

Perfectly Worded
Your words made perfect

A short guide to:
Getting the Best from Your
Proofreader

Getting the Best from Your Proofreader

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Introduction

I am a proofreader (sometimes also termed a “copyeditor” or “technical editor”). I work on all sorts of documents, from corporate reports and web sites through to fiction and university research, checking the bones of the documents (punctuation, word usage, consistency and so on) – but *not* the plot, argument or message.

One of the things I find I am confronted with time and again is the writer not doing all they could to make their own work look and read better. Apart from the fact that it helps them in their own endeavours by making their own “final check” simpler before they pass the work to me, it also reduces the amount of time I have to spend correcting things that writers could get right for themselves. And thus lowers the cost of having the document edited. So I have put this document together to begin to explain how a proofreader works to enhance a manuscript, and the things that the author can do to help us help them.

I hope you find this useful. It is a work in progress; any suggestions for correction, addition or other change will be given due consideration – and will in all likelihood be incorporated into the next edition.

It is not mentioned anywhere else, but I am assuming throughout what follows that work to be edited is supplied to the proofreader electronically. If it is sent on paper, some of the things discussed below don't apply, of course; the only time I have had work arrive on paper, it was for proof checking – comparing the manuscript with the proof – so I think I am on pretty firm ground discussing proofreading with the medium being implicitly electronic!

James Cowan
Greenhithe, New Zealand
james@perfectlyworded.co.nz
www.perfectlyworded.co.nz

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Make friends with your Proofreader¹

Overview

Your proofreader is a member of your team, not an adversary. Remember that, if they seem to be getting a bit tetchy – they are doing their best to help make your work perfect. They are there to correct errors that you have missed in your own checking, be they errors in language, punctuation, formatting or anything else.

It is up to both of you to make sure the relationship works for you, the author. Although your manuscript is something dear to you, the result of a lot of work, effort and emotion, and the editor will appreciate that, to the editor it is also a job they are being asked to do. There are things that have to be ironed out before the editing can start, and the relationship requires work from both sides throughout the process.

The brief

It is important that the proofreader knows exactly what you want them to do. If you want them to do only a light “polish” as opposed to a full edit, for example, or only to check the facts, not the language. This must be clear between you before anything starts – apart from anything else, it will affect the time needed, and the cost.

It also is important that you, the author, know exactly what to expect to get from the editing process, and what you should expect to pay (as well as when and how), before you commit to anything. It is best to get the agreement in writing, an email or a letter (and both should be acknowledged by the other end of the relationship too!), to eliminate any misunderstandings.

And be sure that the editor knows the audience you are writing for – if it is a specialist work in an area the editor does not feel qualified to operate in, the conversation should end right there, not when the editor sees the manuscript!

Money

This is an important issue. Unless you are getting your manuscript checked by a close friend, you will be expected to pay for the editor’s services. The benefit of going to a qualified professional is that you get a high-quality job. Many people have little understanding of what their own time is worth, let alone what to expect to pay other professionals; few editors will be willing to move far from their quoted price.

If they don’t already know your work, the editor will have to estimate the effort based either on prior experience of similar documents, or on a sample of your manuscript. Many editors will expect to be paid based on a word or page count, with a factor based on the quality of the manuscript (the amount of work they will have to do to bring it up to a good standard). And unless they already know you, they are likely to ask for a deposit based on their estimate, and may ask for the balance to be paid on completion of the work before they will return your manuscript.

If the manuscript is huge, it might well happen that the editor will be able to edit it in sections, and return them as they are finished. It is also possible that the editor will ask for progress payments during the project, instead of in full at the end.

All this should be agreed before the work starts, in writing, so that everyone knows exactly what to expect.

¹ See the Glossary for the definition of “proofreader” as used in this document

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Keep your word

Your editor is a professional, with a business to run – and with other clients. This means that the editor will need to know when your work will arrive, and (from their own knowledge) when it will end, so they can tell other people when they can start new assignments. And, equally, they knew this from their other clients and their work, to know when they would start working on your manuscript.

