Editing and Proofreading Strategies

All writers—yes, that’s right, all writers—need to go through an editing and proofreading stage as they write. These are properly the very last stages: there’s no point in making sentence—or word-level revisions on prose that you’re still revising drastically. Here are some tips to help you manage these final tasks as successfully as possible.

Have a colleague read the document to you aloud, spelling out names and voicing punctuation. This is a very “expensive” method, of course, requiring two peoples’ time and attention. It works very well, though. Simply sit in such a way that both of you can see the text and listen while the other reads slowly, clearly, and carefully. Have the person stop at each proper name to check the spelling; have him or her say “comma” when he or she comes to a comma. Working together this way, the two of you will catch almost every error.

If no other person is available, read the document aloud to yourself. Read it slowly and carefully, seeing each word as you go, checking the spelling of names and voicing the punctuation. One very effective strategy is to have a pen in your hand and (literally) tap each word on the page as you read it. This strategy will enable you to see each word and punctuation mark as you read. If you have time, read the document backwards: this is another great way to combat the tendency to read quickly and miss spelling errors.

Read through the document at least two times: once quickly to make certain you’re saying everything you need to say and once slowly, as above, to look at each word, question decisions about punctuation and spelling, combine sentences, and so forth.

Keep a log of common problems you have and proofread specifically for them. If you know you often confuse “their” and “they’re,” do a global search on your word processor or a careful read through just to find those words and check to make sure you’ve used the correct one.

Tips on Spelling Correctly: Of course, use your spell checker and look up any word that the spell checker highlights. Unfortunately, spell checkers only work when your misspelling is not otherwise a real word in English. English has many homonyms, words that sound alike but are spelled differently. These are the words to watch out for. Below is a brief list of the some of the most common troublesome homonyms in English. Double check each one of these you don’t feel confident about.

- their/they’re/ there
- who’s/whose
- to/ too/ two
- its/ it’s
- whether/weather
- your/ you’re
- accept/ except
- affect/effect

See the Writing Center’s handout entitled “Usage Demons” for more about these troublesome words.