

## Accreditation in proofreading: guidance for candidates

- Some dos and don'ts
- Using the BSI 2005 proof-correction marks
- Advice on grammar, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary

### Some dos and don'ts

This informal advice is based on our experience of successful and unsuccessful Accreditation candidates. It is supplementary to [Accreditation in proofreading: prospectus](#), which should be read first.

### *Check the package when it arrives*

- Look through your test soon after you get it to assess how long it might take you, so that you aren't rushing to complete it just before the deadline. Experienced proofreaders ought to be able to assess work and manage their time competently; the allotted two-week period (within which you are advised to have a weekend or several evenings free) is ample time to complete the test without rushing and without disrupting paid work, since none of the tests is longer than about 50 proof pages in total (excluding Part 3, the questions).

### *Follow the brief*

- If the test instructions tell you to return *all* the documents, *unmarked*, do precisely that; and check that you've also followed other instructions to the letter. The test material includes several instructions specifically asking you to take or avoid certain actions; failure to do so is taken into account for your grade under curriculum item 1. We have found that many obviously experienced candidates come to grief over this.
- You will be asked to write your candidate's identification number at certain points. Do make sure that you do so, and that you copy it correctly. All slips of that kind are noted, and they will affect your grade for curriculum item 1. We appreciate that candidates may feel impelled to work quickly and then make such errors through haste. In fact, the expected timing for completing the test is based on a sensible pace and gives you ample time to be reasonably careful, write neatly, and check important points such as the correct transcription of a number.
- If the brief for a part of the test asks you to handle queries in a particular way (e.g. writing them on the proof in pencil), do precisely that. If you find you have too many questions to be dealt with in the required way, ask yourself whether you should prune them. Re-read the brief. Unlike a paid job, this 'proof' has been worked over by many people; the brief was written by someone who knows the material well, and it might give you a hint about the number and type of queries that are considered reasonable for this particular test.
- Don't undertake wholesale rewriting (or 'intrusive' editing). That is not likely ever to be required in a proofreading test; if it were, that would be clearly indicated in the brief. So if you find you are constantly rephrasing, cutting and adding copy – even if you are only suggesting 'improvements' in pencil – ask yourself if you are going too far. Unwarranted editing will not only count against you under curriculum item 1; it will also push up your timing compared with the average, which is based on a straightforward, non-creative proofreading of the text as given.

### *Use the current BSI marks correctly and neatly*

- Do be careful not to use outdated or unconventional proof-correction marks. They may cause no trouble in your working life, but when taking the test your use of the most recent British Standards Institution marks must be impeccable. Whether you are newly trained or a long-standing user of the 1976 (and earlier) marking systems, you must work carefully through the BS 5261C:2005 chart before taking the test. The chart is available from the Society, and there is more guidance in 'Using the BSI 2005 proof-correction marks' later in this document.

### *Use the right pen or pencil*

- Do take seriously the curriculum's requirement that you should use a red pen for typesetters' errors, a blue pen for other (uncontroversial) corrections, and pencil for queries. Correct use of the colour code is important to many clients; this is also an opportunity for you to show that you are consistently able to remember and fulfil complex requirements. If you consistently fail to do so, you will not pass the test.
- Do use ink (of the appropriate colour) for any corrections that are not in doubt.
- Do use pencil, not blue ink, for any corrections you are not absolutely sure about (which should include any rephrasing beyond the most simple and obviously correct change of a single word or two). The curriculum's instruction to use pencil 'for queries' applies both to actual queries for author or desk-editor and to any corrections that may conceivably need to be altered by the collator. If in doubt, always use pencil. And, as mentioned above, be wary if you find that you are making a great many interventions of this kind.

### *Find and correct general typographical errors / Check page numbers, running heads, cross-references, prelims etc. and make or suggest changes or improvements*

- Do take curriculum items 4 and 9 seriously. Skim through the tests with items such as running heads and headings in mind, comparing like with like, working out the correct style, and pointing out any anomalies. If you aren't sure of the correct style, simply put a concise pencil query on the proof against any apparent anomalies; you will gain some points for pointing out a problem even if you can't suggest a solution. We don't expect proofreaders to be skilled typographers or designers, but they must be able to spot obvious problems.

