PROOFREADING 101

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LESSON FOUR

Spelling

The American-English language changes over time, as do other languages. Spoken and written words evolve as cultures change, new ideas and inventions are born, and generations make their mark. This can be confusing as vocabulary and spelling change to keep up with the culture.

So what makes a word, in fact, a word? Does the spoken sound make it a word? Is it considered a word when it makes its way into one of the many dictionaries? Or is it a word only when *Merriam-Webster* says it's a word?

Consider this intriguing quote:

> Many cultures believed the letters of their alphabets were far more than just symbols for communication, recording transactions, or recalling history. They believed letters were powerful magical symbols that could be used to cast spells and predict the future. The Norse runes and the Hebrew alphabet are simple letters for spelling words, but also deep symbols of cosmic significance. This magical sense is preserved in our word *spelling*. When you "spell" a word correctly, you are in effect casting a spell, charging these abstract, arbitrary symbols with meaning and power.
> —from *The Writer's Journey* by Christopher Vogler

Perhaps there is a bit of magic in our words, whether they take people to other worlds or encourage them to live boldly. Writing is powerful. And the etymology of the word *spelling* is certainly interesting. Read what *Merriam-Webster* says about it.

What do you think qualifies as a word? *Irregardless* is in *Merriam-Webster*. Does that make it a word? Please say no. The definition of the word is "regardless," and it includes the word *nonstandard* with it. What does that mean? That means it's not a *proper* word. So the answer is no.

Merriam-Webster defines a word as "something that is said." Per that definition, anything could be a word. So does *MW* think *irregardless* is a word? Yes. However, they say, "It is in fact a real word (but that doesn't mean you should use it)." What's an editor to do?

The debate continues, but the best answer would be to consider proper usage. The dictionary lists words in our language to clarify their meanings. That is the purpose of any dictionary. If you want to know how a word gets into *MW*, you can read all about it. There are also lots of interesting tidbits in their Frequently Asked Questions and Word of the Day. Want to dig deeper? Try their quizzes.

Since this course is based on *The Chicago Manual of Style* and *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* for book editing and proofreading, we will continue with the understanding that our words must adhere to proper usage to be considered words in print. It should also be noted that *MW* often lists more than one spelling for a word. In that case, the first word is considered the preferred spelling, and all others are variants. For proper usage, stick to the preferred spelling.

Commonly Misspelled Words

Sometimes we hear words said incorrectly or see them spelled incorrectly so often that we forget what is correct. So we are going to do something a little different to start this final lesson—a quiz. Let's see what you *think* you already know. You may be surprised.

Only one word is correct in the following sets. Without using a dictionary or spell-check, which word do you think is correct? Although you won't be turning this in, keep track on a piece of paper so you remember your choice before you see the answers.

1. all right / allright / alright
2. by product / byproduct / by-product
3. co worker / coworker / co-worker
4. Email / E-mail / email / e-mail
5. espresso / expresso
6. good by / good bye / goodby / goodbye / good-by / good-bye
7. hairbrained / harebrained
8. ice tea / iced tea
9. Internet / internet
10. mind set / mindset / mind-set
11. okay / OK / ok / Ok
12. old-fashion / old-fashioned
13. on line / online / on-line
14. toward / towards
15. Web site / Website / website / web-site / Web-site / websight / Websight
16. y'all / ya'll / yawl

If you edit files on the computer, you definitely want to use spell-check to see if you missed anything obvious. *But do not rely on it.* There are too many words that are real words but may not be used in the right way in the manuscript.

Let's see how many in the above quiz you got correct. The following words are the preferred spellings from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, online paid edition (for the most current spellings), the US book-publishing industry's standard reference.

Clearly, this is a very small selection of words. That's because the point isn't to teach you how to spell a lot of specific words but to point out how often you might *think* you know how to spell a word and don't look it up when you should. This might be a good time to start a list of words you want to check as you grow your business.

all right (always two words, with two *l*'s)
Alright is considered substandard, although some publishers have a "house style" exception.

by-product (hyphenated)

coworker (no hyphen)

email (no hyphen)
This word has a discrepancy between *CMOS* and *MW*. *CMOS* shows no hyphen. Many writers and editors applauded this change in the seventeenth edition. *MW* still has it hyphenated as its preferred spelling but also lists it without the hyphen. Use *CMOS* without the hyphen unless the style guide says otherwise.

espresso (no *x*)

goodbye (one word, without a hyphen, and with an *e*)
This word has changed over time, so it can still be used with a hyphen as a variant. The word without an *e* is also shown in *MW* but is less common. Stick with the standard above unless the publisher has a different preference.

harebrained (not *hair*brained)

iced tea (always with a *d*)
To find it in *MW*, look up *iced*. You will not find *iced tea* as an entry.

internet (not capitalized)
This word also has a discrepancy between *CMOS* and *MW*. *CMOS* has it lowercased, while *MW* has it capitalized, though it shows *internet* as secondary. Use *CMOS* and lowercase it unless the style guide says otherwise.

mindset (no hyphen)
This is an interesting one. It used to be *with* a hyphen when this course was first written. *MW Unabridged* still shows it that way. However, *MW Collegiate* now shows it *without* the hyphen,

stating *mind-set* is less common. This is a great example of why proofreaders need to look up hyphenated words often. They may actually change the rule and remove the hyphen.

