

SfEP Proofreading notes

based on text from Unit 2, *Proofreading*, in *Basic Editing* by Nicola Harris

These notes are based on the text of Unit 2 in *Basic Editing* by Nicola Harris, which is now out of print.

The Society for Editors and Proofreaders thanks both Nicola Harris and the Publishing Training Centre for permission to adapt/update that material, which has been done by Gillian Clarke in consultation with Judith Wardman and Gerard M-F Hill.

It can be used as background reading for the SfEP accreditation in proofreading test, although *Butcher's Copy-editing* (4th edition) should be followed if there is any conflict of advice.

Proofreading principles

The role of the proofreader is as back-up to the copy-editor. Making changes at proof stage is costly (in time as well as in money), so, although the proofreader should correct significant errors, the temptation to tweak or 'improve' the author's style should be firmly resisted. What is deemed 'significant' can vary from job to job, so it is important to establish precisely what the client wants or expects.

It is the copy-editor's job to check that writing style, organisation of content and legal issues are dealt with, as well as ensuring that grammar, punctuation, spelling, arithmetic and so on are correct and consistent. However, the proofreader should look out for errors of omission or commission by the copy-editor, and also errors in inputting the copy-editor's amendments or in the typesetter's interpretation of the design specification.

Proofreading symbols

The symbols that should be used are those of BSI 5261C: 2005; the BSI's laminated card listing all the symbols and their uses can be purchased from the SfEP office (£4.00 + C5 s.a.e.).

Learn them carefully but have the list to hand whenever you are proofreading until you become fully familiar with them. Life is very much easier if you learn them correctly from the beginning! If you have already been doing some proofreading, this is your opportunity to correct any bad habits. If in doubt, check!

The symbols used nowadays are those published in 2005. If you work for a client that continues to use the 1976 (or earlier!) symbols, you may be expected to follow suit. Nevertheless, you must become thoroughly acquainted with the current ones.

The symbols used in proofreading and copy-editing are identical, with one exception: that for changing a capital to lower case. If a *proofreader* needs to change a capital letter to lower case, that letter is circled and the 'change capital to lower case' symbol placed in the margin. If a *copy-editor* is marking up paper and wants to change a capital to lower case, he or she marks a short diagonal stroke through the top of the capital; this is a convention that is understood by typesetters to mean 'change this capital to lower case'. If several letters are in capitals and most are to be lower case, the copy-editor will put the 'capital' marking under the letters to remain capitals; the marking to change several letters can be done by extending a horizontal rule from the tick mark over those to be made lower case.

When you are proofreading, identify each error both **in the text** and **in the margin**. You will normally use both margins: mentally divide the text you are reading into two halves and then use the left-hand margin to mark changes to the text on the left side and the right-hand margin to mark changes to text on the right side of your imaginary divider. Remember, though, that two or more changes in a single line **must** be marked in the correct sequence.

You should put an oblique stroke (or ‘slash’) after each margin mark, unless it is already followed by the insert mark (a **caret**) or the amendment is the delete symbol. (Of course, if you have marked a substitution – which is followed by the oblique stroke – you don’t need a second one.) Remember that the caret or oblique stroke in the margin comes *after* the new or replacement character(s) or words.

Technique

Proofreading against copy

If you are proofreading against copy, you will normally have in front of you the copy-edited typescript/printout (the **copy**) and the **proof**. The copy will often be double-spaced whereas the proof will look like a printed page. Your role is to ensure that the typesetter’s version (the proof) accords with the original copy. You might also have a copy of the **design** (or **typographical specification**) or copies of the **specimen** (sample) **pages**, which will help you to check that they have been followed consistently. However, if you do not receive the design ‘instructions’ just make sure that the different component parts – for example, the chapter headings, main headings, tables, figure captions, footnotes – are presented consistently throughout.

