Tips for Writers

Increase Your Editing Accuracy

We've all been shocked to discover that something we've written has a typo, and we wonder how we missed it. That email must have been read at least five times before it was sent! Yet there it is: a misspelling we don't see until *after* the email is sent.

Most of us are familiar with memes like "Cna yuo raed this?" and don't struggle with reading the words. Neuroscientists think is because our brains use context to correspond to what we expect to see.

A similar process is at work when you try to edit your own writing. When you're familiar with what a document should say, your brain simply fills in the expected words. This wonderful adaptability allows us to read quickly, but it's not so great when we're trying to catch small errors. The following suggestions can help.

#1 Step Away

The enemy of editing accurately is familiarity. One way to overcome this is to set your document aside (no peeking!) and give yourself time away from it. You can take a walk, exercise, or simply do something else for a day or so. When you return to the work, your mind will be fresher.

BONUS Tip: Go through your document more than one time, looking for specific things on each pass. You may catch a continuity error on one pass and awkward wording or a missing citation on another. Taking time to do these passes separately will help improve your focus and your accuracy.

#2 Use Speak
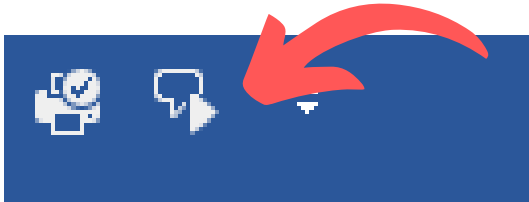
Word's Speak icon

Listening and reading are different activities, and hearing text read aloud will make you sensitive to what you might not otherwise see: the missing words, sentences that lack flow, and the overall pace of your writing. While you can certainly just read your text out loud yourself or use a third-party program to do it for you, Word comes with a read-aloud feature called Speak. You can add the Speak button to the Quick Access Toolbar by putting your cursor over the bar and right-clicking to customize the toolbar and add the Speak button. Once you're ready for the read-aloud, highlight your text and click the Speak button. You can adjust the speed and choose the voice in the settings for Speak.

#3 Change the Page Color

Sometimes all that's needed to make a document seem different to the brain is to change something about its appearance, such as using a different page color. You can temporarily change the background of a Word document as you are working on it. The menu you need is usually found on the Design tab, under Page Color, but you can also use the "Tell me what you want to do" bar on the Word ribbon, accessed by alt-Q. Type "change page color."

This will bring up the Theme Colors menu for you to select a color. You'll want to choose one of the lighter colors. I often use a light yellow or light blue with black type. When you're ready to send your document to someone else, simply change the page color to "none."
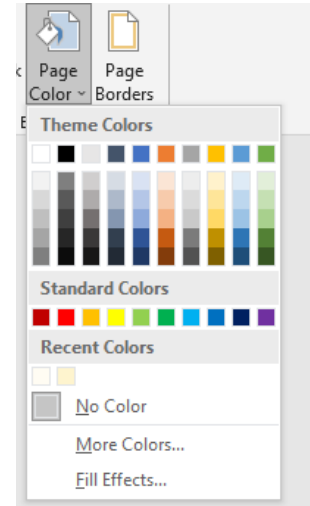
The Page Color menu

#4 Print It

Scientists have been studying the difference between paper and screen since the 1980s, when it became apparent that the world was going to move to digital type. There has been some science to back up the fact that print is visually less demanding than digital text. Other studies seem to imply that because humans casually surf the internet, our minds may be trained to view on-screen text casually as well, so we overlook a lot.

Printing out your document, or sections of it, can help refocus your attention so you'll catch more errors. There also is a different sensory experience reading on paper, and these tactile experiences may influence how alert you are, which in turn affects what you notice.

If you don't have a printer, you can also simply change location. You can work outside if the weather is nice, in a different part of the office or house, or at a café or library to provide a change in scene that will help reset your attention.

#5 Use Spell Check

This tip seems obvious, but people don't always use spell check. Word's spell check is far from perfect, and its ability to make incorrect grammar suggestions is legendary. But it still offers a way to check things you may have missed.

Most people are familiar with the spell check button, but Word also has options for checking grammar rules under File-›Options-›Proofing-›Grammar & Refinements. You can choose from a variety of settings for when you run spell check. This menu is also where you can add custom dictionaries, an especially useful tool if your document has a lot of technical terms or unusual names.
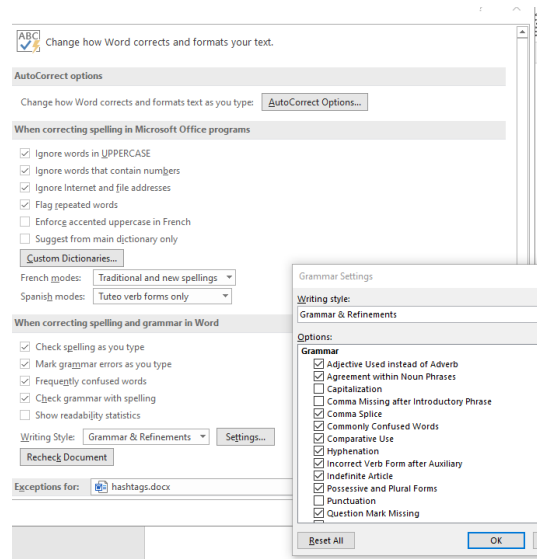
The Grammar & Refinements options

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Michelle is a writing coach, developmental editor, and copyeditor who works with independent authors and publishers. She has been helping authors for over 15 years and is committed to the profession of editing and encouraging writers to unlock their unique voice and the power of their writing. In addition to being part of national editing associations, she has a BA in journalism from Temple University.

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Questions? Just ask. I'm happy to help.