### *Find and correct 'red' and 'blue' errors*

- If you notice something wrong, do mark it on the proof itself, not just in a separate note for the in-house editor or author. If a problem seems so complex that your comments on it have to be appended separately, make sure that this is clearly signalled on the proof itself. The same applies to long queries: write them on a separate sheet if that seems unavoidable, but make sure that there is some clear indication of this at each relevant point in the proof.
- Don't let the search for literals and technical flaws distract you from noting details that may turn out to be inconsistently treated. If this isn't already an established habit for you, read and re-read *Butcher's Copy-editing* (pp. 45–50) before you take the test.

### *Check maps/figures/tables*

- Do remember that, although a proof may be presented on single sheets, the finished work will probably have left- and right-hand pages. If you don't know the implications of this, find them out and keep them in mind.

- Do work out (roughly) the finished dimensions of the page and the usual margins within which all type and most illustrations must fit. Remember that the size of a book when it is printed is not necessarily the same as the size of the proof pages.

*Make or suggest adjustments to minimise the effects of added and/or deleted material / Find and draw attention efficiently to matters needing consideration by others*

- Don't overlook curriculum items 8 and 10. The test includes several opportunities for you to demonstrate the skills in question. If you don't even notice the opportunities, you will lose points and may even fail on these items in spite of good grades elsewhere.

*Pace yourself*

- Do pace yourself carefully throughout your work on the test. You won't fail on curriculum item 12 if you can balance the need for vigilance and clear presentation with the need to get the job done at a business-like speed. You don't have to rush: the 'reasonable time' mentioned in the curriculum is based on the time taken by fellow-proofreaders working on the same test in the same conditions as you. On the other hand, don't dawdle, don't go over and over any part of the test, and don't devote hours to researching one particular point (you should think carefully before spending *any* substantial time on 'research'; if you suspect but can't prove that something in the proof is wrong, query it in pencil and pass on).

*Problems*

- Don't panic if you run into problems. If they are in the proofreading parts of the test, it's probably wise to note where they are and return to them later, rather than pushing up your overall time by agonising over them before you have read the whole test. Everything you are expected to know and do is covered by *Butcher's Copy-editing* and the [SfEP proofreading notes](#) (the latter, also available from the SfEP office, being an updated and expanded version of Unit 2 [Proofreading] of Nicola Harris's *Basic Editing*). Remember that you are free to consult them (although any time you spend doing so must be included in the hours you report on the Declaration). Bear in mind that, unlike the dilemmas you encounter when doing a paid job, those in the test have been designed in; we are assessing your ability to cope independently with technical difficulties but are not asking you to do anything that hasn't been regularly achieved by proofreaders like you during piloting of the test you are taking.
- Don't telephone, e-mail or ask anyone else for help with problems, except as detailed in the test instructions. That is, you must check promptly that your set of test papers is complete (you will be told the correct number of pages); if it is not, or if any page is defective, you must report it straight away. Otherwise, you should not contact SfEP about problems with the test itself.
- The Declaration form gives space for you to comment or to report briefly on any problems you may have run into. This mirrors the letter you might send to a client, for example to give your reasons for decisions that may not be obvious in the proof itself or to explain that you have been unwell or under unusual pressure. The examiners will take this into account, particularly if your result is close to a borderline, so if you have something material to say, use the space on the Declaration to do so (you won't get another opportunity).

## Using the BSI 2005 proof-correction marks

Item 2 of the accreditation test curriculum requires candidates to 'Use the current BSI marks (BS 5261C:2005) correctly and neatly'. Be warned: you will fail on this item if you repeatedly use wrong or outdated marks or if your correction marks are not clear and efficient.

If you aren't fully trained in the use of BSI marks *or if you were trained in the 1976 (or earlier) marking systems*, you would be foolish to take the test without working carefully through the BS 5261C:2005 chart. This is available, at a very reasonable price, from the Society. It can be used alongside the advice on proof correcting in the fourth edition of *Butcher's Copy-editing* and the [SfEP proofreading notes](#).

The advice given here assumes that you have the 2005 chart to hand: its numbers are given in square brackets.