So if you warn them to expect a manuscript on a particular date, and it doesn't happen, the editor's planning, and the plans of their other clients, are interfered with. It might be that a day or so is not important (depending on the length of the project), but you must let the editor know when anything you have agreed to changes. Including that the manuscript will be late, the final deadline changes or the work is going somewhere else.

Before you send the manuscript off

There are things you can do to help the proofreader to help you. Some are “mechanical” things, like checking the spelling throughout the document before you send it off, and are dealt with below. Others are not so easy.

The first and most important is to make sure that your manuscript is as complete as you can make it, and as perfect. Once you have sent it off, take a break, and wait for the results. As with anyone else, if you leave them to get on with the job, they will be happier – you wouldn't stand behind your plumber trying to suggest how they should do their work, would you?

Above all, don't make changes to the manuscript and send revisions off before the proofreader has finished their task on the original version. This could mean that they will want to negotiate a new contract, as the document will have to be checked again from the front, and all the work they have already done is wasted.

Once you have sent off your manuscript, unless something happens to change the deadlines (in which case contact the proofreader by phone or text, not email – they may not see it in time), try and leave the proofreader alone.

If you want to get the proofreader to check another edition of your manuscript, after they have already checked it once (or more), it helps to make your own updates with changes tracked (once you have processed the previous set of tracked changes from the proofreader); the proofreader should then need only to check the new text (because they can identify it), and assume the rest of the manuscript is already OK. If you don't identify ALL the changes you make, the proofreader will have to check the entire document again.

Always remember that the proofreader is on your side. You have hired them as an expert in language, grammar and so on; at least consider their advice. They are aware of how much emotional investment a manuscript represents, and their suggestions are not criticisms, they are advice for improvements.

I recently came across this from Jenny Argante of Oceanbooks in the Bay of Plenty:

“a good rule of thumb for any new author is to cut your 'final draft' by 20%. Anything that does not actively progress your story is holding it back. If you set yourself to cut 20% you'll be learning to differentiate between what is there to progress the story and what does nothing of the kind. Length is no measure of quality. I'm with Coleridge: 'best words in best order.' And Farrukh Dhondy tells us, 'The only true writer is a rewriter.' So rewriting is an essential skill for an aspiring author and a finished document cut by 20% will save you 20% of the cost for professional editing”

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Check list

Before sending the work to a proofreader, you should carry out all the following operations:

- If you use real places, real people, real events, real dates in your work, verify all the facts: spelling of names of places, of businesses and of people; accuracy of dates; and so on.
- If your document contains references and citations, check that the formatting of the entries is correct, and the list of references is complete.
- If you refer to any websites in your text, make sure that the reference is accurate. Include the date you used the website as well, in case the information is moved before a reader tries to check your data.
- Remove repeated words (“the cat sat on on the mat”).
- Check that the paragraphs are correctly formatted.
- If you have a table of contents, update it before you send the manuscript to your proofreader, and check that the entries appear in the table as you want them to – and that they are all there.
- If you use unusual words (or abbreviations), or use standard words in a non-standard fashion, as well as explaining them the first time they appear, put them into a glossary.
- Run the spell-checker over the work. It won’t pick up words in the wrong place (“affect” instead of “effect”) – that’s what your proofreader does – but it will remove typos. Do this after all the changes made during the previous corrections!
- If there are special things you want your proofreader to change, or not to change, let them know: create a “style guide” to send with your manuscript.

Help the proofreader to help you

If there are things the proofreader needs to know from you during the editing, please – *please* – respond promptly; anything that hampers them from continuing can only obstruct completion of the work. There is no justification for your delaying them and expecting them to make the original deadline. And little reasonable expectation of success!

