



# The Final Hurdle: Proofreading your Academic Paper

Orlanda Harvey<sup>1</sup>, Rachel Arnold<sup>2</sup>, Jillian Ireland<sup>3</sup>, Edwin van Teijlingen<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Centre for Seldom Heard Voices, Faculty of Health, Environment & Medical Sciences, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, United Kingdom

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Midwifery & Women's Health, Faculty of Health, Environment & Medical Sciences, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, United Kingdom

<sup>3</sup>University Hospitals Dorset NHS Foundation Trust, Poole, UK & Centre for Midwifery & Women's Health, Faculty of Health, Environment & Medical Sciences, Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, United Kingdom

## Correspondence to:

Prof. Edwin van Teijlingen  
Centre for Midwifery & Women's Health, Bournemouth University,  
Bournemouth Gateway Building,  
Bournemouth, United Kingdom.  
Email: [evteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk](mailto:evteijlingen@bournemouth.ac.uk)

## ABSTRACT

Academic publishing is a key aspect of most academics working in the field of public health and social sciences. When the paper in which you have put in your heart and soul is finally accepted for publication it feels like the time to celebrate. This may, however, be slightly premature. In this article four authors share their experiences of proofreading – the final stage in having an academic paper published. They explain the importance of careful proofreading, the dangers of assuming that there are no mistakes or omissions, and the challenges of online publishing and layout. The authors highlight areas in which particular care is needed such as proofreading in teams, and they stress the importance of allocating sufficient time to proofread. The key messages in this paper are: (a) proofreading is exact business; (b) it is most certainly time consuming; and (c) feeding back mistakes to a journal editor is not without its trials and tribulations. Surmounting this last obstacle, the authors suggest, will hopefully ensure that when the article is published you can feel proud of it.

**Keywords:** proofreading; publishing; academic writing; scientific papers; publication

## BACKGROUND

In many academic disciplines, Public Health included, academic publishing is vital for career progression. For scholars it is always a pleasure to see one's paper in print. If all is properly organised by the publisher, the first time you see your paper as it will look in its final version is when you receive the proof copy. It is your task, as the author, to proofread this final copy and pick up any mistakes you may have made, or the journal has made transferring your word file into the journal's layout. However, when you receive the proofs of your paper there are several possible issues than can occur. First, and probably most common, you are too close to the paper, you know what's in it, or better should be in it, and, therefore, cannot see missing words in the text, your brain simply fills them in.

Secondly, you are too busy with other academic work, including new papers that you're working on, and you do not give this task the time and attention it really needs. Thirdly, the reviewing process and the wait to get into print has taken so long that the context has changed, and you feel the need to rewrite/update parts of the text in the proofs. It is not uncommon to receive the proofs six months to a year after resubmitting your final accepted paper. Fourthly, more journals now ask you to do the proofreading and editing online, which brings its own problems.

There are more than aesthetic reasons as to why your article may need proofreading. For example, misspellings of words, especially of key terms, can affect citation retrieval in electronic bibliographic databases. Turner and Eisenstein conducted an

interesting experiment in 2023 using only misspelt search terms; not surprisingly misspellings adversely affect the chance of an article being retrieved (1). The latter may mean key articles are not included in a systematic review, furthermore, the article is less likely to be read and cited. Interestingly, Turner and Eistenstein also found that many articles were missed in literature searches by searching for correct spelling only (1). Obviously, many published typos had not been picked up by authors when proofreading the final manuscript, suggesting missed opportunities in the publication process to identify and correct misspellings prior to the final online version of a paper.

### Example 1

In the Autumn of 2023 one of us received proofs from the journal BMC Health Research Policy & Systems (2). The BMC journals are part of the international publishing group called Springer. This journal used an online proofreading system called eProofing, to which the authors get temporary access, to read and correct text. This system looks good online. But, in our experience, authors must be careful and be aware, that the online version you get to edit does not look the same as the version that will appear in print. The draft print version generated by eProofing has line numbers which don't appear online when you are editing the proofs. This meant we had to write on the online system separately that we had found a set of quotes glued together, as the system does not allow authors to change the lay-out (for obvious reasons). So, we had to write details like: "There needs to be a space after first quote line 421." What might look fine in the eProofing version didn't do so in the print version, where it was simply wrong. This is illustrated in Figure 1.