OK (all caps, only two letters)
This can be a tricky one, because it seems more like slang than a word. But *CMOS* and *MW* list *OK* as the standard spelling. *MW* shows *okay* as secondary. However, most book publishers prefer *okay* (possibly to avoid confusion with the abbreviation for Oklahoma or maybe just because the all-caps spelling tends to bring attention to itself). Either are acceptable, but consult the style guide and be consistent. Just *never* spell this word as "ok" or "Ok."

old-fashioned (with an *-ed* and hyphenated, whether it's used as a noun or an adjective)

online (no hyphen)

toward (no *s*)
The proper spelling is without the *s*. Many Americans add the *s* to directional words ending in *–ward*. However, the added *s* is from British English and is considered a variant in American English. Similarly, *afterward*, *backward*, *downward*, *forward*, and *upward* should be spelled without the *s*.

website (lowercased, one word)
This is another funny one. Did you notice how these words with discrepancies are tech terms? They keep changing as we make them more like words and less like tech terms. *CMOS* and *MW* both use this spelling.

y'all (a contraction of "you all"—the apostrophe replaces the missing letters *ou*)

Hyphenation
The Chicago Manual of Style contains an extensive guide (*CMOS* 7.89) for determining when certain words should be spelled with a hyphen. Here are some examples based on that list. If you are unsure about the hyphenation of a specific word and cannot determine it using the *CMOS* rules, check *MW* online for the most current spelling. But it may or may not be there. As always, refer to the publisher's style guide.

Compound modifiers. *CMOS* 5.92, 7.81–89; *CWMS* p. 201
As a general rule, a modifying phrase is hyphenated when it comes before the noun it describes, but it is *not* hyphenated when it comes after the noun it modifies.

> The stove was red hot. / a red-hot stove
> The manuscript was high quality. / a high-quality manuscript
> I love fiction writing. / a fiction-writing clinic
> Their manuscript was on the cutting edge. / cutting-edge technology

The same rule applies to numbers.

> She waited a half hour for her plane to arrive.
> Margaret was the fourth-to-last contestant.

If an adjective phrase contains multiple words, put hyphens between all the words in the compound modifier.

> twenty-first-century near-future speculative fiction
> twenty-four-hour-a-day schedule

> However, note that "twenty-four" is a hyphenated word, but the phrase "twenty-four hours a day" is not hyphenated because it's not followed by a noun.

If two adjective phrases end in a common noun, use a hyphen after each of the unattached words to show that they are both related to the noun.

> This year's schedule includes several three- and four-day clinics.
> This book is targeted for four- to six-year-old children.

If there's a potential for misreading (or the possibility of a distracting, even humorous, secondary interpretation), the rules about compound adjectives yield to clarity.

Adverb phrases. *CMOS* 7.86
Phrases that include an *-ly* adverb are always open (not hyphenated).

> Steve received a *mildly* worded rejection letter.
> Amelia's novel has a *highly* developed plot.

Adverb phrases that do *not* end in *-ly* are hyphenated *before* but *not after* a noun. However, compounds with *most* and *least* are usually open.

> Her book was much loved. / a much-loved book
> The man was well read. / a well-read man
> Some of the *least* skilled writers in the county entered that contest.

Exception: If the adverb is part of an adjective phrase, all the words in the adjective phrase are hyphenated if the phrase is followed by a noun.

> Vanessa's proposal received a *not-so-mildly-worded* rejection.

Some compound adverbs are always hyphenated, as listed in *MW*, no matter what their usage.

> Peggy's husband was long-suffering.

Note that *longsuffering* is often found in Bible translations *without* the hyphen, as are a few other

words. Using both the hyphenated form (in Scripture quotations) and closed form (in prose) in a book could be perceived as incorrect by the reader. Check the style guide or ask the publisher for their preference.

Ages. *CMOS* 7.89
Age terms (in both noun and adjective forms) are hyphenated whether they're followed by a noun or not (except in the plural form, such as "ten years old").

