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E-EDITING: TIME SAVING TIPS

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I learned to proof and edit the hard way: read, and read, and read, and then re-read. I spent hours combing over my high school compositions, hoping to find every last error. I don't remember if I was ever successful, but I do remember many late nights!

Then, in college I purchased a computer. It ran slowly and took up most of my desk, but I loved that I could correct errors on the screen instead of retyping a page. Its word processing program supposedly edited my essays for me, but I simply didn't trust it.

Truth is, I still don't trust computer programs to ensure that I have error free documents. I do, however, trust them enough to use them to my advantage. I have, over time, created a series of steps I use to help me proof and edit my work. Use this simple editing checklist with your word processing program to save time and move one step closer to error-free documents.

Citation format

I don't know a single attorney who loves to check every citation in a document to ensure each is in the correct format. Still, we all realize that having correct citations helps give our writing and arguments credibility, so we spend time looking through our work to find any citation format errors.



Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff

To help save time, use the "find" function on your word processor to quickly find all of the citations in your document. Chances are, you have a good idea of the c3"P.3d," or "F.2d." You can also search for "id." and "Id." to find short citations.

The same principle works for statutes and regulations. You can search for "I.C." or "U.S.C.A." to quickly locate these types of citations.

Once you have a citation highlighted on your screen, you can quickly check your citation manual to ensure that the



format is fine, and then easily move to the next citation without having to skim all of the material in between them.

Spelling errors

We all think faster than we type, and this leads to spelling errors in our drafts. Two of the most common spelling errors in legal documents are transposing letters in abbreviations or names, or missing a critical letter in a word. As a result, I find myself editing documents in which I refer to the same party as both "ABC" and "BAC" or I discuss the *statues* that govern.

When I'm using an abbreviation throughout my document, I make the "find and replace" function one of my first editing stops. If I'm using "ABC," I ask my computer to replace "BAC," "BCA," "CBA," "CAB," and "ACB" with "ABC." I find this helpful because my Word program corrects all the abbreviation mistakes, but I frequently miss these transposition errors when I proofread.

Additionally, as I draft I make note of any names—either of a party or a case—I struggle to type correctly. I then use "find and replace" to quickly fix any errors. (As an added bonus, this saves me time in the drafting stage because I don't worry about correcting these typos as I'm putting my thoughts down.)

I also know to search for commonly mistyped words. You know—the ones that are particularly hard to spot when you know what you mean to say: "trail" instead of "trial," "statue" instead of "statute," and my most feared "pubic" instead of "public." I keep a list of my common typos and always run a quick find and replace for each as I proof and edit my documents.

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In the same vein, run a quick spell-check on your document. It won't pick up every error—and it won't find the words in the previous paragraph—but it will help you find the one-time errors you've made. Every time you see a red squiggly line under a word you can easily replace it and save yourself at least one read-through for proofing.

Using these three quick tricks helps cut down my proofing time, and assures me I won't ever discuss "pubic policy" in a brief!

Ambiguous pronouns

I know simply reading the words "ambiguous pronouns" makes some people cringe. But some readers expect you to know how to use pronouns correctly, so it's worth a few minutes of your time to make sure all your pronouns match their antecedents.

Quick grammar lesson: an antecedent is a noun, and the pronoun replaces it. (In

the last sentence, for example, “antecedent” is the antecedent and “it” is the pronoun.) Pronouns must match their antecedents in gender and number.

Many writers particularly struggle when using a pronoun to refer to a group of people, a business or appellate court. The correct pronoun for a single entity like Idaho Power or the Ninth Circuit is “it.” So, search for “they,” “their,” and “them” and check the antecedent.

“This” can also create ambiguity problems. It can refer to the previous noun, sentence, paragraph, or idea. For instance, “This comports with the Court’s reasoning.” Does this refer to the argument you made in the previous paragraph or a line of cases you discussed earlier in the section? To make sure your reader understands the antecedent for “this” you need to add a noun. “This *argument* comports with the Court’s reasoning” ensures that your reader knows what you mean. Use your computer to find every “this” in your document and then check to see if you should add a noun for clarity.

Wordy phrases

As much as I try to eliminate wordy phrases from my drafts, they still sneak into my writing. So, I keep a list of my

Use your computer to find every “this” in your document and then check to see if you should add a noun for clarity.

“favorites” handy and search my document for those phrases. For instance, I love to type “The fact that” as I’m getting my thoughts onto paper. I don’t, however, want that wordy phrase to show up in my final version! Because my computer can locate my cluttered phrases, I can use my energy to fix them rather than searching for them.

(For tips on removing wordy phrases, see my essay “Cutting the Clutter: Three Steps to More Concise Legal Writing” in the January 2011 edition of *The Advocate*.)

Conclusion

While these tips won’t make your editing pain free, they will help you avoid at

least one round of reading. That, hopefully, is enough to prevent a few late nights!

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff is a member of Smith, Fordyce-Ruff & Penny, PLLC. She clerked for Justice Roger Burdick of the Idaho Supreme Court and taught Legal Research and Writing, Advanced Legal Research, and Intensive Legal Writing at the University of Oregon School of Law. She is also the author of Idaho Legal Research, a book designed to help law students, new attorneys, and paralegals navigate the intricacies of researching Idaho law. You can reach her at tfordyce-ruff@sfrplaw.com.

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