- If you are right-handed, put the copy on the left and the proof on the right. (If you are left-handed, put the copy on the right and the proof on the left.)
- Hold your pen over the word you are proofreading; slide a ruler or piece of paper down the lines of the copy with your other hand as you read, in order to keep your place.
- Read every word in the proof, every letter in a name or difficult word – remember that proofreading is totally different from reading for pleasure or for information.
- Check back and forth from copy to proof to copy as often as is necessary, to make sure that you don’t overlook anything. Look particularly at names, numbers and technical terms to ensure that they are correct.
- If there isn’t already such guidance from the copy-editor, to ensure consistent usage throughout the work, make a list of: terms that are hyphenated, one word or two words; words that are italicized or capitalized; and words with accents.
- Even if you have a list from the copy-editor, you might find it useful to add to it.
- Make sure that your amendments in the margin align with the line in which the changes are to be made (your writing should be neither too small nor too big).
- Fitting in amendments in the left-hand margin can be a bit tricky; especially if you are altering something near the beginning of the line, leave a bit of room for a possible second amendment.
- If you run out of space in the left-hand margin, continue in the right-hand margin; remember that your marks **must** be in the correct sequence.
- In real life, it is quite possible that there will be few errors for you to spot and deal with. You must work hard not to lose concentration: that is bound to be the point at which an error occurs, and you risk missing it if you are not giving the job your full attention.
- Remember that direct quotations (and titles of works, such as books) must be left with their original spelling and grammar (including use of italic); do not, mistakenly, make them consistent with the (house) style used in the main text.

Proofreading blind

If you are proofreading ‘blind’ you have only the proof; there is no copy to check against. You cannot tell with certainty whose fault an error is, so you use only one colour to mark amendments. You can use either red or blue but be sure that you do not chop and change. Mark the top of the first page ‘Blind proofread’ so that it is clear that, if using red, you are not assuming that everything is down to the typesetter or, if using blue, you are not assuming that everything is down to the copy-editor.

Because you do not have the copy-edited copy to check against, it can be harder to decide whether to amend something one way or another (for consistency). So you might have to raise more pencil queries than you would if you were proofreading against copy.

Colours for marking proofs

Your main task is to look for errors missed or made by the copy-editor and for errors made by the typesetter.

- Use red for errors made by the typesetter.
- Use blue for other necessary changes – i.e. anything not caused by the typesetter. (If, later, you are to collate the proofs, you may need to distinguish between author’s changes and changes down to the copy-editor; in this case you can use black for the author’s changes – or vice versa. This is no longer a British Standard convention, so, when proofreading, always use blue for amending errors not made by the typesetter.)
- Use pencil for anything about which you are uncertain. Don’t waste time agonising over a point; mark it in pencil and then, when you have reached the end of the job, return to the beginning to try to resolve your pencil marks – if they are important, you will insert them in blue; if they are not important, you will rub them out. If you are not sure what the correct solution is, you will raise a query with your client, either in pencil on the proof or in a separate list keyed to the relevant passage in the proof.
- Typesetters occasionally mark a query on the proof. The colour they use is normally green but, if the proofs you have are photocopies, the marks will be in black.

Your colour coding enables the typesetter to allocate costs quickly and fairly. Red (and green, if present) corrections will be done at the typesetter’s expense. Blue and black amendments will be charged to the publisher. Most contracts between publisher and author allow for this latter cost to be set against the author’s royalties (or fee) if it amounts to more than a specified percentage of the typesetting cost.

Amendments made by the typesetter

Typesetters sometimes correct an obvious mistake (e.g. ‘teh’ for ‘the’) missed by the copy-editor. You don’t usually have to mark this; just note mentally that this has been done. However, be alert to an amendment made by the typesetter that should *not* have been done. If in doubt, make a pencil note telling your client how the text has been altered.

Some uncommon or special presentations

Ligatures

Look out for the letters ‘fi’, ‘ffi’, ‘fl’ and ‘ffl’. These often appear as separate letters but may be given as **ligatures** – they are joined together. You may also occasionally see ligatured characters used for AE, ae, ct, fh, fj, ft, OE, oe, st and Th, especially in Latin and Greek texts. If so, make sure that this style is used consistently throughout.

Punctuation

Note that, in the margin marks, you must always circle full stops (**full points**) and colons; commas and semicolons are *not* circled.

Some typefaces have quote marks and apostrophes that are straight (Palatino is one). Nevertheless, when inserting or substituting them, be sure to draw them curly, so that it is obvious what they are (opening or closing quote, or apostrophe).

Superscript and subscript

When inserting or substituting something that should be above the imaginary base line on which all **characters** (letters, numbers, punctuation) ‘sit’, make sure that your margin mark is clear by using the superscript mark (a cup shape) underneath the character. This is particularly important with closing single quote marks and apostrophes: these will appear as commas if you forget to indicate that they should be above the base line.