> My ten-year-old is taking swimming lessons from a seventeen-year-old girl.
> Eva babysat a two-and-a-half-year-old child.
> Paula's niece is two and a half years old.

Colors. Color-combination modifiers should be hyphenated if followed by a noun.

> reddish-brown hair
> blue-green eyes
> black-and-white tile
> Norm's tie was cobalt blue.
> The truth isn't always black and white.

A bouquet of "red and white roses" would consist of some red roses and some white roses. If each rose has both colors in it, you'd have a bouquet of "red-and-white roses."

Numbers. *CMOS* 9.2, 9.13–14

Hyphenated numbers. Hyphenate numbers twenty-one through ninety-nine.

Simple fractions. Hyphenate spelled-out fractions, whether they're used as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs (except when the second element is already hyphenated).

> one-half; a one-half split
> three-quarters; three-quarters done
> one twenty-fifth (1/25); a one twenty-fifth share

Mixed fractions. Don't use hyphens when combining whole numbers with hyphenated fractions.

> Niki's manuscript was four and one-eighth (4⅛) inches thick.

Note: Quantities consisting of whole numbers and simple fractions may be expressed in numerals instead of being spelled out (especially if a symbol for the fraction is available, as in the examples above). No space between the whole number and the fraction.

Compounds with fractions. Hyphenate adjectives, but not nouns.

> Clarissa wrote for a half hour.
> After her half-hour session, she ate two pieces of chocolate cake.

Measurements. Adjective compounds that have a number and a unit of measure are hyphenated when they come before a noun, but they are not hyphenated when *not* followed by a noun.

> Laura jogged a three-mile path.
> Gary's car left a 150-yard skid mark.
> Margo's dogs drink two three-ounce bottles of water every day.
> Bring me the one-and-a-half-gallon jug.
> I don't use the jar that's two and a half cups.

When numerals are used and the units are abbreviated, don't use a hyphen, even before a noun. Include a space between the numeral and the abbreviated unit of measure. See *CMOS* 10.58 for exceptions to this spacing rule.

> 33 m distance
> 12 kg weight
> 3 ft. high statue
> 1,200 lb. stone

Note: For questions about how and when to abbreviate a word, see chapter 10 of *CMOS*.

Percentages. CMOS 7.89
Compounds consisting of a number followed by *percent* are always open. No hyphen.

> "Jason noticed a 10 percent increase in book sales after his radio interview."

Prefixes and suffixes.
Most prefixes and suffixes are added to another word without a hyphen. As usual, there are exceptions to this rule. See the *CMOS* Hyphenation Guide (7.89) for details.

Slang

Some slang words are listed in the industry-standard dictionaries, so look up words like these if you want to use them. *CWMS* offers a few guidelines on pages 153–154 and 324.

The following examples are commonly found in commercially published books (especially novels). Even when a word is not listed in *MW*, dialogue can break the rules (as we learned in lesson 3). Be sure to consult the proper style guide.

aha: used to express surprise, triumph, or derision

> *Aha*! I finally found a good book about proofreading.

c'mon: abbreviation for "come on"

> *C'mon*, let's go!

gimme: informal pronunciation for "give me"

    Gimme a break!

gonna: informal pronunciation for "going to"

    I'm *gonna* go now.

ha ha: used to express amusement or derision

    Very funny, Joe. *Ha ha*.

huh: used to express surprise, disbelief, or confusion, or an inquiry inviting affirmative reply

    "*Huh*," Wayne said as he stared at the confusing lesson in Katie's workbook.
    "*Huh*!" Gordon muttered. "I never knew about that spelling rule."
    "*Huh*?" Cari asked, certain she couldn't possibly have heard Jacob correctly.

sh: used to urge or command silence or less noise

    "*Sh*," Miranda cautioned. "Alexander's in the next room!"

    Note: The pronunciation is "often prolonged," so no need to add more *h*'s.

uh-huh: used to indicate affirmation, agreement, or gratification; slang for "yes"

    "*Uh-huh*," Dustin said, nodding. "That's exactly what I said."

uh-uh: used to indicate negation; slang for "no"

    "*Uh-uh*," Max replied. "I will not do that, no matter what Edwina says."

wannabe: a person who aspires to be someone or something else or who tries to look or act like someone else

    She wrote like a Danielle Steele *wannabe*.

yea: slang for "yippee"

The *MW* definitions for *yea* refer only to affirmative statements or votes. (Examples: "Did you vote *yea* or nay?" and "*Yea*, when this flesh and heart shall fail, and mortal life shall cease …" from "Amazing Grace.") However, the same pronunciation is often used in informal speech to express exuberant delight or triumph (*yippee*) or joy/approval/encouragement (*hooray*).

