Policy on Proofreading Students’ Written Work

Produced by Educational Development Services and the Centre for the Development of Academic Skills, revised April 2015

Lynne Francis, Dr Mark Crompton, Silke Placzeck and Gerard Clough
This policy document was composed with reference to the following sources:


Clough, G., Centre for the Development of Academic Skills


Shore, H., Disability and Dyslexia Services (ESO)


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Third-party Proofreading Practices and Assessment Offences</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rationale</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Who will need to read this document?</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Definition of key terms</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Policy particulars for all parties involved in and affected by the proofreading of student</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing for assessment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. College Disclaimer</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Introduction

Academic writing is not typically a lone process. When producing a paper for publication, an academic will seek feedback on their writing from colleagues; this feedback informs redrafting of the paper. Through the peer reading and feedback process, the writer will perfect each piece of written work thus developing, over time, polished skills in writing within their discipline.

For students to likewise acquire and master the appropriate writing style for their chosen subject(s), the process of writing, seeking feedback from readers, and redrafting is the same. The main difference between the academic and the student writer is that it takes time and extensive practice to perfect one's written ‘academic voice’ and in this aspect the publishing expert in their field soon becomes well established as a writer. The student, or ‘novice’, on the other hand, has still to develop their own voice in their writing, and their texts are typically subject to assessment, not only for the quality of their content, but also for their effectiveness as a piece of coherent writing.

To practise and master the craft of successful writing in their discipline, it is essential that a student seeks appropriate forms of guidance from relevant Professional Services and resources made available to them, as and when needed. At Royal Holloway the student has a number of possible avenues of support to explore, before any decision to have written work proofread is considered.

2. Third-party Proofreading Practices and Assessment Offences

Proofreading undertaken by a third party not approved by Royal Holloway is not encouraged by the College. However, a wide range of ‘third-party’ practices exist to identify and ‘correct’ errors within students’ texts, referred to variably as ‘proofreading’ or ‘editing’; some of these may lead to the commitment of an academic offence such as collusion or plagiarism. To be clear, ‘an assessment offence is any conduct which attempts to deceive or is in contravention of any rules or regulations governing assessment”. Students found to have committed an assessment offence are likely to incur penalties which may range from having marks deducted from the overall grade for a piece of work to being given 0% for an assessment, possibly leading to failure of the course in the case of a grave assessment offence.

If a piece of work is proofread by a third party (i.e. other than their supervisor/course tutor) so that surface-level errors are limited, it can facilitate the assessment process. However, any alterations in content or meaning made to a student’s text by way of rewriting all or parts of the piece by a third party would be considered by the College as collusion.

3. **Rationale**

The rationale for this policy document is to ensure, as far as is possible, that all parties involved in the writing, reading and provision of feedback on students’ written work for assessment have a shared understanding of what the College considers to be an acceptable level of proofreading. The risk of inadvertently committing an assessment offence, e.g. collusion, is thus likely to be minimised.

It is not intended that the policy should restrict the excellent work of a supervisor in supporting the academic development of their student’s writing; existing supervisory feedback practices may be informed by, but not restricted by, the policy document.

For clarification, the proofreading scheme is only open to third-year undergraduates and postgraduates (taught and research) seeking the services of a third-party proofreader to identify surface-level error in extended written work, i.e. a project, dissertation, or thesis.

4. **Who will need to read this document?**

- Proofreaders
- Students
- All staff involved in teaching and supporting learning at Royal Holloway, including:
  - Teaching staff
  - Research Supervisors
  - Course Leaders
  - Personal Advisors
  - Departmental Support Staff
  - Academic Quality and Policy Office
  - Disability & Dyslexia Services (ESO)
  - Centre for the Development of Academic Skills (CeDAS)
  - Library

5. **Definition of key terms**

In order for a common understanding to be achieved between all parties concerned with the writing and proofreading of student work for assessment, it is important to have a shared set of defined terms. For this reason, the table below is provided to clarify the meanings of terms used within this policy. Please note that the meanings given are not necessarily equivalent to those documented in a standard dictionary.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proofreading</strong></td>
<td>Proofreading is the last step in producing a piece of written work. It involves the identification only of surface-level errors (incl. inconsistencies) in grammar, punctuation, spelling, labelling, formatting and referencing that have been missed by the author. Proofreading, so defined, does not address substantial problems related to structure, argument, use of sources and written expression; these matters should be resolved at an earlier stage of drafting through dialogue with a writing tutor, writing mentor or a relevant member of academic staff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Proofreader</strong></td>
<td>Any person, other than the author of the text or the supervisor/course leader/tutor (i.e. a third party) who carries out proofreading.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Final Draft Stage</strong></td>
<td>This is the point at which a piece of extended writing has been completed and is almost ready for submission. It is only at this point that an approved third-party proofreader may be approached in order to identify surface-level errors that have been missed by the author of the text.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
6. Policy particulars for all parties involved in and affected by the proofreading of student writing for assessment

a) When is the proofreading of a piece of student writing appropriate?

It is not an expectation for students to have their written work proofread by anyone other than themselves or their supervisor/course leader/tutor at any point in their studies. However, there are occasions when third-party proofreading might be appropriate. For example, longer pieces of written work such as a dissertation (especially when publication is a likely outcome) may benefit from the close scrutiny of another pair of eyes and so engaging the services of a proofreader may be an appropriate course of action. Students whose first language is not English may also wish, or be advised to, have extended pieces of writing proofread.