Similarly, be sure to put the subscript mark (an inverted v) over a character that is to appear below the imaginary base line (e.g. the ‘2’ of ‘H₂O/H₂O’). However, do *not* do this for commas – they appear on the base line.

Small capitals

As their name suggests, small capitals are shaped exactly like the full-size capitals but smaller. They are generally the same height as the lower case ‘x’ (this is known as the **x-height**).

Some abbreviations, such as ‘BC’, are set as small capitals instead full capitals. Others, such as ‘AIDS’, have only an initial capital (e.g. ‘Aids’). Make sure that, whatever style (or styles) is used for abbreviations, they are consistent throughout.

Hyphen, en rule and em rule

In most printed typefaces a hyphen is extremely short – often much shorter than its typed version. It is used to connect words or parts of words in various ways: ‘pre-eminent’, ‘the decision-making process’, ‘marriage break-up’, etc.

An **en rule**, which is normally about twice as long as a hyphen but thinner, is used in several different ways.

- Between words, a **closed-up** en rule can be understood as ‘to’ or ‘and’; its function is to connect separate entities, which could stand on their own. So, ‘the Paris–Rome express’, ‘rural–urban conflict’, ‘the jazz–classical music boundary’, ‘the French–German trade agreement’.
- Be careful about one particular case: although ‘French–German trade agreement’ takes an en rule, ‘Franco-German’ (or ‘Anglo-American’, ‘Sino-Soviet’ etc.) has to take a hyphen because ‘Franco-’ (like ‘pre-’) cannot stand on its own.
- A **closed-up** en rule may also be used with ranges of numbers: 15–17, 35–40, etc. Example 1 in the box on page 6 compares an en rule (A) with a hyphen (B) in a range of numbers. Although the en rule is preferred, either style may be accepted at proof stage provided it is consistent. Remember that a range of numbers that is preceded by ‘from’ must have ‘to’ (not an en rule) between them; if preceded by ‘between’, the word ‘and’ must be used, not an en rule.

- A **spaced** en rule can be used for a parenthetical dash (see ‘em rule’, below). It is important to ensure that the space is never omitted in this context, in order to distinguish it from an en rule between words of equal importance or in number ranges.

An **em rule** is twice as long as the en rule. (The origin of the two names is that in many typefaces the en rule is the width of a capital N and the em rule the width of a capital M.)

- An em rule is used for a dash, traditionally **closed up** (with no space before or after it). Some publishers now use a spaced em rule for a dash. Others prefer a spaced en rule for a dash.
- A spaced em (or 2 em) rule may indicate a blank (in place of someone’s name or a swear word) or an unfinished (interrupted) sentence in dialogue.

Word spacing

You will have noticed that some typeset lines have more space between the words than other lines; and some lines will have very small spaces between the words; these lines are described as **gappy** or **tight**. Such variations are inevitable in **justified** setting – that is, typesetting in which the right-hand margin is even, just like the left-hand margin. Uneven spacing between words is often a particular problem in justified setting when the line length (the **measure**) is narrow, as, for example, in text that is in two or three columns.

Mark an amendment to ‘extreme’ spacing – usually by introducing a word break – *only* if words are exceptionally close or exceptionally wide apart in any given line. (In real life, it is probably worth checking first with your client as to their policy about ‘extreme’ spacing before making any adjustments.)

In **unjustified** (also called **left justified** or **ragged right**) setting – the right-hand margin of the text is uneven – there is no problem about gappy or tight lines because there is a standard space between all words. This is why unjustified text is often used with a narrow measure. The possible problem with unjustified text is that the usual convention is to have no **word breaks** (see later) at all. This can result in a long line followed by a short line followed by another long line, which can look odd or unsightly. The overall shape can often be improved by taking a word over (or back) from the long line into the short line. Or the design might allow for the occasional word break. (As with tweaking to adjust very gappy or very tight spacing in justified text, check first with your client before attempting to improve the look of affected text.)

Remember that any change made in a paragraph may affect the spacing or length of subsequent lines in that paragraph, so be wary about trying to improve the word spacing (in justified text) or line length (in unjustified text).