### *The 10 most important points to note about the BSI 2005 system*

- 1 [A1] BS 5261C:2005 requires use of the solidus (oblique) after every change that is not an insertion or a deletion. This has sometimes been considered an optional requirement but we recommend that the BSI's clear-cut instruction be strictly observed.
- 2 [A1 and B1] The BSI 2005 system recognises the use of a multiplier for corrections that are repeated in the same line without interruption (e.g. 'x 2' encircled).
- 3 [B3] Test candidates must use the new shape for the delete symbol prescribed by BS 5261C:2005, not the traditional curved or flat-topped shape. Use of the outdated curved symbol will be penalised.  
Note too that the traditional delete-and-close-up mark is not included in the 2005 system and must not be used.
- 4 [B7] The sign for italic no longer has a central stroke.
- 5 [B19 and B20] For inserting or substituting a superior character, single combined marks can be used. For inferior characters, the margin mark is the same whether substituting or inserting. Note that B20 must not be used for inserting or substituting a comma.
- 6 [B32] N and M rules are to be indicated with the single letter 'N' or 'M' (not 'en' or 'em').
- 7 [C7] Note the change to the mark-up for matter to be centred.
- 8 [C12] There is now a symbol for showing that matter should be unjustified.
- 9 [D2] Note carefully the 2005 system for marking the instruction to insert or substitute space between characters or words. This has sometimes been a subject of controversy; we recommend test candidates to follow precisely the 2005 BSI recommendations.
- 10 [D3] When reducing space between words, make sure that the mark in the text is a single stroke.

### *More advice about proof-correction marks*

- 11 Be sure to encircle anything you write on the proof to supplement your correction marks (Note 4 in BS 5261C:2005).
- 12 When you have more than one correction for a line of text, remember that your marks must be in the correct order (from left to right in both margins) and separated by obliques if they are not deletions or insertions.
- 13 Note carefully the BSI instruction [B2] for the use of a letter in a diamond to indicate additional matter to be inserted. This was identical in the 1976 system but is often not observed as strictly as it should be.
- 14 Note too the 2005 instructions for requesting and removing emboldening [B9–B12].

- 15 The 2005 system includes a new symbol for inserting underline [B34] but none for removing it. The SfEP's unofficial recommendation is to encircle the underlined character(s) that should not be underlined and in the margin draw the underline symbol [B34] with a slash through it.
- 16 We recommend that inserted material that needs to be italic or bold should be appropriately underlined in the marginal mark (see *Butcher's Copy-editing*, p. 102). The same should apply to capitals and small capitals when there is any chance of ambiguity.
- 17 If you need to add (or correct) something above or below a character (e.g. a diacritical mark or an accent), treat the character plus the diacritical mark as a single entity; cross it out in the text and write the correct form in the margin, followed by an oblique stroke.
- 18 When asking the typesetter to indent the first line of a new paragraph, many proofreaders use the indent symbol [C8: Move to the right]. We believe it is preferable to use C1 [Start new paragraph], so that the typesetter will match the size of the indentation to the overall design specification.
- 19 When more than two lines need to be transposed, and the sequence cannot be clearly shown by the use of C5, the rather complex system recommended as C6 may be replaced by using square brackets at either end of the line(s) to be moved and an arrow drawn to the point where the text should be. However, if in doubt, use the BSI system; if necessary, supplement the mark with a clear but brief verbal instruction, encircled.
- 20 The 2005 system includes new symbols for marking thin and fixed spaces [D5 and D6].

## Advice on grammar, punctuation, spelling and vocabulary

Accreditation test curriculum item 6 examines candidates' ability to 'find and correct or query' errors present in the copy when it was given to the typesetter: That is, the proofreader must be able to stand in for a deficient (or absent!) copy-editor. This requires (among other skills) a reasonable knowledge of current English usage, which we define as:

- **grammar:** the definite rules agreed by all and the debatable 'rules' that are often challenged (or ignored), *and* matters of taste (such as the use of capitals) which might be called *style* rather than grammar
- **punctuation:** again, definite rules, debatable cases, *and* matters of taste
- **spelling:** including words that have accepted alternative spellings
- **vocabulary:** the correct use of words (as prescribed in dictionaries) *and* recent changes in meaning and use.

To that knowledge of usage we feel a competent proofreader must add:

- **knowledge** of when changes should never be suggested (e.g. when proofreading poetry and in quoted matter or where the brief specifically asks that an author's style shouldn't even be queried, let alone changed)
- a **good sense** of how to apply his or her knowledge of usage – when to insist on rules and when to allow them to be bent or broken.

