When I was growing up, one of my regular chores was to sweep the sidewalk that joined the driveway to our front porch. I hated this task! "Why," I asked my mother in exasperation, "do I have to do this? No one ever says, 'Wow! That's a beautifully swept walk!'"

"You're right," my mother responded, "No one notices the sidewalk after you've swept it. But someone certainly would if you didn't!"

And so it goes with grammar. Few people, except for English teachers and grammar gurus, will exclaim at the end of a carefully proofread paper, "My, what an error-free paper this is!" Most likely, comments are on the content of the paper. After all, communicating ideas is the whole purpose of writing! A paper cluttered with errors distracts the reader. At best, your reader will *notice* a paper filled with errors; at worst, your thoughts and ideas are dismissed because you've distracted the reader or lost your credibility (or both!).

Advice from the Experts

"Writing is hard work. A clear sentence is no accident. Very few sentences come out right the first time, or even the third time. Remember this in moments of despair. If you find that writing is hard, it's because it *is* hard" (Zinsser 12).

Peter Elbow offers this advice:

- Start with a clean copy
- Take a break and come to proofreading with fresh eyes
- Morning, when you're less likely to be tired, is a good time to proofread
- Read your work aloud
- Enlist the help of friends*

"Once you are aware of and know how to correct your most serious and frequent sentence-level problems, you must monitor for them when you write….You should decide whether you find it easier to monitor while you are writing or to go back and check for certain errors after you have completed a piece of writing" (Lane and Lange xix).

And your very own *Easy Access* gives you straightforward suggestions to:

- Read Out Loud
- Read Paragraphs Out of Order
- Use a Ruler or Pencil as a Marker
- Use Computerized Grammar and Spelling Checkers--cautiously
- Create a Common-Errors List (41-42)

We'll look at the advice of the experts and talk about why these and other strategies are valuable.

*Always be sure about your professor's policy on proofreading before asking a friend.

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. *Writing with Power*. 1981. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Lane, Janet and Ellen Lange. *Writing Clearly: An Editing Guide.* Boston: Heinle and Heinle, 1993.

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well*. 6th ed. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

Additional resources:

Einsholm, Amy. *The Copyeditor's Handbook*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2000.

Keene, Michael L. and Katherine H. Adams. *Easy Access*. Boston: McGraw Hill, 2002.

Lanham, Richard. *Revising Prose*. 3rd ed. New York: Macmillan, 1992.

Tarshis, Barry. *How to Be Your Own Best Editor*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 1998.

Writing Center pages and on-Line Writing Labs. These three are excellent ones to bookmark.

The On-Line Writing Lab at Purdue University
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/print/general/gl_proof.html

The University of North Carolina:
http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/proofread.html

University at Northern Iowa's Writing Center page:
http://fp.uni.edu/writingcenter/help/help_proofreading.htm

Strategies: A Quick List

Take a break before you proofread

Why it works:

The more distance you can get from a piece of writing, the better. Ideally you have set aside time to let your work sit for a day or two before you look at it with fresh eyes and brain. If you do not have the luxury of a long break, even a short one can help. Facing the final stage of the drafting and revising process after even a five minute break will help you to look at your paper anew.

Review previous papers before proofreading your current work

Why it works:

Being aware of the types of errors you tend to make will help you to spot them in your work.

Print out a clean copy in 14 point font

Why it works:

Changing the size (and perhaps even the color or font) of the document you've been working with can help to look at it with new eyes.

Read aloud

Why it works:

1. It makes you slow down
2. Not only do your eyes have the opportunity to catch mistakes, but your ears are invited to help out also.

Read out of order (this works at the paragraph, sentence, or even word level)

Why it works:

1. It makes you slow down
2. You focus on the words instead of the ideas

Use a piece of paper, a ruler, a pencil, or even your finger as a marker

Why it works:

1. It makes you slow down
2. It helps you to concentrate on words as individual entities, not part of a larger idea

Ask a friend to read your paper aloud to you

Why it works:

1. Your friend will most likely read more slowly than you would because he or she is not familiar with the paper.
2. Your friend will read what is actually on the page, not what you meant to put there.