Look in the box (page 6) at the examples of:

- units/measurements (example 2)
- people’s initials (example 3)
- numbers (example 4)

You will see that some of the examples are closed up whereas some are spaced. The amount of space can be **variable** (changing like the space between all other words when the line is justified) or **fixed**. The standard space symbol (looks like a saucer on a stick) indicates that you want a variable space. You can check all these space symbols in Group D of the BSI chart.

Examples1 Ranges of figures (comparing en rule/hyphen)

1A 132–136 1B 132-136

2 Units/measurements

2A 98 lb 2B 98 lb 2C 98lb

3 Initials

3A G. V. Carey, J. B. Jones 3B G.V. Carey, J.B. Jones

3C GV Carey, JB Jones 3D GV Carey, JB Jones

4 Page numbers

4A p. 216 4B p.216

The copy-editor must ensure that the required style is used. For example, units of measurement such as ‘60 km’, ‘21 g’, ‘10 a.m.’ may have an ordinary word space, or a fixed space or no space at all. As proofreader, you must recognise the distinctions and check that they have been applied consistently.

With people’s initials, opinions are fairly evenly divided, some preferring spaces (word or fixed) and others preferring no space, and many preferring no full stops after the initials.

Lining and non-lining (old-style) figures

Lining figures (such as those in examples 1 and 4A) are all the same height – the full height of a capital, just as they are on an ordinary keyboard – and in the text of this guidance.

Non-lining (old-style) figures vary in height and depth. Look carefully at the numerals in a font like Georgia. You’ll see that the 1 and the 2 are the *x-height* (like small capitals). Some (such as the 6) have an **ascender** (that is, they rise above the x-height, like an ‘h’ or ‘k’); others (such as the 9) have a **descender** (a tail going below the line, like ‘g’ or ‘y’).

Some typefaces will have only one style of figure; in others the designer is able to choose which to have. (Unlike the other points discussed so far, no specific marking is required in the typescript; a general instruction – probably in the design (typographical) specification – is sufficient.) It is unlikely that both styles would be used deliberately in the same book, so proofreaders should query any deviations they notice.

Widows and orphansWidows

A widow is a short last line of a paragraph at the top of a page or column. Most publishers prefer to avoid these, although with **automatic page make-up** (division of text into pages by the typesetting system) this can be difficult to achieve without additional work/expense. A line that is three-quarters of the usual length is acceptable. (Some would say that half a line is all right.)

A single word as the last line of a paragraph is also a widow. Publishers vary in whether they accept this type of widow; if they do not accept it, this should be indicated in the brief. It is rare for a publisher to accept just part of a word as the last line of a paragraph, unless it can be a ‘word’ in itself (e.g. ‘chair’ of ‘wheelchair’).

Orphans

An orphan is just the first line of a paragraph appearing at the foot of a page. Many publishers accept this, although they do not accept just a heading at the foot of a page.

Word breaks

Most typesetting systems have an in-built **hyphenation program**, which determines where it is acceptable to break (divide) words when there isn't enough room to fit the entire next word at the end of the line. Because there are rival authorities on the subject, proofs may not always conform to the system you expect. Moreover, some programs might not recognise certain names or unusual words.

In general, it is sensible to accept word-break decisions unless they are startlingly wrong or misleading. The main principles are:

- There should generally be at least two letters on both lines. (This doesn't apply for terms such as 'e- mail'.)
- The first part of the word should not lead the reader to mispronounce it (and therefore find the second half unexpected). So, 'psycho- logical' is fine but 'psychol- ogist' and 'psy- chology' are preferred to the etymological break at 'psycho-'.

It is common to divide between doubled consonants (e.g. 'bet- ter') but never between doubled vowels (e.g. 'smo- oth') and not between two vowels if it affects the pronunciation (e.g. 'tre- ading').

Economy of marking

Note that, when substituting, your replacement doesn't have to have the same number of characters, and you can combine two changes if they occur together. For example, to change '70 tall' to 'seventy, tall' you replace the '70' with 'seventy,' (i.e. include the comma while you are changing the figures to a word, thus achieving 'seventy, tall').

Smudges and 'broken' letters

Proofs may be photocopies of a master printout, so some of the smudges you encounter might come from the photocopier. If, for example, a smudge (or a hair, which makes a letter look broken or flawed) appears in the same spot on each page, it is probably on the photocopier and you do not need to mark it. If you are in any doubt, however, do mark the problem so that the typesetter can check.