

University Policy  
and  
Guidance  
on  
**Proofreading**  
of  
Student Texts

This document was produced in response to research undertaken by Nigel Harwood, Rowena Macaulay and Liz Austin, on behalf of the Teaching and Learning Subcommittee on Proofreading practices.

# UNIVERSITY POLICY AND GUIDANCE ON PROOFREADING

**Many students seek 'proofreading' services at some point during their studies but different editing practices at times go on in this name. In a context where work is to be assessed, the University is keen to ensure as far as possible that we have a shared understanding of what proofreading work should entail and the acceptable boundaries to any intervention on a student text.**

These guidelines are intended for this purpose and relate to the proofreading of any text to be submitted as part of academic course work (up to and including PhD dissertation level). The recommendations set out are intended to inform the actions of i) students seeking proofreading, ii) academic supervisors advising them in this respect, and iii) proofreaders advertising their services on campus.

All persons listed in the on-line Proofreader registry have signed an agreement to say that they have read these notes and agree to be guided by them. It should be noted, however, that the University cannot further guarantee the competence of proofreaders on the registry, and cannot recommend one proofreader rather than another.

Please see notes under the section *Final disclaimer* for more discussion on respective student and proofreader responsibilities.

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## **PART 1 GLOSSARY OF TERMS**

IMPORTANT NOTE: the terms in this glossary are explained with specific reference to *student writing*. Meanings may therefore differ from common dictionary definitions.

### **Proofreading**

The process of identifying errors and suggesting corrections to a text.

### **Third party proofreader (or interventions)**

A person other than course supervisor or tutor who proofreads a student's text in the sense given above (or interventions in a text made by such a person).

### **Interventions**

Any comments or suggested changes made by a third party proofreader

### **Formative feedback**

Feedback from the proofreader that identifies and explains typical errors in the text (in ways that help the student improve their own writing and editing skills). The University wishes to encourage this practice.

### **Plagiarism**

Plagiarism is an academic offence which the University defines as "the misuse of authorship" (for a full explanation, see <http://www.essex.ac.uk/plagiarism/>). Proofreading improvements to a text that go beyond the guidelines set out here may constitute plagiarism. The University takes this very seriously.

### **Track Changes**

Track changes is a facility within the word processing package, Microsoft Word, which allows users to see changes that have been made to an original document. Such changes can then be individually 'accepted' or 'rejected' as the author wishes.

## **PART II: GUIDANCE AND PROTOCOLS ON PROOFREADING**

Please read the *glossary of terms* before reading on, as the meaning of key words may differ from common dictionary definitions.

### **1. Checking whether proofreading is appropriate**

There is no obligation for any student to engage the assistance of a paid proofreader at any stage of study or on any piece of coursework. However, it is acknowledged that certain types of student texts are quite often submitted for proofreading to a third party, and such assistance is at times actively recommended by supervisors. This is particularly the case for doctoral dissertations which typically aim for publication standard in their presentation. In addition, students whose first language is not English may want to have Masters level projects and dissertations proofread. There are no University regulations forbidding the use of proofreaders for other types of work but please see the note below on consulting supervisors.

### **2. Consulting relevant supervisors**

Before engaging the services of a proofreader, students should consult with the relevant course or research supervisor to discuss whether proofreading is required or acceptable for any given item of coursework. Supervisors for their part are asked to bear in mind the potential cost of such services in relation to the text stage when giving such advice. At draft stages in particular, consideration should be given to the other options for writing support and skills development. The University Talent Development Centre can provide information on the range of support and guidance available.

### **3. Finding a proofreader**

The University's online proofreader list is set up to help students find a proofreader who is familiar with the university system and protocols, and who has the necessary skills to work on their particular text. Proofreaders are asked to provide a range of background information (e.g. skills areas, preferences and charges), to help students make informed choices in this respect. However the University cannot guarantee the quality of work (see also 'disclaimer' at end). Please note therefore that:

- Proofreaders seeking to advertise with the University should bear in mind that students should be able to approach them in the reasonable expectation that they have the appropriate skills and secure, up-to-date computer software and equipment to perform the task.
- Students, for their part, should undertake sufficient preliminary discussions to give confidence as far as possible that a potential proofreader is competent to provide the help requested.

