

Think Proofreading Isn't Important? Think Again...

By Greg Walker

Proofreading. The word alone is enough to bore the socks off most writers. After going through the whole creative process and editing your work down to a work of art bordering on the sublime, you're presented with the wearisome process of taking a magnifying glass to your sentences and going on a hunt for misplaced commas.

And yet... misplaced commas can be very costly indeed. About as costly as futile full stops, pointless paragraph breaks, and using grandiose-sounding words in completely the wrong places (which can be spectacularly embarrassing-I speak from experience).

They are costly because mistakes get noticed, especially by eagle-eyed clients who are only too happy to point out each tiny error you make (you know the sort). That might lead to nothing more than a bruised ego but, egos aside, the cumulative effect of too many trivial errors can be devastating.

No matter how small the mistake, if the client decides that they would not have made the same error then they inevitably begin to question why they are paying someone to write for them in the first place.

But if you had any doubt about the seriousness of proofreading, here are some of my all-time favorite mistakes where even the most basic of final checks would have been enough to prevent monumental embarrassment.

1. It's Welsh, But It A'int Right

We'll start with the best of the lot. This mistake occurred in Wales a few years ago, where road signs are written in both English and Welsh, meaning translations are a frequent requirement.

After writing out the content of one particular sign, an anonymous official then sent it off to be translated. The email was returned soon after containing a sentence in Welsh. Job done.

It was only when the sign was put up in full public view that the full extent of the mistake became apparent.

The sign was split into two halves. The top half read: 'No entry for heavy goods vehicles. Residential site only'. And below it, the Welsh translation.

It looked all well and good... unless you could read Welsh. For although the translation was certainly Welsh, it was not exactly a faithful translation of the English above it.

Instead, it read: "Am not in the office at the moment. Send any work to be translated."

It has since become the most famous auto-reply in the world. Or in Wales, at least.

2. Bad Advice from the King James Bible

The Bible. A source of inspiration and guidance to millions of people across the world. So here more than in any other book you'd think that careful proofreading was essential.

Unfortunately, the 1631 version of The King James Bible ended up providing some particularly bad advice to the faithful.

Most of it was fine, but if you happened to read Exodus 20:14, that being the Seventh Commandment, you may have found the advice slightly conflicting with what you had been taught in church:

"Thou shalt commit adultery."

The printers received a fine of £300 for their error, and the version, which became known as the 'Sinners Bible', was soon withdrawn. 11 copies apparently still exist after nearly 400 years to remind us all of the potential perils of proofreading failure.

3. Red Faces on the Blue Side of Manchester

I've got a friend who supports Manchester City, now one of the biggest soccer teams in England. They have a fierce rivalry with Manchester United, who have seen far more success over recent years. So when Manchester City made it to the FA Cup Final in 2011, it was their moment to shine.

However, the event very nearly proved disastrous when some anonymous worker in the flag factory made a very bad mistake indeed.

It is customary on such occasions for the Football Association to print out tens of thousands of flags to give away to supporters on the big day. But just days before the event, the flags were delivered only to reveal that they all bore the name 'Manchester United' after someone made a colossal error.

Luckily they got changed in time, but heads had to roll over that blunder.

4. 'Embarrassing' Parker Pens Mistake

Translation mistakes make for some of the funniest proofreading blunders, and sometimes you really do have to wonder how such obvious mistakes were never caught out.

Parker Pens is one of those firms which is clearly not paying its proof-readers enough money, as was revealed so spectacularly when it decided to boldly enter the Mexican market.

The mistake arose due to one of the most notorious 'false friends' in English and Spanish translation. False friends are words which sound the same but mean very different things. The verb 'to embarrass' sounds a lot like 'embarazar'... but 'embarazar' means 'to become pregnant'.

So the company certainly made an impression, but perhaps for all the wrong reasons, when it made the surprising declaration that its pens 'won't leak in your pocket and make you pregnant'.

Anyone who knows Spanish would have easily spotted the error, so it's a wonder that this one managed to get through the net. Or maybe it was all just some elaborate marketing ploy to make headlines?

Always Proofread

No one is fool proof. Writers will always make mistakes, and even careful proofreading is sometimes not enough to prevent errors from getting through. In fact, I'm almost certain someone will pick up on at least one mistake I've made in this article, even though I've proofed it twice.

Some writers hire professional proof-readers to check over their work before handing it in. Personally, I don't do this. But I have built up my own little system to help me catch the real humdingers.

This involves writing and editing as early as possible, and then I put the work aside for a few days before proofreading it just before handing it in. I also have a list of the most common mistakes I make ('their' and 'there' seem to get mixed up on an embarrassingly frequent basis), and I do a quick check for these mistakes on every piece of work I deliver.

This catches most of the mistakes I make, and I'm certain that a few of my clients would not still be

clients if I had regularly missed these errors.

So always proofread. It's not fun, and there's no way to make it something that you look forward to doing. But it can prevent you making minor or major mistakes that can not only prove to be very embarrassing, but can also cost you freelance writing work.

Proofreading effectively is just one way to improve your writing and enjoy more success as a freelancer. For more information and tips on taking your writing even further and winning better clients, head to <http://prowebwriting.com> where Greg Walker has written a free ebook which you might find rather interesting.

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