

Goof Proofing Your Writing: A Guide to Proofreading Marks

I recently spent about four hours proofreading and editing a document that I passed along to a generous soul who offered to type the final draft for me. When I got the new and supposedly improved printed copy, I was horrified to discover that all the mistakes I *thought* I'd pretty clearly marked were still there along with some hieroglyphics! What had happened? Had the earlier version been printed by mistake? Had I simply imagined indicating the necessary changes? Had my typist become a graphic artist or simply lost her mind?

When I asked her about the unaltered yet strangely illustrated text, I found out I might just as well have been making the changes in a foreign language. In fact, some of the proofreading symbols looked so much like Arabic that they were perceived as such. She had no idea how to "read" the carets (those ^ things), transposition marks (the horizontal S's), or the indicator for starting a new paragraph (¶).



Granted, there are people who work as professional proofreaders and editors, and it's a given that they would know how to use and decipher proofreading marks. But why should they have all the fun? After all, the whole point of developing this coding system is to save time and produce error-free copy.

Whether you are reading someone else's writing or your own for the purpose of eliminating mistakes, you will benefit from recognizing and learning to use proofreading marks. These universally accepted symbols serve two purposes. First, they alert the writer to the location of a mistake (**where** a problem occurs). Also, they indicate the nature of the mistake (**what** the problem is) and how to correct it. These marks comprise a shorthand language that both saves time and helps a writer produce an accurately written final draft.

What follows is a list of some of the most frequently needed proofreading marks you should know. Print it, and keep it handy. Keep it on your desk by your computer. Keep one on your bulletin board or wall. Keep one in your wallet or purse. You just never know when someone will thrust a piece of writing at you and ask, "Can you proof this for me?" Practice making these marks, and yes, you make them by hand. Do *not* under any circumstances waste time trying to find these marks under the "Insert" dropdown menu on your tool bar! You won't find them.

Keep in mind that these marks are generally used to indicate omissions of letters, words, punctuation marks, and spaces. They are also used to show where the same items should be deleted, transposed, or moved to. Proofreading focuses on grammatical, mechanical, organizational, and typographical accuracy more than on content correctness, yet proofreaders are certainly within their authority to question ideas and statements in a text they are asked to read. This job, however, is usually in the hands of an editor.

This list is not all inclusive, but it provides the marks that are most often needed for work-related writing.

Usually proofreaders use carets (^ or > or ^), deletion marks (/ or 8 or 7), underlines for letters and words that need to be capitalized or italicized, and the new paragraph symbol (¶) right on the lines of text. Think of these as directional signals that only indicate where a change needs to be made.

What needs to be changed is then indicated in the margins. For example, if the text shows a proofreader's circle around the abbreviation *it's* where it should be spelled out as *it is*, the abbreviation



should be written in the margin.

Remember all those weird red marks your English teachers put all over your writing when you were in school? Mystery solved! This is what those things were all about. Now you know, so here's your chance to proof like a pro.

ACTION	SYMBOL	EXAMPLE
Delete something	/ or 8 or 7	like it out
Delete and close up space	Ⓟ	close up
Close up space	○	print as <u>o</u> no word
Insert something	^ or > or ^	insert here (something)
Insert a space	#	put <u>o</u> here
Space evenly	eg #	space evenly ^ where indicated
Keep what was original	stet	let marked text stand as set
Transpose letters or words	tr	change / order the
Begin a new paragraph	¶	
Spell out abbreviation	Ⓟ	set <u>5 lbs.</u> as five pounds
Use capital letters	cap =	set <u>nato</u> as NATO
Use small capital letters	sm cap or s.c. =	set <u>signal</u> as SIGNAL
Use lowercase letters	lc	set <u>Smith</u> as smith
Use italics	ital	set <u>oeuvre</u> as oeuvre
Use roman	rom	set <u>mensch</u> as mensch
Use boldface type	bf	set <u>important</u> as important
Add superscript	∨	∨ as in x ²
Add subscript	^	^ as in H ₂ O
Add a comma	↵	stop ↵ and then move on.

Add apostrophe	↓	↓ re going with us.
Add period	⊙	to listen ⊙ Next you will
Add quotation marks	“ ” or ‘ ’	“ Hey, watch out! ”
Add parentheses	(/)	
Question to writer	OK/?	

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