And when the proofreader returns your manuscript

Most proofreaders will make their changes with Word’s “track changes” set. This means that the original text is still there, and can be seen crossed out next to the replacement text. As the author you have the right to accept or reject the changes, but it is worth being careful before you do either. A proofreader will only change words when either they seemed to be the wrong word (“affect” and “effect”) or a particular word seems to have been used often enough nearby to be obtrusive. Or when they are not “plain English”, or are clichés; both these categories are discussed below.

Your proofreader should explain the more contentious of the changes in Word comments, or in a covering note. If you have doubts about changes:

1. If it is a change of word, look up the original and new words in the dictionary to see if they are close enough for your requirement, or if the original was clearly wrong for where it was. If it is a punctuation change, try reading the paragraph containing the revised sentence out loud to hear if it sounds better than the original.
2. If you don’t agree with the proofreader, make a note to ask why they made that change. Don’t query it immediately – there may be more.
3. When you have checked right through the manuscript, communicate with the proofreader about the all things you were unsure of. Calmly. In writing, so that the proofreader can check what you say.

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Remember that *the manuscript is yours*; the proofreader is trying to improve it without taking it over and making it their own. But the changes were made for what the proofreader thought were good reasons according to the standard (or your own) style for the target audience and local usage (e.g. the USA and NZ/UK use different spelling for many words).

Things proofreaders check that you can for yourself

Planning the manuscript

This is something that can have serious effects on a document, as well as on the reading experience. To say nothing of the amount of work the proofreader will be forced to carry out on your behalf. If there are multiple threads in the thinking behind the document, they need to be kept separate; it strengthens the writing, as well as making the work more easily understood.

There is no issue with an author having ideas that are out of context as they write (“Oh heck I forgot to put that in”), but there is no excuse for their not using their word processor to put the ideas into the right place in the manuscript – no matter when they come to mind.

What I mean by this may best be shown by a (rather lame) example:

The avalanche fell from part-way down the hill, across the road and into the stream at the very bottom. The men started clearing it from each side with bulldozers, being careful of rocks falling from above. The fall included rocks, soil and trees. They used trucks and carted the spoil away to another gully. There was a lot of water running down the slope after the avalanche, which may have had something to do with starting it.

It would be easier to read if the information was put together, the avalanche and the men separately:

The avalanche fell from part-way down the hill, across the road and into the stream at the very bottom. The fall included rocks, soil and trees. There was a lot of water running down the slope after the avalanche, which may have had something to do with starting it. The men started clearing it from each side with bulldozers, being careful of rocks falling from above. They used trucks and carted the spoil away to another gully.

It would be still easier to read if the two threads were in different paragraphs:

The avalanche fell from part-way down the hill, across the road and into the stream at the very bottom. The fall included rocks, soil and trees. There was a lot of water running down the slope after the avalanche, which may have had something to do with starting it.

The men started clearing it from each side with bulldozers, being careful of rocks falling from above. They used trucks and carted the spoil away to another gully.

Note: the proofreader will probably suggest you replace “after” with “following” (“*running after*” suggests a chase), and “avalanche” with “landslide” (“*avalanche*” appearing too often) in the last sentence of the first paragraph, so you could make those changes yourself.

Facts, dates, names, locations

If you are writing non-fiction, or anything with non-fiction elements, you can be certain that somewhere among your readers will be a checker. One who will Google every single fact. They may or may not subsequently let you know what they found, but they may tell others – including highlighting mistakes in published reviews.

If you are getting the manuscript published by a commercial publisher, they will in all likelihood verify everything on your behalf. Perfectly Worded will do the same if we know that

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there is nobody else checking. But both we and your publisher will charge you for our efforts; you can check things like which county a town is in, how to spell a company name, when a battle was fought, ... in your own time, for no fee at all.

Memory, personal or family, can deceive; if you use anything that could be verified from an external source – verify it yourself!