### **4. Planning ahead**

It is very important that students seeking proofreading begin consultations well in advance of deadlines, and that a clear agreement be drawn up between student and proofreader covering expectations relating to time and cost (as far as these can be estimated).

Proofreading can represent a significant cost to a student. (It typically takes much longer than student writers expect). This is because proofreaders must take great care

not to alter meaning or add to content in any way (see notes on the *scope of intervention* below). Proofreading can represent quite a lengthy stage in the process of text completion. Experienced proofreaders will be able to advise on a typical turn-around time, but it is wise to begin the process of consulting with your supervisor and contacting potential proofreaders well in advance of sending a text. Discussions and agreement on terms and conditions of paid proofreading typically need to cover the following points:

1. *The type of corrections required* - this may have a bearing on cost, although students should bear in mind that even 'final editing' can be time-consuming.
2. *The format* - the means by which the work will be delivered to the proofreader and the mode employed by the proofreader for corrections.
3. *Communications* - the extent of anticipated contact between proofreader and student.
4. *Dates and deadlines* - The date for delivery of scripts to the proofreader and return of completed corrections and comments to the student. This should allow good time in advance of a deadline for the students to make the suggested corrections and follow up on potential queries.
5. *Financial arrangements* - fees for the work, arrangements for payment, the date payment is due, and any extra expenses to be borne by the student. Where the fee is agreed as an estimate, the proofreader must advise the student as soon as possible if any significant increase becomes likely once work is underway.

## **5. Written agreements and good communication**

Proofreaders and students have equal responsibility for effective communication. While a job is in progress, both parties should have easy means of getting in touch and should keep each other informed as necessary. This is especially important where any aspect of an original agreement changes. Students and proofreaders are advised to keep careful note of all arrangements and an original of all documents submitted for proofreading. In this way:

- All parties have a clear understanding of the work to be undertaken and terms and conditions agreed upon
- The student writer will be able to demonstrate that no part of the text's academic content has been changed or added to in the proofreading process.

## **6. Proofreading at different work stages**

To minimise the risk of proofreader interventions adding to or unduly affecting the meaning or content of student work, text should normally be submitted for thirdparty proofreading at completion stage only. Note also that, regardless of stage, a student's work should always be expressed and edited to the best of their ability at the point of submission for proofreading. On no account should proofreading be based on initial or fragmentary texts such as outlines or notes to essays, assignments or dissertation chapters.

## **7. Possible types of proofreading (and associated levels of intervention)**

Two types of text intervention need to be distinguished:

*Final editing*

Proofreading at this level entails checking for mistakes, occasional spelling or punctuation errors; word processing errors such as repeated phrases or omitted lines; inconsistency in layout, formatting, referencing, etc. Prior to submitting work for proofreading, students should have consulted and followed the relevant departmental style guidance on matters such as formatting for headings, paragraphing and quotations etc, and likewise the conventions to be followed for references, bibliographies and footnotes. It is the student's responsibility to pass on the departmental guidelines to the proofreader (note: should a student be unaware that such guidance exists, the proofreader may need to prompt in this respect). Accurate referencing is an important skills requirement. Where an entire bibliography is set out inaccurately or inconsistently, proofreaders are recommended to amend a section of it only, as an example for students to follow. Students should then make the necessary remaining changes themselves.

### *Language correction*

Proofreading at this level extends to errors in grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure and expression. When making corrections of this type, the proofreader should only suggest corrections where the intended meaning is clear to the reader. Where meaning cannot be understood, or where there is ambiguity, a note to this effect should be made by the proofreader for the attention of the student. Face-to-face consultation may be useful to negotiate a final correction. In order to advise competently on even basic correction of grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and expression, proofreaders will need to be familiar with the conventions of the discipline in which the student is working.

NOTE: Proofreading should not entail any intervention that would substantially change the content of a piece of work. Proofreaders should avoid:

- Rewriting sections where argumentation or logic is faulty.
- Significantly rearranging paragraphs with the intention of improving structure.
- Correcting data calculations or factual errors etc.

Note though, a proofreader may advise the student writer to check possible problems of this type with a relevant supervisor or tutor.

