University doesn't offer a proofreading service. You may feel however that you need a second pair of eyes to proofread your work before you submit it to pick up anything you've missed. However, the Writing Development Centre can teach you strategies to proofread and edit your own work, and the Specialist Learning team will carry out paired proof reading as part of a study skills session to support students with specific learning difficulties to learn this skill.

Want to review your study strategies?

Book a one to one appointment with us for personalised study advice tailored to you, your subject and level of study.