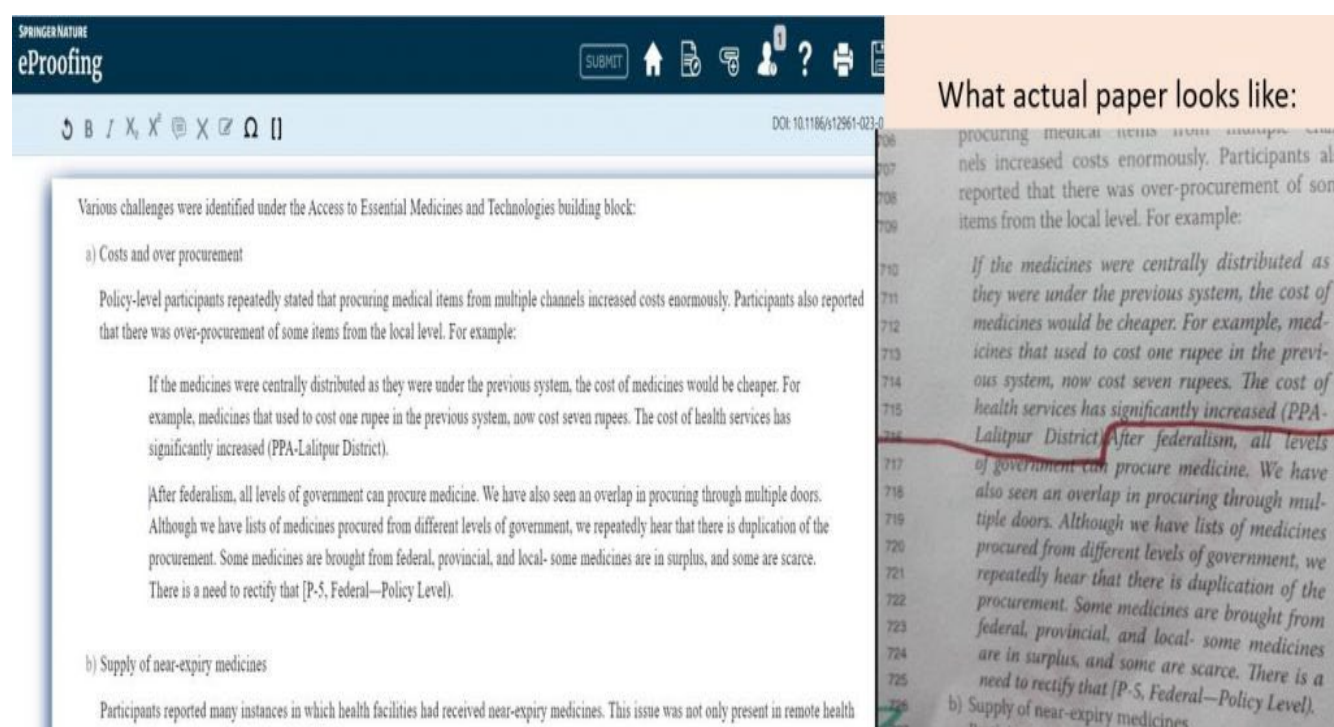


Figure 1. Difference in what proofs looked in eProofing software and in 'print' version

### Example 2

Also, in the autumn of 2023 we battled with the proofs of another paper accepted by Women and Birth (3), which is part of the international publishing house Elsevier. Again, this publisher has an online system for proofs. The proofreading really was an unexpected and frustrating hurdle. It took up a huge amount of time because the system was so inflexible – the authors gave up in the end, and we felt less proud of the article because it still contained mistakes. This system does not allow the authors to correct mistakes in the layout, for example in the line spacing. In this case we ended up writing to journal manager, not the editor, little instructions such as: "There is a very big gap between the end of Section 3.7. and Overview of findings section – please could the text be rearranged to get rid of this big gap." We also asked for a summary section to be kept on one page, so as to not orphan two words on the next page, but that appeared to be too difficult a request. We think having a little flexibility, i.e., human intervention the lay-out could have been improved. The illustration (Figure 2) below illustrates the challenges with text as it appears, cut over two pages, in the current online-first version.