Students wishing to engage the services of a proofreader must first consult with their supervisor/course leader/tutor to verify whether it is acceptable to have a particular piece of their writing for a course proofread and obtain written verification from the member of staff.

b) When is it NOT appropriate for a piece of student writing to be proofread?

Proofreading and third-party proofreader guidance may be appropriate at the final draft stage of the writing process. It is not acceptable to submit a piece of student writing for proofreading to a proofreader at interim stages of completion. A proofreader must gain confirmation from a student that the piece submitted is at final draft stage.

A student’s text must not be submitted for proofreading to a proofreader without confirmation from the course supervisor/leader/tutor that this is an appropriate course of action.

c) Who is responsible for making any alterations to student writing for assessment as a result of the third-party proofreading process?

A piece of writing submitted for assessment by a student should demonstrate their own knowledge and understanding of a topic. Therefore, the responsibility for all decisions regarding alterations to a piece of student writing lies with the student writer. It is vital that a student writer takes time and care when considering the guidance provided by the proofreader, so as to fully understand the comments, which may guide the student’s decisions about how to improve their own writing. Failure to do so may result in an academic offence such as plagiarism or collusion which will be investigated.

---

2 and 3
d) What do we mean by proofreading, and what types of problem should **not** be addressed by proofreaders?

The work of a proofreader may involve the identification of the following type of surface-level writing problems:

- typing, spelling or punctuation errors;
- grammatical slips, e.g. lack of agreement, word class error, comma-splice sentences;
- unnecessary repetition of words or obvious omission of words;
- inaccurate or inconsistent application of referencing conventions;
- unclear or inconsistent signposting/labelling of visual information;
- formatting that does not comply with a prescribed layout style (typography, heading hierarchy, pagination etc.);
- incompleteness of document, i.e. required elements of a document are missing.

**What proofreading is NOT**

For the purposes of this document, proofreading does **not** involve correcting a student’s writing; it is the identification only of errors and inconsistencies through application of the prescribed **Proofreaders’ Error Identification Code**.

Third-party interventions made by a proofreader should **never** alter the academic content of a piece of writing. The proofreader **cannot**:

- change wording and language;
- alter a student’s argument;
- change paragraphing and/or sectioning within the essay;
- correct calculation errors or factual knowledge;
- comment on the content of a piece of work; or
- give structural advice on a piece of work.

Under **no** circumstances should parts of the text affected by the above problems be rewritten by the proofreader as this would be regarded as an academic offence and the student may be penalised as appropriate.

e) What essential arrangements need to be made between student and academic supervisor, and student and proofreader?

If a student believes there is a need for a piece of their writing to be proofread, they should consult their academic supervisor to confirm that this would be a suitable course of action and to obtain written permission. In all cases where a student submits written work to a proofreader, they should include written **acknowledgement of proofreading** in the final version of the extended piece of work on submission for marking.

A student is expected to provide any approved third-party proofreader with a copy of explicit departmental/course assignment guidelines which detail specific writing conventions.

A student **must** ignore any advice provided by a third-party proofreader that goes beyond the limited definition of proofreading provided within this document which could constitute an academic offence.

In the case of any allegation of **plagiarism** or **collusion**, a student will need to provide a copy of their original final draft of their piece of writing before it was proofread, together with written confirmation from their course supervisor/leader/tutor that proofreading was approved as an appropriate course of action.

It is the responsibility of the student to provide the proofreader with a relevant style guide to assist the proofreading process.
Proofreaders will be required to sign a declaration that they have read, understood and will abide by the contents of this policy. They will not be permitted to offer their services to Royal Holloway students unless they do so.

Proofreading can be a lengthy and unpredictable process and can therefore be quite costly and time-consuming making it necessary for consultation between student and proofreader. It is essential that the proofreader does not change the meaning of a student’s text, and that they do not add any further detail; this takes time and due care and attention.

In cases where a proofreader finds that a student text contains multiple instances of severe error types and/or extensive errors with language, the proofreader must explain that such substantial errors cannot be addressed by a proofreader.

Students and proofreaders are advised to take care and be mindful of issues of confidentiality and security of data to ensure that original and proofread versions of a student’s writing are clearly identifiable, and stored safely so as to easily be retrieved in the case of any investigation of a suspected academic offence.

7. College Disclaimer

The rationale for the Royal Holloway policy on proofreading is to promote a shared understanding of what the College regards as acceptable and ethical proofreading practices. All parties (students, proofreaders, academic supervisors/course leaders and tutors) concerned with the authorisation for proofreading, or involved in proofreading of student work, particularly for assessment, have a responsibility to read, understand and abide by the policy.

All parties connected with the proofreading of student work have an ethical responsibility to follow the policy and the practical guidance presented here on how that policy is implemented. The ultimate responsibility for any alterations to a student’s text lies with the student writer themselves. Proofread written work submitted for assessment by a student will be treated as their own work. This only applies to the proofreading scheme approved by the College and use of the service is subject to the approval of academic staff.

Failure on the part of the student to comply with the policy and code of practice provided here is likely to lead to plagiarism or collusion which are serious academic offences which will be investigated. Use of the Royal Holloway proofreading scheme will not be considered as mitigation/extenuating circumstances in the event of an allegation of an assessment offence or in the event of an academic appeal. Use of the proofreading scheme does not guarantee that students will get a better mark.

Royal Holloway is unable to comment on or verify the experience or qualifications of any proofreader. The College will not take responsibility for the quality of work of any particular proofreader. All proofreaders approved by Royal Holloway will be subject to annual review and may be removed from the register of approved proofreaders if found not to be compliant with the proofreading policy and/or the code of practice.