

Ten Tips for Better Proofreading

This article is intended to be shared with law office staff to help them improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your law practice.

By Marsha Watson Smitherman

How many times have you sent out something with a small error you didn't notice? It's frustrating and embarrassing, and it's avoidable. The following tips will help you hone your proofreading skills so you can consistently produce professionally perfect results.

1. Let the computer help you. We all keep spelling scan turned on when we work. Take that two steps further. First, add any words that are correctly spelled to the dictionary, including commonly used names. That will cut down on the number of red squiggly lines, making genuine errors more likely to stand out as you type. Second, take one more step and perform a regular spell check before you print the document. This will catch the things you missed and also pick up things like double spaces between words.

2. Don't let the computer do all the work. We all know there are words the computer won't catch—*their* instead of *there*, *it's* versus *its*. In addition to that, incorrect spellings sometimes get added to the spelling dictionary. When you've printed the document, read it all the way through one time. We do get used to doing things on screen, but it is generally easier to proofread when the document is on paper.

3. Start at the top and end at the bottom. Most attorneys, when reviewing documents, will review only the body of the work. If there's an error in style, if the date is wrong, or if

there's a problem in the address, they are not likely to see it. You won't see it, either, if you don't accept this risk and take the responsibility for starting at the very top of the page and looking at *everything*, all the way to the bottom of the page, including dates, addresses, styles, signatures, and certificates of service.

4. Don't be too sure of yourself. It's our job to be able to spell names, and most of us are very good at it. But I will never forget the time I started work on materials for a client who works in an industry I find interesting, whose products interest me – going back to work they were doing before World War II – and whose name I was sure I knew how to spell. Imagine my chagrin when the client complained that I had misspelled their company name consistently throughout the document. When you're starting work on a new case or client, check the spellings of all the pertinent proper names against official documents from the source. Even a business you know from previous work may change its name from time to time.

5. Two heads are better than one. Encourage the people you work for to read the work as you are taking it through drafts and to read the final copy before they sign it. They may not like taking the time, but the two of you are much more likely to produce a perfect result. Things that one person tends not to notice will jump out at the other.

6. When it has to be letter perfect, ask for help. There are times when two independent readers aren't enough. Most of us know this, and most of us do it, most of the time. When you're proofreading legal descriptions or any type of data that may be subject to typing error – statistical tables, account numbers, and the like – have someone read the typed document for you while you read the original to them. But don't do it most of the time – do it *every time*.

7. If you can read this, you may be mkanig msiketias. Oddly enough, the brain relies more on the shape of a word than its actual spelling when you are reading. So any word that starts and ends with the correct letters may look okay if you're reading quickly and the sentence makes sense. One way to defeat this phenomenon is to read the line backwards, one word at a time.

8. The brain really is amaznig. Even when you read backwards, look at longer words with suffixes carefully. You can wind up misspelling spectacularly because your brain determines a word using the first few letters and tends to fill in the correct ending based on context. It's a good thing – because it would take us forever to read if the brain didn't have its own form of shorthand to use in dealing with words. But it makes proofreading harder.

9. Here's a good rule. Use a ruler or straightedge to help keep you on the

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line you're reading. This is particularly helpful with documents like contracts that may have smaller print, very long paragraphs, repeating terms, or heavy verbiage.

10. Trust your subconscious mind.

The subconscious mind is an amazing tool which does many things more

easily and better than the outer waking awareness. How many times have you noticed a mistake when you glanced at something you were getting ready to copy? Pick up every document and run your eyes quickly down the page before you copy it or stick it in an envelope. You're just giving your subconscious mind time to catch something the rest of you may have missed earlier.



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