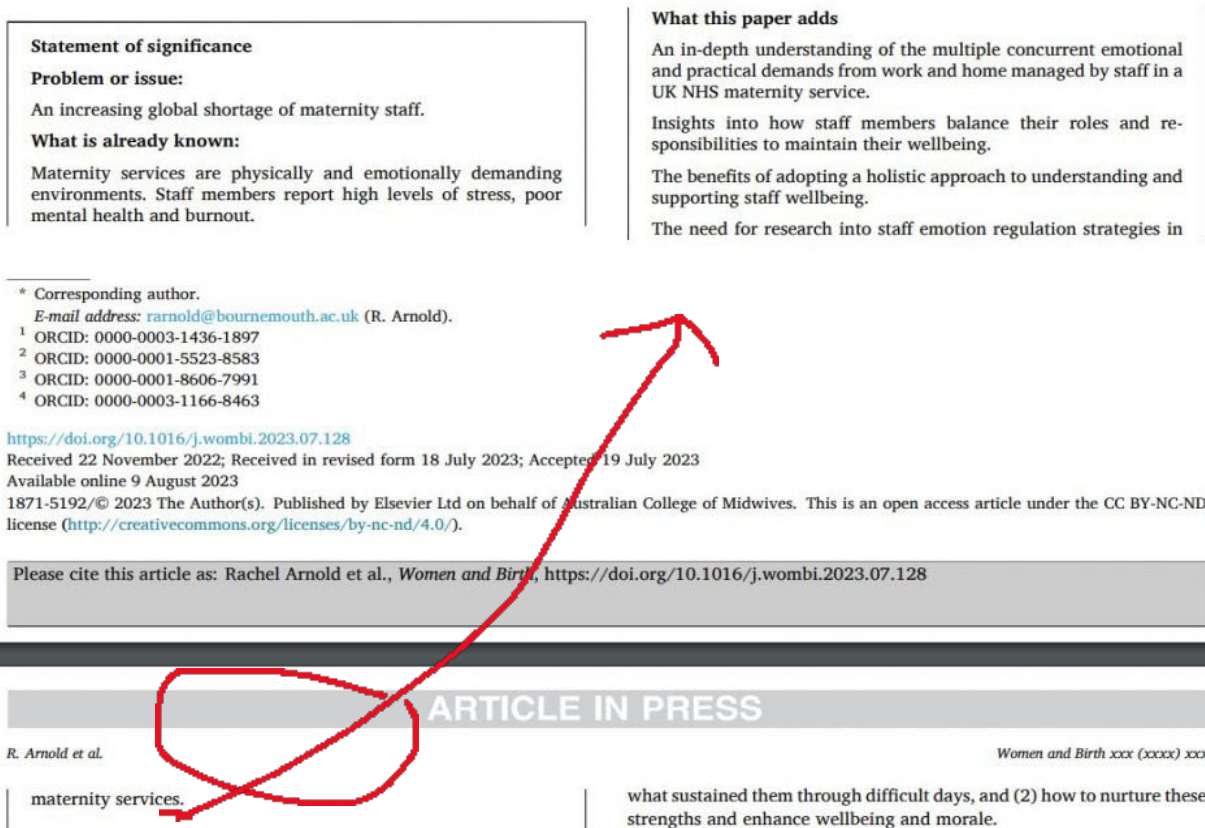


Figure 2. Proofs with orphan words on second page

We would like to stress our advice to set plenty of time aside to read and edit the proofs, and to send details instructions to the journal manager or editor about what needs changing. Although most authors focus on the main body of the text when they do the final proofreading it is important to check that everything else is there – specifically the acknowledgements, funding, author contributions. If they are not there it's important to check that they will be added at the final stage and have not been forgotten like ours were! This is made more difficult because journals use different publishing systems, and publishing systems change, so it is easy to make assumptions. Changes may include typos, grammar and style, but also lay-out of text and illustrations, boxes in the text, tables and figures. "It is also important to check tables and figures during the proofreading as the formatting can often go astray during the typesetting process" as highlighted by Sheppard et al. (4). There is also the need to double check correct spelling of names of co-authors and the final author order in the proofs (Example 3).

### Example 3

Many years ago, one of us received the proof of pages of a short article written with the third author (5). This author dutifully read and edited the proof of the actual text, but he never checked the short introduction with the authors' names which an editor had added to the final proofs (Fig.3). We have just the abstract of this

paper to illustrate in Figure 3 what happened. The text in the shaded box was not written by the authors but added as part of the journal's house style, by the editor. When the paper came out in print it transpired that this editor has changed the author order, i.e. the corresponding author was named as first author, most likely because he had submitted the paper behalf of his co-author. This caused some friction between the two co-authors.

