Many editors are called upon to perform what clients call “proofreading.” Originally, proofreading meant “reading [printer’s] proofs.” Traditional proofs were produced by securing lead type and engravings in blocks called “galleys,” inking the galleys, and pressing them onto paper to produce “galley proofs” that proved what would be printed. Modern typesetting produces the plates used in offset printing directly from film negatives generated by desktop publishing software, and proofing now involves scanning “blues” (photographs produced directly from the negatives) for errors. In color printing, you may instead check color-key or inkjet proofs.

Unfortunately, “proofreading” has many other meanings to our clients: light copyediting, “reading to proof” (also known as “reading against copy”), or even ensuring that the final version displayed on the computer screen is what you’ll get back from the printer. (See the next section for details.) If the document has been laid out, you’ll also have to examine the layout for infelicities such as bad line breaks, awkward hyphenation, headings mysteriously formatted as body text, and so on.

Unfortunately, clients sometimes send a manuscript for “proofreading” that actually requires editing when they aren’t prepared to pay for that time-consuming service. This raises an awkward dilemma: An unedited manuscript may contain so many problems that a light copyedit can’t possibly fix them. In such cases, it is important to report the problem to the client as soon as possible and ask for instructions on how to proceed. If the document is already laid out, or if the client is unwilling to provide time (or money) for adequate editing, you can only grit your teeth and try to fix the most egregious problems—and politely request that the client not acknowledge your work. This won’t be a manuscript to include in your portfolio.

To avoid this problem in the future, educate your clients about the value of editing before a document goes to layout, and of providing enough lead time for you to edit well.

“Reading to Proof”

“Reading to proof” is an increasingly rare activity in which the editor compares the original manuscript (on screen or on paper) with the printout from desktop publishing software or the on-screen Web or Help file to ensure that nothing got lost during production. This term comes from the way this proofreading was once done: The editor would place the original manuscript beside the proofs, and “read the manuscript to the proofs” while seeking differences. Sometimes a second person was press-ganged into reading the original aloud so the editor could concentrate on the proofs; proofreaders developed an entire oral vocabulary for identifying punctuation marks, accents, and so on, that could be quite entertaining to hear. Because most production work is now done entirely on the computer, the risk of lost or misplaced text is much lower, and this kind of proofreading has become less common, particularly in high-pressure publishing environments.

Although you can read to proof on screen by opening the original document in the word processor that created it, opening the layout in the desktop publishing software (or displaying
a PDF), and juggling windows so the two are visible simultaneously, this process requires a large monitor—or possibly two monitors—if you hope to display an adequate amount of information simultaneously and thereby reduce the amount of scrolling required. Some editors find this procedure uncomfortable and unproductive, and prefer working on paper.

But the computer can facilitate this task by reading the document aloud while you follow along in a printout and mark omissions or discrepancies. This “text to speech” capability has been built into the Macintosh operating system for years, and with most Macs, no additional hardware is required because the built-in speakers are adequate for the job. A comparable feature has recently become part of Windows (www.microsoft.com/enable/training/windowsxp/adjispeech.aspx), though typically external speakers must be added to a PC before you can use this feature.

Blind and visually impaired computer users use more sophisticated “screen reader” software, such as JAWS (www.freedomscientific.com/fs_products/software_jaws.asp) and IBM’s home page reader (www-3.ibm.com/able/solution_offerings/hpr.html) for Windows, or the OutSpoken reader for Macintosh. STC’s AccessAbility SIG (www.stcsg.org/sn/visual.shtml) is a good place to turn for more information.

Printer’s Proofs

If you still produce printed documentation, you need “proof” that what you sent to the printer is what you’ll get when the materials arrive, hot off the presses. Information is unlikely to be lost in modern production systems that transfer word processor files directly into desktop publishing software, but font substitutions, disappearing special characters, incorrect software settings, and other problems still trap the unwary or unfortunate.

Some would have you believe that “soft proofs” (on-screen images) are an acceptable alternative to paper proofs, blues, or inkjet proofs, but I remain skeptical. Having worked with on-paper and on-screen editing for nearly twenty years, I’m increasingly convinced that real proofing can only be done accurately in the actual medium of the final product. I have no hard data to support this opinion, but here are a few of the many problems I’ve seen with “soft” proofs:

Gestalt: Other than for small pages, even the largest monitors can’t display most two-page spreads at full magnification, and this prevents you from seeing the full effect of the layout (the gestalt). Even single pages fit on only the largest monitors at full size. It’s difficult to review layouts without prohibitive amounts of scrolling.

If you’re producing information on paper, you must still use paper as your final proof.

Legibility: It’s difficult to distinguish between characters such as commas and periods on most monitors, particularly with relatively light typefaces such as Palatino. Solving this problem requires either repeatedly zooming in on the display (unproductive) or doing a separate pass on paper.

Resolution: Even the best displays top out at fewer than 100 pixels per inch—not much better than early dot matrix printers. In addition to legibility problems, most software has limitations and idiosyncrasies related to the screen display. For example, PageMaker displays line breaks correctly at 100 percent magnification but does a poor job of displaying the actual word spacing at magnifications less than 200 percent.

Color: If you’re responsible for verifying colors, you can’t do it on screen. Even expensive color-calibrated monitors have color gamuts (ranges of possible colors) that don’t overlap completely with the gamut on paper; what you see on screen won’t match what you see on paper, particularly if you change the ambient lighting. Moreover, even seemingly identical monitors vary greatly in how well they display colors, and the problem is exacerbated if you move between operating systems (for example, from Windows to Macintosh), so even proofing Web colors is challenging.

Ease of use: It’s currently impossible to annotate PDF files and other on-screen media as easily as writing on paper. The inefficiency of having to transfer on-paper edits into a computer file is easily compensated for by the tremendous efficiency of writing on paper.

On-screen proofing thus remains a challenge. If you’re producing information on paper, you must still use paper as your final proof. Conversely, if your documents will appear exclusively on the screen, you must proof those documents on the screen—and confirm that no drastic problems (for example, color shifts) arise when you move between computers or operating systems. This situation will change as more refined versions of “e-ink” and “e-paper” (www.wired.com/news/technology/0,1282,58765,00.html?tw=un_story_related) begin to replace computer displays for some applications, but we’re not nearly there yet.

Demand Proof!

Proofreading will remain important as long as humans are fallible and computers are contrary. In light of these facts, it behooves us to remind clients of the need for proofreading and to keep an eye on the technology available to help us proofread. For some types of proofreading, the computer can be a valuable ally; for others, it will be some time yet before we can apply the power of the computer to this task. ☐