**Replace "to be" verbs (is, was, were, etc.) with strong active verbs.** Often this entails making your statement in active rather than passive voice.

**Original sentence** in passive voice: The ball was kicked by Bill.

**Revised sentence** in active voice: Bill kicked the ball.

This example is easy because the stronger verb is fairly obvious. In other situations, words ending with -tion are often verbs waiting to happen. For example, we can transform "frustration" into "frustrates," and "allocation" into "allocates."

Also, collapsing compound verbs into a single verb ("are able to" into "can") rids your sentences of both dull verbs and a lot of clutter. For example, we can rewrite "I am hopeful that he will recover" as "I hope he recovers."

**Eliminate strings of prepositions** (often a symptom of passive voice).

**Original sentence**: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is dominated by a sense of the main character's brooding over the nature of man in society. Notice all the prepositional phrases: by a sense, of the main, over the nature, of man, in society. We may not be able to eliminate them all, but we can tackle a few.

**Revised sentence**: In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the main character constantly broods over man's place in society.

**Be concise.** Eliminate clutter, which often appears in the form of prepositional phrases, but also watch out for the senseless and the redundant moments. Notice how, in the example above, "by a sense" adds nothing to the meaning of the sentence. Beware of pairs of words which create a nice rhythm to your prose but say the same thing: "With careless nonchalance, she threw the bag over her shoulder." Clearly, either "carelessly" or "nonchalantly" will serve our purposes, but we don't need both. Also, expletives (there are, it is) often launch weak sentences: "There are many people who find success intimidating." We have a couple options with this sentence: "Success intimidates many people" or "Many people fear success."

**Vary the structure and length of your sentences.** Your prose becomes choppy (and dull) when every sentence begins with the main subject followed by a verb, and when sentences are of uniform length:

**Original sentence**: "I stopped exercising. I gained 50 pounds."

We could improve these sentences by combining them:

**Revised sentence**: "After I stopped exercising, I gained 50 pounds."

**Use transitional words and phrases to show relationships between sentences.** Notice how, without any transitional words, we cannot be sure what the relationship is between "I stopped exercising" and "I gained 50 pounds." Did the speaker stop exercising because he had gained fifty pounds? Or did he gain fifty pounds because he stopped exercising? Did exercise or the lack thereof have anything to do with the speaker's weight gain? A revision should clarify this relationship.

**Get some distance from the text!** It’s hard to edit or proofread a paper that you’ve just finished writing—it’s still to familiar, and you tend to skip over a lot of errors. Put the paper aside for a few hours, days, or weeks. Go for a run. Take a trip to the beach. Clear your head of what you’ve written so you can take a fresh look at the paper and see what is really on the page. Better yet, give the paper to a friend—you can’t get much more distance than that. Someone who is reading the paper for the first time, comes to it with completely fresh eyes.

**Decide what medium lets you proofread most carefully.** Some people like to work right at the computer, while others like to sit back with a printed copy that they can mark up as they read.

**Try changing the look of your document.** Altering the size, spacing, color, or style of the text may trick your brain into thinking it’s seeing an unfamiliar document, and that can help you get a different perspective on what you’ve written.

**Find a quiet place to work.** Don’t try to do your proofreading in front of the TV or while you’re chugging away on the treadmill. Find a place where you can concentrate and avoid distractions.

**If possible, do your editing and proofreading in several short blocks of time.** Your concentration may start to wane if you try to proofread the entire text at one time.

**If you’re short on time, you may wish to prioritize.** Make sure that you complete the most important editing and proofreading tasks.

**Don’t rely entirely on spelling checkers.** These can be useful tools but they are far from foolproof. Spell checkers have a limited dictionary, so some words that show up as misspelled may really just not be in their memory. In addition, spell checkers will not catch misspellings that form another valid word. For example, if you type “your” instead of “you’re,” “to” instead of “too,” or “there” instead of “their,” the spell checker won’t catch the error.

**Grammar checkers can be even more problematic.** These programs work with a limited number of rules, so they can’t identify every error and often make mistakes. They also fail to give thorough explanations to help you understand why a sentence should be revised. You may want to use a grammar checker to help you identify potential run-on sentences or too-frequent use of the passive voice, but you need to be able to evaluate the feedback it provides.

**Proofread for only one kind of error at a time.** If you try to identify and revise too many things at once, you risk losing focus, and your proofreading will be less effective. It’s easier to catch grammar errors if you aren’t checking punctuation and spelling at the same time. In addition, some of the techniques that work well for spotting one kind of mistake won’t catch others.

**Read slow, and read every word.** Try [reading out loud](http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/reading-aloud/), which forces you to say each word and also lets you hear how the words sound together. When you read silently or too quickly, you may skip over errors or make unconscious corrections.

**Separate the text into individual sentences.** This is another technique to help you to read every sentence carefully. Simply press the return key after every period so that every line begins a new sentence. Then read each sentence separately, looking for grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors. If you’re working with a printed copy, try using an opaque object like a ruler or a piece of paper to isolate the line you’re working on.

**Circle every punctuation mark.** This forces you to look at each one. As you circle, ask yourself if the punctuation is correct.

**Read the paper backwards.** This technique is helpful for checking spelling. Start with the last word on the last page and work your way back to the beginning, reading each word separately. Because content, punctuation, and grammar won’t make any sense, your focus will be entirely on the spelling of each word. You can also read backwards sentence by sentence to check grammar; this will help you avoid becoming distracted by content issues.

**Proofreading is a learning process.** You’re not just looking for errors that you recognize; you’re also learning to recognize and correct new errors. This is where handbooks and dictionaries come in. Keep the ones you find helpful close at hand as you proofread.

**Ignorance may be bliss, but it won’t make you a better proofreader.** You’ll often find things that don’t seem quite right to you, but you may not be quite sure what’s wrong either. A word looks like it might be misspelled, but the spell checker didn’t catch it. You think you need a comma between two words, but you’re not sure why. Should you use “that” instead of “which”? If you’re not sure about something, look it up.

**The proofreading process becomes more efficient as you develop and practice a systematic strategy.** You’ll learn to identify the specific areas of your own writing that need careful attention, and knowing that you have a sound method for finding errors will help you to focus more on developing your ideas while you are drafting the paper.