## **8. Agreeing the scope of work to be undertaken**

Students should note that the type of proofreading work required will impact on the length of time the work takes and the resulting cost. Note also that students may not always be the best judge of what level of correction is needed to their work, especially when they are writing in a second language. It is therefore a matter that should always be discussed in advance. If in doubt, the course supervisor should be able to advise on the type of corrections - if any - that might be needed. The final decision may therefore depend partly on student preferences and partly on supervisor/proofreader advice, although it is important to remember that the final decision rests with the student, as the one responsible for payment and ultimately for the content of the work. For these reasons, it is highly advisable that the proofreader completes a sample of work on the student text at the outset, as a means of informing discussions with student writers on likely time and cost etc (see also 'Setting Fees' below).

## **9. Setting fees based on a sample of work**

Proofreaders typically charge by the hour (the amount of time taken) or by the page (the length of text to be proofread). The method of calculating fees should be agreed in

advance and at least a parameter of costs agreed upon (e.g. upper and lower limits). It is good practice - for the purpose of clarifying the work required and the likely fee - for the prospective proofreader to mark up a sample of the student work (two or three pages is recommended). It is up to the proofreader whether to require payment for this sample, but either way this should also be agreed in advance. The student writer should take care to offer a representative sample of work (i.e. typical of the whole text, in terms of number of words per page, and the level of editing already undertaken by the student and, possibly, his or her supervisor).

## **10. Formats for comments and corrections**

There are two main ways of working on a text when proofreading: *by hand* in hard copy) and *electronically* (using 'Track Changes' and 'Comments'). *By Hand* - working from corrections to paper copy represents the more secure way to ensure that the student writer takes control of reviewing and writing up final changes. The onus is on the proofreader working by hand however to ensure that their corrections are legible, and that they employ a consistent system for suggesting changes. • *Electronically* - if the proofreader makes suggested changes electronically, they *must* use Track Changes rather than direct (i.e. 'invisible') edits to a text. Students for their part must know how to use Track Changes and again be responsible for considering each suggested correction (rather than simply 'accepting all').

## **11. Including formative feedback**

In addition to text corrections, proofreaders are urged to provide summary feedback in the form of a list of the main or common errors noted, so that the student writer can hopefully progress their future writing as a result of the proofreading process.

## **12. 'Ownership' of corrections**

Proofreaders and students are urged to note that proofreaders should not take on responsibility for making the final decision on any changes to a student's text. The student is always ultimately responsible for the work submitted. On receiving work back from a proofreader, students must therefore allow themselves good time to consider each suggested correction very carefully in order to make the final decision themselves on if and how to change the original text. It is very important that the student maintain ownership of corrections, however minor they may be.

## **13. Keeping work safe**

Original documents are frequently supplied in electronic form, whether by email, USB or shared file. It is recommended that:

- Files supplied by a student should be virus-checked upon receipt
- A copy of the student's original file should be kept by the proofreader and student writer. A protocol should be agreed for the naming of proofreader-edited versions.
- Disks should be clearly labelled and dated so that they are easily identifiable.

It is the responsibility of both proofreader and student writer to keep copies of software files, queries and correspondence relating to work undertaken. Students should ensure against loss of original material by keeping copies themselves. Likewise, proofreaders

should regard student work as confidential and should take precautions to ensure that documents held on behalf of students are kept secure.

#### **14. Acknowledging help given**

For dissertation work, it is common practice for students to provide a foreword to their text, acknowledging and thanking all those who have provided support of whatever nature in the process of research and writing. Students are advised to include the proofreader in this acknowledgement. For term papers, students should state on the cover sheet that work has been proofread.

#### **15. University disclaimer**

The guidance set out in this document aims to provide students, proofreaders and supervisors with a shared understanding of good, ethical practice in relation to the third-party proofreading of work going on to be assessed. The University does not recommend one proofreader over another, and cannot guarantee the skills of individual proofreaders or the quality of their work. The University only ensures that any proofreader advertising via its web-based Proofreader Directory has confirmed their familiarity with this guidance and agreed to abide by it. Both proofreader and student have responsibilities in the proofreading process as set out in this document. However, it is imperative that both also bear in mind that the final responsibility for any adjustment to a text is borne by the student writer, and that the document will be assessed on this basis - as the work of the student.