Formatting

The most obvious thing to be aware of is the formatting of the work. “Obvious”, that is, in that it is the first thing you see when you open the document.

As you read this document, be aware that the first paragraph in a section does not have any indentation, and all the others have the first line indented. Also notice that there is a bit of blank space between the paragraphs. This is the standard; it is what magazine and book publishers practice (newspapers may differ in a great many ways from other publications!).

The modern style is to have all the paragraphs reasonably short; some people hold that a paragraph should contain no more than a half a dozen sentences. Personally I don't think it matters how many sentences there are, but a paragraph should not be so long as to deter the reader from starting to read it. Novels of the Victorian era often used to have paragraphs of more than a page, but having a paragraph contain too many separate themes ends up confusing the reader.

A less obvious feature of formatting is spacing. There was a time when it was customary to put two spaces after a sentence-ending punctuation mark (full stop, exclamation mark, question mark); this is no longer the fashion. The modern custom says there are no occasions when two (or more) spaces should be used.

There are other places where spaces are not acceptable in modern writing:

- between the bracket and the first letter of the first word inside, or after the last letter of the last word before the closing bracket “(like this)” and “[like this]”; the same applies to quote marks “ as in this example ” and ‘ this one ’;
- before a decimal point (“ .1” should be “ 0.1”);
- before a %, full stop, comma, colon, semicolon, exclamation or question mark;
- after currency symbols, such as €, \$ and £, when they are followed by a number.

Sentence structure

This is something that a proofreader is expected to correct – some writers do a brain-dump into the word-processor, writing as if they are talking. Reading is not like listening, sadly, and the requirements of a reader are different from those of a listener.

A standard sentence has the basic structure “doer-does-something” (technically subject-verb-object). So far so good – “The barman pours a drink”. There are all sorts of extra bits which can be added like adjectives (to describe the barman and the drink), adverbs (to describe the pouring), and “phrases” and “clauses” which act as adjectives and adverbs. The difference is that a clause is a complete sentence in its own right: “After he picked up a glass [clause], the barman poured a drink”, and a phrase is not: “From the bottle on the bar top, the barman poured a drink”.

The difficulty comes with clauses containing words ending in “-ing”. These words are *not always* “doing” words (verbs), they have a special character because of their context. “Having picked up a glass”, although it may look like a clause, is in fact an adverb – and it can only refer to the barman. “Having picked up a glass, the barman poured a drink” makes perfect sense. But a structure often seen or heard “Having picked up a glass, a drink was poured” is gibberish – the drink hadn't picked up the glass, and there is nothing in the sentence capable of doing any pouring (the “drink was poured” part still needs someone to do the work).

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Another major issue is that a sentence can run away on the writer, getting longer and longer and containing more and more extra phrases and clauses until the thing becomes indecipherable even if it is properly punctuated. If a sentence is more than a couple of lines long, it might do well from being read out loud, and if it needs to be read more than once for the sense to come out, it should be rewritten.

Punctuation

This is the most fraught of the things a proofreader has to deal with. Punctuation (commas, colons and so on) can make the document sensible or nonsense.

There are lots of “rules”, but the underlying philosophy is that punctuation is there to make the meaning clear. Some of the basics are:

- a comma (or a dash) denotes the end of a thought – or a place where the reader can take a “mental breath”. If the sentence contains a phrase or clause which extends the meaning, i.e. is an extended adjective or adverb, it should have a comma or a dash before the start and at the end. Ideally, if you removed the bit between the commas the sentence should still make sense (like in the last sentence!). A frequently-found construction is “Mr. Smith the chief executive, said ...”; there should be a comma after the name.
- a semi-colon is either a “strong” comma, joining sentences with the meaning of something like “furthermore”, or it ends items in a list where the items themselves contain commas (“The shopping list read: butter, low-fat; bread, white; milk and cereals”). A colon, on the other hand, prepares the reader for a list or for a consequence (“Don’t tease the dog: he will bite”).
- in a written conversation, the punctuation comes inside the speech marks (“Hi there,” said John. “Coming to the pub?”). And in a quote, if the quote ends with a punctuation mark, in English the sentence containing it still needs a punctuation mark to end it (in American it doesn’t). So in English the sentence including the quote would read: ‘Caesar is believed to have said “Et tu, Brute?”.’ And in American: ‘Caesar is believed to have said “Et tu, Brute?”’
- an apostrophe is only used to make a plural on one occasion – when the item is a single character (“mind your p’s and q’s”). The apostrophe denotes missing letters; even when you say “John’s book”, in times gone by you would have said “John his book” and the “h” and the “i” have been removed. In the same way, “he’s going” means “he is going”. And remember that “It’s” means “it is”; as the old construction “bird in it his cage” was never used, so the possessive of it has no apostrophe – “bird in its cage”.

Not so plain English

There is an international campaign to make formal documents “plain English” – there are even awards for doing so! This applies more to formal (generally business or legal) documents than personal manuscripts, but nevertheless it is worth being aware of the issue.

For example, “It would be appreciated if you were to give consideration to the attached document” could – and, for choice, would – be written “Please read the attached document”. If you are used to writing this stuff, it can be a hard habit to break!

Some common instances of plain English and the phrases replaced are:

Not so plain English

a number of
alter
aim to *or* will aim to

Plain English

several
change
will

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Not so plain English

amend

assist

commence

concerning

endeavour

for the purpose of

for the reason that

fortuitous

in as much as

in order to

in regard to / in respect of / in respect to

it would be appreciated if you could / would

majority of

modify

near future

of the opinion

owing to the fact that

prior to

work cooperatively

Plain English

change

help

start

about

try

to

because

lucky

since

to

about

please

most

change

soon

think / believe / consider

because / since / for / as

before

cooperate

Clichés

Clichés are phrases used so often as to be meaningless. They are generally heard (for example, on the radio) rather than read, and are informal. Unless they add something to the flavour of the work, they should never be written!

Some examples:

Cliché

at that point in time

at this point in time

came to a grinding / shuddering halt

come to a grinding / shuddering halt

fact of the matter

in point of fact

over and above

part and parcel

whole nine yards

Meaning

then

now

stopped

stop

fact

in fact

in addition to

the whole

all

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Words, words, words

A lot of people are confused about some words, and your proofreader should be able to correct this. However, it will help you both if you are aware of some of these snares.

There is a special group which end in either -se or -ce and always cause confusion. They all behave the same way as advise and advice (which are among the few which sound different when a noun and a verb). The nouns are advice, device, licence, practice; the verbs advise, devise, license, practise. But note that most -ce words that can be used as both a noun and a verb do not change! And misprice is not related to misprise. Nor is prise to price.

Some other traps:

Affect and **effect** are very different. Both can be a verb and a noun, but *an* effect is a result (“the effect of a change”) and *to* effect is to make a change – the actual change itself is the object of the verb. To affect is to change an object or a person directly, so the object of the verb is the thing that is changed (“he was affected by the accident”), or to put on airs (“he affected a French accent”). Affect as a noun is a technical term in psychology meaning “appearance of feeling” (as in “he showed no affect”).

Between applies to only two items. The format of its use is “Between A and B”; if the two options are hyphenated, that makes them a single one, and the other option is still needed. “Between 1 and 3” is correct; “between 1-3” requires a further “and ...” (“between 1-3 and 5-6”).

Both only applies to two entities; for a greater number use “all”.

Compare to and **compare with** have slightly different meanings and use. To “compare to” is to point out or imply resemblances between objects regarded as being different; to “compare with” is to highlight differences between objects regarded as similar.

Comprise means “contain”. So when this word has been used to mean “assembled from”, it should be replaced; “comprises of” should be “consists of”, and “comprised of” should be “composed of”. Think of Beethoven; he didn’t “comprise” his music, he composed it, assembling it from the available instruments and the notes they could play.

