PROOFREADING PAPERS

Students, unfortunately, seem to have absolutely NO clue what proofreading a paper requires of them. It is important for papers written for my classes, because papers that are not proofread inevitably contain errors that are unacceptable in nature and number. This usually results in an F, even though the content of and research for the paper are adequate or better. This is because poorly written papers are unreadable, or at least too painful to bother with after the third paragraph. So, I strongly suggest you pay attention to the following requirements.

N.B. A good writer cannot exist without the following: Elements of Style, by Strunk, White and Angell; and the Chicago Manual of Style, on line at http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html. If you are doing a paper on a legal/judicial topic and you are citing law review articles or court cases use the legal citation style guide found at either www.legalcitation.net, or http://www.law.cornell.edu/citation.

Also exceptionally helpful are books on individual aspects of writing/grammar/composition, such as Errors in English and Ways to Correct Them; The Most Common Mistakes in English Usage; 1001 Pitfalls in Grammar; and I Always Look Up the Word “Egregious” (search amazon.com under Style Guide and Errors in English or Errors in Writing for more). These are as important to you as a dictionary and thesaurus (remember what they are?). Purchase one of more of these guides AND USE THEM!

When composing a paper for me, if the subject matter is more than a week old, you’re writing history. SO WRITE IN THE PAST TENSE ONLY!!! Do not try to blend the two in some attempt at stylistic uniqueness. You’ll only screw it up.

Begin proofing your paper by using the SPELL and GRAMMER Check sub-program in MSWORD. Do not forget to also turn on the STYLE Check in the menu. Once you have the SPELL/GRAMMER/STYLE menus set, you can conduct a check simply by hitting the F7 key and proceeding from there.

1. Failure to proof carefully a paper shows me that you either didn’t care enough about the paper to do a good job or that you are too lazy to bother doing the work. In either case, I’ll not care enough about your paper to do more than give it an F. And you will not succeed in a grade appeal.

2. Proof reading is tedious, detailed labor. It’s one reason why good writing is hard work. If you don’t work at your writing in school, your grade will reflect that lack of effort. In real life (e.g., government or business), failure to work at your writing will result in an absence of promotions, accolades, respect, and influence. You can have the most
important ideas in the world, but if you can’t explain them clearly and concisely, you might not as well bother to think at all.

3. You proofread to catch errors in: composition, punctuation, sentence and paragraph structure (syntax), grammar, spelling, clarity, conciseness (don’t say in 15 words that which you can say better in six words), style, and “readability.” If you don’t catch your errors, I will. And if there are too many, you will not be pleased with your grade.

4. Consistency (i.e., the same words/names are spelled and punctuated the same way, throughout your paper) matters. “Supreme Court” belongs in caps, for example, but if you insist on using lower case at least do so throughout the paper. Lack of consistent capitalization or spelling on frequently used words is undeniable proof that you failed to proofread.

5. **Do not proof read on your computer screen** – you’ll miss a lot. Print out a draft copy, let it sit awhile (preferable a few days) and re-read it with a fresh eye. Make your corrections and then go back and make the corrections on the computer.

6. Proof your compositional (i.e., organizational) structure: does the paper logically flow from one paragraph to the next? Does one paragraph logically lead to the next? Or did you just write it as a disorganized “stream of conscientiousness”?

7. Keep your paragraphs short and pithy – six to eight sentences should be the average. Only rarely should any paragraph be longer than ½ of a page.

8. Know your grammar rules and follow them.

   a. For example: proper nouns are capitalized, but of course you have to first know what a proper noun is. Congress is always in caps, congressional isn’t; titles like president and secretary of state are lower case if there is no name behind them.

   b. Use the style guide to check grammar rules – the Post’s guide is particularly useful when writing about and government.

   c. Singular nouns take singular verbs, plural nouns take plural verbs; transitive verbs take an object, intransitive verbs don’t.

   d. If you use a comma to start a clause within a sentence, use a comma to close it (and vice versa).

   e. Be careful about splitting infinitives.

   f. It’s “the person who…” and the “item or thing that…..”
9. Read your paper with a fresh eye simply for readability – or have a friend read it. You may understand what you’re trying to say, but you’re not writing for yourself, you’re writing for an audience who, presumably, doesn’t know all that you do and certainly doesn’t know what you meant to say (as opposed to what you did say).

10. Don’t write like you talk – i.e., don’t write using colloquialisms, slang, trite phrases and the like. You don’t need to be able to write like Hemingway, and you shouldn’t try because you will probably fail anyway. Write in a clear, straightforward manner – especially if you haven’t taken, and mastered, a course in advanced comp or rhetoric.

11. Work on having an ample vocabulary so that you don’t keep saying the same things the same way – you’ll bore your reader and display your lack of vocabulary. Use your thesaurus!

12. Make sure each paragraph, sentence, clause, and word says exactly what you want it to or conveys precisely the mental image you wish to convey. Again, that’s what a thesaurus is for – and why writing can be hard work.

13. Know what homonyms, antonyms and so forth are. For example, “lead” is a metal, but “lead” also is the present tense of the word meaning “to guide or steer.” They are spelled the same but pronounced differently. “Led” is the past tense of the word “lead” when used to guide, but it is pronounced as “lead” as in the metal. It’s basic but I find this and similar very basic grammatical errors on far too many papers every single semester. As in, “yesterday the captain lead the firing squad.” I hate that.

14. Building on #13, spell correctly, and remember that spell check doesn’t correct words that for correctly spelled words wrongly used. For example, “weary” when you meant “wary.” Or “cleaver” when you meant “clever.” Only proofing can catch these mistakes. Better you find them than me.

15. Remember that you are almost certainly writing history, so write in the past tense. Don’t try to be clever and mix present and past tense. You almost certainly will not get it right if you don’t understand when and how to do so.

16. Work on developing and using a rich vocabulary. Using the same word, the same description, and same phrases throughout is not good writing. See #11 above about avoiding the trite and clichéd – a good vocabulary will take care of this.