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Time Savings: E-editing Tricks and Tips

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff
Concordia University School of Law, tfordyce@cu-portland.edu

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Tomorrow I'll teach this batch of 1L's their final proofing and editing class of the year. (I'm writing this in April, admiring the lovely blossoming trees around Boise.)

This final editing class fills me with excitement and it gave me the idea for this month's column. My students have tired of paper editing tricks like reading backwards (so you can concentrate on the words instead of the flow) or out loud. This time, I'm going to work with them on e-editing.

I thought many of *The Advocate's* readers might also enjoy these tips. So here goes. This month, we will cover ways to prevent mistakes, ways to fix mistakes, and why e-edit isn't a cure-all.

Fix citation mistakes before they happen

Yes, this is possible. Word-processing programs come with default settings that create chaotic legal citations.[1] But you can set your word processing program to avoid pesky citation errors.

First, change the default setting to eliminate the single or double space after a period. This will prevent citing to *P. 2d* instead of *P.2d* or *U. S.* instead of *U.S.* While this may seem like a simple trick, it saves space as well as time.

Next, get rid of the auto-formatting that puts ordinals in superscript. You may remember from pre-Algebra that an ordinal number denotes a series: first, second, third. Reporter abbreviations are done in "legal ordinals" like 2d and 3d, and word processing programs don't recognize these as ordinals. Circuit abbreviations, however, can create problems. Instead of having to fix every citation to the 9th Circuit, you can simply type *9th* correctly.

Finally, turn off auto-replacement for symbols. This will save you from citing to subsection © or ® of a statute.

Taking the time now to change a few settings can save you time and effort when cite checking every document.

Finding errors: Grammar and spell check

How many times have you seen those pesky squiggly lines under words as you are typing, but just ignored them? Time to stop. Those lines indicate that your word processing program has picked up on a spelling or grammar error. Running each and every document through both spell and grammar check can help you find and correct errors.[2]

To make this process even more efficient, take some time to add common legal words to your dictionary. This will prevent your computer from identifying common legal words, like *tortious*, as errors.

Adding clients' names to the dictionary can also help you avoid the embarrassment of misspelling their names. For instance, if your client is named *Kukuchka*, your spell check will flag it every time. If you put the correct spelling in the dictionary, it will flag only the misspellings: *Kukuckha*.

Spell-Czech: Some notes of caution

Of *coarse*, spell check can't replace an old-fashioned proof read. Spell check won't identify words that are spelled correctly, but used incorrectly. (Like my use of *coarse* two sentences ago.)

Remember back to your elementary school days when you learned about homophones? Words that sound the same but are spelled differently? Well, when we are working away furiously, we sometimes use a homophone for the word we *here* in our heads.

Taxi drivers charge a different *fair* depending on whether it is *peek* season.

It's more likely the writer meant

Taxi drivers charge a different *fare* depending on whether it is *peak* season.

Here is a list of common homophones.

aisle—isle
brake—break
cell—sell
cent—scent
cereal—serial
coarse—course
for—four
hair—hare
heal—heel
hole—whole
idle—idol
know—no
made—maid
meat—meet
pair—pear
peace—piece
plain—plane
real—reel
sight—site
seam—seem
stair—stare
steal—steel
tail—tale
waist—waste
weak—week[3]

Of course, my favorite set of homophones involves a grammar nerd joke!

How do you comfort a grammar nerd?

By saying *there*, *their*, *they're*!

Spell check won't pick up on the use of a homophone instead of the word you intended, but my next tip can help you find and fix them quickly.

Finding errors: The find function

You can use the find function[4] to help you edit and proof read. Picture this: It's late, you're tired, and you're proofing a wonderful work of advocacy. The titillating topic? The legislative history of a statue.

Did you catch the error? That's right. It should be *statute* not *statue*. Here are a few other common mistakes that spell check *wont* catch.

anew instead of a new
defiant instead of definite
desperate instead of disparate
fro instead of for
pubic instead of public
tot he instead of to the
tortuous instead of tortious
wonton instead of wanton
wont instead of won't

Keep a list of your common mistakes handy, and pretty soon this editing step will be second nature.

Conclusion

No single editing method is foolproof. But using these tips should make your job of editing go more quickly.

I'm off to enjoy a lovely April afternoon by working on my lesson plans at the park. Maybe using these tricks will give you enough extra time to enjoy a lovely June day!

Sources

• Darby Dickerson, *ALWD Citation Manual: A Professional System of Citation*, 9-13 (4th ed., Wolters Kluwer 2010).

• Megan McAlpin, *Beyond the First Draft: Editing Strategies for Powerful Legal Writing*, 118-119 (Carolina Academic Press 2014).

• Suzanne E. Rowe, *Spell Czech: Amazing Mistakes Your Computer Won't Catch*, available at:

https://www.osbar.org/publications/bulletin/11nov/legalwriter.html.

• Suzanne E. Rowe, *Perfect Proofing: 10 Steps Towards Error-free Documents*, available at: https://www.osbar.org/publications/bulletin/06dec/writer.html.

Endnotes

1. For specific directions on how to change these settings, see Darby Dickerson, *ALWD Citation Manual: A Professional System of Citation*, 9-13 (4th ed., Wolters Kluwer 2010).

No single editing method is foolproof. But using these tips should make your job of editing go more quickly.

2. Grammar check can be very helpful for identifying minor points like subject-verb agreement errors. Be cautious, though. Grammar check isn't perfect and will often identify perfectly good sentences as needing revision. Instead of blindly accepting every suggested change, use grammar check as a way to identify sentences you might want to revise after considering the grammar rules.

3. Megan McAlpin, *Beyond the First Draft: Editing Strategies for Powerful Legal Writing*, 118 (Carolina Academic Press 2014). This book contains many wonderful editing tips, including a much more inclusive list of homophones.

4. You can simply hit "Ctrl+F" or "Apple+F" to quickly access the find feature in Word.

About the Author

Tenielle Fordyce-Ruff *is an Assistant Professor of Law and the Director of the Legal Research and Writing Program at Concordia University School of Law in Boise. She is also Of Counsel at Rainey Law Office, a boutique firm focusing on civil appeals. You can reach her at tfordyce@cu-portland.edu or tfr@raineylawoffice.com.*