So, for example, candidates must know that 'Eat less cake and biscuits' should strictly be 'Eat less cake and fewer biscuits'. They should also be aware that the use of 'less' in place of 'fewer' is now so widespread that it will probably soon be accepted by all except a few diehards. That is the kind of *knowledge* that's required; the *good sense* is called for when the proofreader is pondering whether to accept the copy as given and, if not, whether to make a definite correction in blue ink or to raise a query in pencil.

The required knowledge should also protect proofreaders from importing errors or questionable usage. Thus, if candidates suggest an improvement for the copy, they must, for example, use the right form of 'its' and not write 'potatoe'; if an author has correctly used the spelling 'practise', candidates who alter it to 'practice' will be penalised.

### *Gaining knowledge*

The recommended reference for the Accreditation in proofreading test, the fourth edition of *Butcher's Copy-editing*, is a good starting point; it reflects modern mainstream publishing practice, and we endorse the advice on usage. This is concentrated in Chapter 6, which is called 'House Style' but has much useful general advice, including three sections on usage:

- 6.12: Punctuation
- 6.14: Spelling
- 6.15: Miscellaneous points.

Most candidates will want to supplement this with some further reading on usage. The *Butcher's* bibliography (pp. 508–9) gives plenty of recommendations, and the Publishing Training Centre's on-line bookshop ([www.train4publishing.co.uk](http://www.train4publishing.co.uk)) is a good source. You should not take the Accreditation test until you are thoroughly at home with this subject, so that you can spot problems at once and will remember the relevant advice. We also recommend the SfEP course 'Brush up your grammar' (and the Publishing Training Centre's grammar courses) to build up your knowledge and confidence.

### *Learning good sense*

Sooner or later in your reading on usage you will notice that authors cannot always offer clear-cut dos and don'ts. Here are some examples where a flexible approach is paramount.

#### **The split infinitive**

*Butcher's Copy-editing* (p. 165) follows older authorities such as Fowler, Gowers and Partridge in saying that, while split infinitives are best avoided (if only because some people find them so offensive), they should be allowed to stand if rephrasing them would make for an awkward or ambiguous sentence.

Nicola Harris, in her useful but out-of-print *Basic Editing* (London 1991, Book House Training Centre), helpfully showed how modern editors approach the problem. In her example (p. 11), a copy-editor revised one split infinitive ('to not do') but left another because it was in a quotation (and, we may add, this one seems inoffensive: '... the marriage relationship contains so many coercive elements as to largely exclude options, at least in the short run'). Harris pointed out (p. 38) that the split infinitive is more widely accepted in American English than British, and after explaining the opposing schools of thought she concluded: 'I suspect this may be a losing battle and the split infinitive will become fully accepted within your lifetime. Even now it is allowable if it is really the neatest and clearest mode of expression.'

We subscribe to these views, and recommend flexibility combined with respect for authors' and clients' wishes.

#### **Relative clauses**

Another familiar cluster of problems concerns the alternative uses of 'which' and 'that' and the punctuation of defining and non-defining relative clauses. *Butcher's* (p. 164) pithily gives the rules; it defies pedants by allowing 'which' in a defining clause, and even recommends it if there is another 'that' in the sentence ('the process which produces that particular effect').

Again we recommend a flexible approach. We do not support a total ban on the use of 'which' in defining clauses. We are *not* flexible over the omission of commas before and after defining clauses, where traditional punctuation practice is a help to understanding; but we accept that opinions are divided over the use of commas for non-defining clauses. This last is another case where proofreaders must be prepared to sink their own views and adapt to the style they are presented with.

#### **Language development**

Harris exemplified the sensitivity required of editors and proofreaders particularly well when (in a passage on 'Language change', pp. 41–2) she stressed that many of the points of grammar under discussion involve not rules but 'degrees of acceptability ... variations, some of which may even be common in colloquial English but are better avoided in written English'. She concluded that editors (and, we may add, the proofreaders who follow after them) 'need to tread carefully the line between pedantry and "anything goes"'. The accreditation in proofreading test gives you a chance to show how well you can tread that line.