When the paper is put in your heart, this interesting paper on xxxxx and xxxxx in which you have accepted for publication and soul is finally feels like the is jointly written by Author 2 and Author 1 publication it time to celebrate. This may, however, be slightly premature. In this article four authors share their experiences of proofreading – the final stage in having an academic paper published. They explain the importance of careful proofreading, the dangers of assuming that there are no mistakes or omissions, and the challenges of online publishing and layout. The authors highlight areas in which particular care is needed such as proofreading in teams, and they stress the importance of allocating sufficient time to proofread. The key messages in this paper are: (1) proofreading is exact business; (2) it is most certainly time consuming; and (3) feeding back mistakes to a journal editor is not without its trials and tribulations. Surmounting this last obstacle, the authors suggest, will hopefully ensure that when the article is published you can feel proud of it.

Figure 3. Example of proof with extra text added by editor in production stage of the paper

### Example 4

The third author of this paper was invited to submit a proposal for a paper following a presentation at an online conference which took place in 2020. The paper was submitted in 2021 (6). The conference had been



organised by academics in an English department whilst the author is a health professional. The subject matter was how aspects of the maternal experience are expressed in performance, in this paper a lullaby. Everything about the conference and the journal was new and exciting to the author. Including the author guidance (Intellect House style) which arrived in late 2021. It was different to anything she had seen before and ran to 77 pages! There was a lot of detail to be considered in producing the full paper (5600+ words), after feedback from peer reviewers in March the proofs were ready in May 2022. By which time the process had been so long and disjointed that the author found it difficult to keep returning to the work, having to reread all 77 pages of the author instructions in tiny detail to ensure that suggested changes to the proof adhered to the publisher's requirements.

### Coordinate the proofreading process

Many academic papers are based on teamwork, we do research in teams, and we write in teams. With the proofs made available for all co-authors to read and to edit online, there might be the temptation to allocate sections to different co-authors, for example, the lead authors proofread the Introduction, and Conclusion, the statistics co-author reads the Methods and Results, the psychology co-author proofreads the Discussion and Conclusion. Or perhaps one of the co-authors volunteers to proofread the whole paper, and the other authors make assumptions that they have done it well. Such division of labour sounds good, but there are two serious risks namely that some of the inconsistency in the wording might not be picked up because individual co-authors focus too much on their allocated section, or worse one of the co-authors does not manage to do their share and the rest just assume that section has been properly proofread. The latter is a real risk as it is impossible for someone else to know whether no changes or edits to the proof in a particular section means (a) there were no mistakes; or (b) the section has not been proofread. Mosely suggested that should an article be published with such errors then this can lead to a range of emotions from both editor, publisher and author including anger and embarrassment (7). The latter can be hurtful and subsequently dent the confidence, particularly of early career researchers, when such errors are picked up by reviewers. This happened to this author, who had assumed that senior colleagues had carefully proofread the final draft only to receive the following feedback from a reviewer which they emphasised in bold font:

**'Apart from the comments and suggestions below, an overall proofread of the manuscript is strongly recommended.'**

Here you can feel the annoyance of the reviewer, and as reviewers ourselves we acknowledge that when

reviewing a paper with grammatical and spelling errors it can lead you to be less objective and leave you feeling that if the authors cannot be bothered to proofread effectively why should we give up our time voluntarily to give detailed feedback.

Many journals offer support and guidance for how to review and edit your article's proofs, for example Taylor and Francis (8) stress the difference and importance of proofreading for different types of errors, such as content errors; copy editing: grammatical and spelling mistakes and mechanical editing: stylistic errors, word choice and flow. Such guidelines can be a useful reminder for authors to ensure they cover all aspects of proofreading. There are techniques that can be used to support effective proofreading including, proofreading in pairs or dyads which has been found to increase the efficacy of detecting errors (9), reading aloud which has been found to improve error detection (10), putting aside the paper for a couple of days and then re-reading one more time (11).

**Table 1. Advice to novice authors in proofreading**

- Take the task of proofreading seriously, set a proper amount of time aside to do so.
- Follow the instruction given by the publisher and make sure you fully understand them.
- Read thoroughly, look for mistakes and omissions rather than assuming there will not be any.
- If you are writing with colleagues discuss how you will approach it and what check ups you will put in place to ensure that the proofreading has been done.
- Authors may prefer to read the proofs aloud, to ensure that no words are missed or repeated.
- Proofread everything, the title, abstract, key messages, authors' names and affiliations, acknowledgements, references, tables and figures, not just the body of text.
- Get a colleague or friend to do a final read through – this 'fresh eyes' approach can be very effective in finding missing words and typos.
- If you get the chance to give feedback on the proofreading system and process it is important to do this so that systems become more author friendly and standards of academic publishing increase.

In short, as highlighted in Table 1, we advise anybody who is proofreading to pay close attention to this important part of academic writing and publishing and enjoy seeing your article in print.

### Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



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