



FINDING COSTLY AND EMBARRASSING MISTAKES

...BEFORE YOUR READERS DO

EDITORIAL | RONNIE MOORE



Sue was arranging an important meeting. She did what meeting planners do: Arranged all the details. Contracted space, speakers, equipment and more. The sales meeting was announced, and personnel, principals and speakers scheduled their travel to get there. It was business as usual. Well, *not exactly*.

There was a typo in the meeting dates published. By the time the mistake was found and everyone was notified, more than \$25,000 had been spent in airline change fees, additional airfare, and other penalties, not to mention the wasted time and embarrassment this mistake caused.

An email to a top executive at a Fortune 500 Company said: "Management was the driving force behind the project."

An ad for a rental house read: "Three bedrooms, two baths, fenced yard, and mice eating area."

You want to find mistakes before your reader does — before they erode your credibility and cost you and your organization time, money and embarrassment. No one is immune to striking the wrong key, so it is important to look for and find those potentially costly and embarrassing mistakes. Here are some proven strategies for finding more mistakes in text.



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Do not rely solely on Spellcheck.

Spellcheck alone is not enough. It will not find mistakes that flag as words (e.g., “mice” for “nice” or “farce” for “force”), number problems (the meeting planner’s debacle), left-out letters, or missing words (such as “The budget is available” when you mean “The budget is not available.”)

You must proofread your text.

Use multi-sensory proofreading.

Your eyes alone are not enough. Say words out loud and point to words as your eyes move across text. Your eyes alone make for poor proofreading because your brain pushes your eyes ahead, skipping words, anticipating the meaning that’s coming. If your eyes don’t look at every word, you will miss some of the mistakes inside of words, such as misspellings and typos. When you look at, listen to, and touch words in text, you create a “checks and balances” system of proofreading. What your eyes don’t see, your ears might hear, or your finger may touch.

Know that it’s easier to proofread someone else’s writing than it is to proofread your own.

When you try to proofread text you’ve looked at too much and too long, you tend to see what you meant, not necessarily what you wrote. Get distance from familiar text by taking a break. Don’t try to proofread right after you’ve finished creating your draft. If there’s someone, at home or at work, whose skills you trust, ask him or her to proofread for

you. We do a better job at finding mistakes in other people’s writing than we do in our own.

Change the way familiar text looks.

The reason we struggle with proofreading our own writing is that we’re seeing and processing the same story, over and over again. That is not only tedious, it tempts us to skip words, to rush through the text because we’re tired of it, and we know what’s coming next. When we’re tired and we’re rushing, we miss mistakes.

There’s nothing we can do about the familiarity of the message; that will not change. But we can change the way that familiar message appears to our tired, nonobjective eyes and brain.

So if proofreading on the computer screen, change the background color of the screen or change the font before you check it one last time. If proofreading on paper (always recommended, as the screen is harder on the eyes), use a different color paper; change the font, formatting, something to make the document look different from the way it looked all the times you looked at it before. When you change the color, background, texture on which familiar text sits, you trick your tired, nonobjective eyes and brain into thinking they’re looking at something new and you’ll do a much better job at finding those mistakes.

Prioritize the potential problems.

Spend whatever time you do have

finding and fixing the most important mistakes — those that could cost you time, money, or credibility. When time does not allow you to proofread thoroughly and repeatedly, search for the two potentially most costly and embarrassing mistakes: **proper names and numbers.**

Using a comma incorrectly or using the wrong word (such as “less” for “fewer”) is not good, but your reader may not even notice it, and even if the reader does notice, it may not be a big issue. However, if you spell the reader’s name incorrectly, that will pop off the page, and it will be personal to the reader. Bad form. People are sensitive about their names, especially if you’re asking them for their time, money, business, or a job. Sending out the wrong date, time, phone number, or dollar amount is far worse than using “less” for “fewer” or misusing a comma. When time is tight, and you can’t look for every possible grammar, punctuation, or usage mistake, always scan for proper names and numbers, and spend whatever time you do have finding and fixing those potentially destructive mistakes.

Ensuring mistake-free text requires a combination of finding what spell checkers cannot find, not depending solely on your eyes when you proofread, and knowing what to look for (proper names and numbers) when time is too tight to do it right. Whether in a memo, email, letter, report, proposal, resume, or contract, mistakes can cost you — find them before your reader does! 