Proofreading Tips

The following tips can empower all students to proofread their papers by themselves. Apply each tip to every paper, and watch as grammatical errors quickly diminish.

While applying these suggestions, mark any areas that are confusing. Then bring the paper into the Writing Lab and ask one of the tutors to explain the confusing areas.

Several of the tips require usage of the *Find* function on the word processor, located under the *Edit* menu of most word processors. Any tutor in the Writing Lab can provide a more detailed walk-through and explanation if needed.

TIP#1 **APOSTROPHE PROBLEMS**

On a word processor, use the *Find* function to find all apostrophes ('). In each instance, ask the following questions:

A) Is the apostrophe used to form a contraction (e.g.: *won't*, *isn't*, *haven't*, etc.)?
    *If so, spell out the two words instead (e.g.: *will not*, *is not*, *have not*, etc.).
B) Is the apostrophe used to form a possessive noun (e.g.: *Tom's*, *dog's*, etc.)?
    *If so, make certain that you actually intended to form a possessive noun.
    *If the noun was actually intended to be plural, then remove the apostrophe.
C) Is the apostrophe used to form *it's*?
    *If *it is* is the intended meaning of *it's*, then a contraction has been formed. Replace *it's* with *it is*.
    *If the intended meaning is the possessive form of *it*, then replace *it's* with *its*.
    NOTE: The word *its'* does not exist.

Mark any confusing instances and then bring the paper into the Learning Lab to receive help from a tutor.

TIP #2 **SEMI-COLON ISSUES**

On a word processor, use the *Find* function to find all uses of the semi-colon (;). For each instance, check to make sure that there is a complete sentence on each side of the semi-colon. If there is not a complete sentence on each side, then substitute a standard comma for the semi-colon. Mark any confusing instances and bring the paper into the Learning Lab for further explanation.

TIP #3 **COMMA CONCERNS**

Identify the subject in each sentence. If there are words that answer one of the following questions (where, when, how, why, or under what conditions does the main action occur?) before the subject, put a comma between those words and the subject. If unsure about any of the instances, mark them and then bring the paper to the Learning Lab for further assistance.
Example: If you need help, *we* will provide it.

TIP #4 **MORE COMMA CONCERNS**

There is a set of words in the English language known as the conjunctive adverbs, which must always be set off from the rest of the sentence with commas. Common conjunctive adverbs are: *however, therefore, nevertheless, moreover,* etc. If these words appear at the beginning of the sentence, they will always need to be followed by a comma.

TIP #5 **COORDINATING CONJUNCTIONS**

On a word processor, use the *Find* function to find all uses of *and*. If there are complete sentences on each side of the *and*, then place a comma directly before the *and*. If there are not complete sentences on either side of the *and*, then there should NOT be a comma directly before the *and*. Mark any questionable instances and bring the paper to a tutor in the Learning Lab to receive an explanation.

> **NOTE**: This test will work for all the coordinating conjunctions: *and*, *but*, *or*, *nor*, *yet*, *for*, *so*.

TIP #6 **USING *IT* AND *THEY***

On a word processor, use the *Find* function to find all uses of *it*. For every *it*, make sure that the meaning of *it* will be obvious to the reader. If the noun *it* refers to is not obvious, replace *it* with a more specific word.

Repeat this step, searching for *they*. In all instances where the reader will not easily be able to tell who *they* are, replace *they* with a more specific word. If uncertain about whether or not to replace any of these words, mark them and bring the paper into the Learning Lab for help.

TIP #7 **CHOOSING THE RIGHT *THEIR* AND *TO***

On a word processor, use the *Find* function to find all uses of *their*. In each instance, ask the following questions:
  A) To what word does *their* refer? Is that word plural? If not, then change *their* to *his or her*.
  B) Is *their* actually the correct word? Make sure that the desired meaning is not *there* or *they are*. If unsure, mark each instance and go to the dictionary. If still unsure, bring the paper in to the Learning Lab and have one of the tutors explain it.

Then use the *Find* function to find all uses of *to* and *too*. For each instance, ask the following question: Can *also* or *very* be substituted for the *to/too* in question? If so, then the correct word is *too.* If not, then the correct word is probably *to.*

Finally, use the *Find* function to find all uses of *then* and *than*. If the word is being used to indicate a comparison, then the proper word is "than."

Example: This paper is longer *than* that paper.

However, if the word is being used to indicate a cause/effect or temporal relationship, then *then* is the proper word.

Example: If the paper is done, then I will hand it in.

Mark any confusing instances and then go to the Learning Lab for further explanation.

TIP #8 **ELIMINATING *YOU* AND *I***

On a word processor, use the *Find* function to find all uses of *you* and *your*. Most academic essays should be written in third person (he/she/it, they/them), but *you* and *your* are second person pronouns—not to be used in most formal writing. Try replacing each instance with *people*, *readers/the reader*, *humans*, or *humanity*. These replacements will not work in all instances. If at an impasse while trying to find a replacement word, mark the sentence and come to the Learning Lab to ask a tutor for help.

> **NOTE**: Some personal essays and creative writing assignments may need to be written in first person (I/me, we/us). If unsure as to whether or not to use first, second, or third person in a particular essay, ask the instructor.

TIP #9 **USING THE GRAMMAR CHECKER**

Run the spelling and grammar checker on the word processor. Make any of its recommended changes that make sense. Mark those that do not make sense and then bring the paper into the Learning Lab and ask one of the tutors to explain them.

> **NOTE**: The computer is not all-knowing; it may offer advice that is not correct.

TIP #10 **THE MOST EFFECTIVE TIP OF ALL!**

Turn to the last page of the paper. Starting with the last line, read each sentence out loud, working from the last sentence on the last page to the first sentence on the first page. Correct any mistakes, incomplete sentences, or awkward phrases. Mark any areas that are bothersome, even if uncertain as to the reason why. Visit the Writing Lab and ask a tutor to explain these uncertain areas.

A good adaptation of this technique is to have someone else read one copy of the paper while listening and marking corrections and questions on a second copy.