Bulletproof: How to Armor-Plate Your Work

Proof *n*. Trial printed material that is made to be checked and corrected.
Proof *adj*. Fully or successfully resistant; impervious, as in a bulletproof vest.

In culinary arts, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. In language arts, the proof of the writing is in the reading (excuse the word play and bad metaphor).

Error-free word work is hard to achieve, but readers expect and deserve it. Moreover, errors detract from the reputation of writers and the presses that host them. It is the editor's duty to look after all three—reader, writer, and company.

Here are some tools I use that help me "bulletproof" my work, plus some observations from one editor's foxhole.

Fact-Checking

The quality of documents rests on the twin pillars of precise language and accurate information. Therefore, proper quality control demands both language-checking and fact-checking.

A plug: *The Fact Checker's Bible* (Sarah Harrison Smith, Anchor Books, 2004) belongs on every editor's shelf. The author heads the fact-checking department of the *New York Times Magazine*.

TFCB is packed with useful techniques for fact-checking, information on authoritative sources, and examples of the travail that can attend its proper execution. The author recites embarrassing instances of fact-checking left undone or gone awry and the consequences thereof. The author offers this terse counsel: "If each reader begins to trust the publication a little less with every error, the eventual cost will be its reputation."

The Web site of the American Press Institute with its "Journalist's Toolbox" link is a fine online springboard for fact-checking: *www.americanpressinstitute.org/content/3899.cfm*.

Proofreading—Hard Copy

I advocate proofreading every job both on paper and electronically.

Although I'd like to offer several pointers regarding hard-copy proofreading, space limits me to the one that I deem most important: Get a drafting table or editor's desk with a capacious tilting surface on which you can survey many pages of your work at once. The broad view will permit your eye to see errors, textual relationships, and formatting discontinuities that might otherwise escape it.

Proofreading—On-Screen

In proofreading, your mind is not your friend. The following technique will force your eye to see what is *really* there, rather than what your mind "wants" it to see. It presumes the use of a color monitor and Microsoft Word software.

Caution: *Do not try this with your original; save it elsewhere.*

1. Convert each single space to five spaces; this moves words so far apart that it forces your eye to halt on each word (try it, it works).
2. Convert the page from white background to blue (select Tools; Options; General; Blue background, white text).
3. Change the text color to a pleasing but vivid shade (I like bright green).
4. Change the font. If you have been looking at a serif font, convert it to sans-serif (I like Verdana); if a sans-serif font, convert it to serif (I like Georgia).
5. Establish 2-inch margins to "columnize" the text.
6. Zoom the text to 150%.

Where Errors Lurk

The New York Public Library Writer's Guide to Style and Usage (p 761) enumerates "types of copy that are often fraught with proofreading perils":

- Heads and subheads.
- Typeface changes within a document.
- Front matter (often written last and therefore rushed).
- Strings of small words: "If it is in the best . . .".
- Proper names.
- Numbers (transposed digits are common).
- Copy wherein words might be repeated at the end of one line and the beginning of the next.

. . . to which I would add a few demon's lairs of my own:

- The final page proofs of a long document that has had many contributors.
- Any document finished late on a Friday or before a holiday.
- Any document into which Web material has been pasted.
- Any document to which material has been added (or from which, deleted) late in production—headings and display material can jump to other pages, resulting in an incorrect table of contents or list of figures or tables.

Conclusion: The Most Important Advice of All

When you think your work is bulletproof, always subject it to a final scrutiny with a "fresh pair of eyes". (We don't see things as they are; we see things as *we* are.)

Chuckle of the Month

From the cover letter of an applicant for an editorial job: "Strict attention to detail is a must in all apsects of my work."