Note: *Yay* is now listed in *MW Collegiate*, but some publishers do not prefer this spelling. Check the style guide.

yeah: colloquial form of *yes*

> "Well, *yeah*, of course I'll marry you," Lizzy told Gene.

Sound Words

Many words that describe sounds are in the dictionary. If a word is listed in the industry-standard dictionary, do not put it in italics. But if you make up a word to describe a sound and it's not in the dictionary, put that word in italics.

cheep: a faint, shrill sound

thunk: a flat, hollow sound

thwack: the sound of a heavy blow

tsk: a "dental click," used to express disapproval

Note: *Tsk-tsk* is a verb, as in "Why did you *tsk-tsk* me?"

whack: the sound of a resounding blow

whoosh: the sound created by a swift or explosive rush

Tech Terms

The internet has been around for years, but the "experts" are still figuring out how to spell words associated with it. Below are a few examples of what the most recent editions of the industry-standard references show. Although there is still some disagreement between them, the trend seems to be less capitalization and less hyphenation.

When there's a discrepancy between a style guide and its recommended dictionary, you could make a case for either spelling. Most publishers will have in-house guidelines that cover these issues. Without that, a good rule of thumb would be to go by whichever reference was published most recently. For example, the 2017 edition of *The Chicago Manual of Style* would supersede the 2003 edition of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*. But *MW* online would be more current.

e-book, e-reader (lowercased with a hyphen)

email (lowercased, no hyphen)
This word is lowercased and hyphenated in *MW*. However, *CMOS* dropped the hyphen. *AP* dropped the hyphen years ago. Check the style guide.

internet (lowercased)
Do not capitalize *internet* unless your publisher prefers it. *MW* still lists *Internet* as the main listing and *internet* as the variant, but *CMOS* lowercases it.

log on/logon
Log on is a verb phrase meaning "to establish communication and initiate interaction with a computer or network" (aka *log in*). *Log off* refers to entering the necessary information to end the session.

Logon is a noun referring to the procedure used to get access to an operating system or application, usually requiring a user ID and password (aka *login*).

online (one word, no hyphen)

web page (two words, lowercased)

website (one word, lowercased)

World Wide Web (aka the Web)
The World Wide Web (always capitalized) is not the same as the internet. *MW* defines the internet as "an electronic communications network that connects computer networks and organizational computer facilities around the world." The Web is "a part of the Internet [remember, *MW* prefers to capitalize this] designed to allow easier navigation of the network through the use of graphical user interfaces and hypertext links between different addresses."

CMOS lowercases *the web*. *MW* capitalizes *the Web*.

Since dictionaries change some spellings in each new edition, especially with technology terms, make sure you always consult the most recent version.

Word Division
Though we do not cover it in this course, word division is something most proofreaders review in final PDFs. Check with the publisher to find out if they want you to do this during your project. Review the rules in *CMOS* 7.36 and *CWMS* pp. 389–392.

Closing
If you learned nothing else from this class, I hope you discovered that there are a lot of things you *thought* you knew but didn't have quite right. Not so you feel bad about yourself or your abilities, mind you. But to encourage you to look things up whenever there's any doubt and to help you get a feel for the kinds of things you *should* be looking up—and, just as important, where to find the answers.

You may have wondered if a project really has *this many* errors in a final proofread. By the time a manuscript gets to the proofreading stage, there should be very few errors. However, a

thorough proofread is imperative and often catches many typos. When I proofread for publishers, I typically find anything between a few errors per page to a few errors per chapter. Much of this depends on how many rounds of editing were completed prior to the proofread.

I must mention that many clients will ask for a proofread, thinking that's all they need. New writers often think their writing is nearly error free and they only need editors to catch a typo here and there. Experienced authors tend to want all the help they can get. Your job is somewhere in between, and you must decide whether or not to accept a job that is far more than just a proofread.

Want more practice? Some students have asked for more hands-on training, so we've created Nonfiction Copyediting and Proofreading Boot Camp. If you would like more time to work on real manuscripts, similar to the quizzes in each lesson, check out this boot camp and other courses at The PEN Institute. If you prefer one-on-one learning, I'm available for mentoring as well. Simply contact me directly. I'd be happy to help in any way I can.

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Lesson 4 Assignment and Quiz

You made it to the end, but you are not done yet. Finish strong with the final assignment and quiz to earn the certificate. You may have noticed that the quizzes got longer each week, and this last one may stretch you a bit.

You are encouraged to use reference material for the quiz. As with any project or client, if you are unsure about something, look it up.

Remember to *turn off* the automatic spellchecker and grammar checker in Microsoft Word prior to opening the document. Then use Track Changes and Comments to complete it.