Different from is the correct form, never “different to”.

Disinterested and **uninterested** do not mean the same thing. “Disinterested” means “without an interest” (in the sense of a conflict of interest). “Uninterested” means “not caring”, or “whatever”.

Either only applies to a choice between two entities – “either A or B” – and cannot be used for a larger number. In this case, use “one of”.

Enquiry and **inquiry** can be used interchangeably.

Everyday and **every day** mean different things. The first means “ordinary”, as in “an everyday black car” and the other one means “Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday”.

Farther and **further** are used in different ways. Farther is used in reference to distance (“Farther away”; think “far away”), and further is used in reference to time or quantity (“further investigation”).

Flair and **flare** are different beasts – the first one is ability or skill, the second is what sailors use when their boats start to sink.

Higher (in multiplication) is open to interpretation – “five times higher” could mean that 100 is now 500 (five times as much) or it could mean that 100 becomes 600 (five times extra). The clearest construction when writing multiplications in words is “five times as much”.

However when starting a sentence (and it must not have a comma when it does) means “in whatever way (“However you do it, it will fail”). When it starts a sentence and is followed by a comma, it has no meaning. Within a sentence, in a clause delimited by

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commas, it means “nevertheless” (“The weather was awful. It was a work day, however, so we had to go to the office”).

Imply and **infer** are not interchangeable. You **IMPLY** things when you give me only hints, and I **INFER** what you are getting at.

Literal means “exactly as written (or spoken)”. It does not confer emphasis or exaggeration – in spite of common usage. “He literally exploded with rage” means that there were body parts everywhere.

Partake does not mean “to take part”, it means to eat. The word to use for taking part is “participate”, or “partake *in*”.

Principal and **principle** can be differentiated by remembering that the principal is a “pal” or a “main man” – and so either a person or something significant (“principal reason”), whereas the other is a theory, truth or law.

Some time is not the same as **sometime**. “Some time” means period of time (“some time later”), whereas “sometime” means either “at one time” (“a sometime king of England, now deposed”) or an indefinite point in the future – by implication possibly never – (“will get to it sometime”).

Stationary means “not moving” (“ar” ⇒ arrest ⇒ stop) whereas **stationery** means pencils and paper (“e” ⇒ pen).

That and **which** have different usages. “That” is restrictive, narrowing the ensuing clause to specific instances of the item referred back to (“the river that broke its banks flooded the town” – other rivers neither broke their banks nor flooded the town) whereas “which” tells more about an already identified instance (“the river, which broke its banks, flooded the town” – the river flooded the town because [by implication] it broke its banks).

Uninterested and **disinterested** are not the same; see above, under disinterested.

Unique means “the only one”, so something cannot be almost unique – use distinctive or unusual.

While and **although** do not mean the same, even though they are often used interchangeably. While is used in relation to time: “the summons was delivered while (during the time that) I was away”. Although, on the other hand, means “in spite of the fact that”, or “but”: “I think we should still go, although I am concerned about the weather”.

And ... there is nothing wrong with using specialist language in a specialist publication. But in a non-specialist publication it become “jargon”, and is to be avoided. Your proofreader should be able to suggest alternative phrasing if you can’t for yourself – but consider the thought that if you can’t come up with an alternative for yourself, perhaps you don’t understand it!

Glossary

Proofreader / Editor: there are at least two types of “editing”: copy-editing and structural or development editing. A structural editor looks at the structure of the work and suggests things like changing the order of the chapters, revising character and plot development and other things related to the *structure* of the work. In NZ, we call a “proofreader” what people elsewhere may call a copy editor (or sometimes a technical editor). In all cases, whatever the label, this person looks at the words, the punctuation, the layout and things like that. While we may or may not enjoy what we are reading, we concentrate on making the work and easy read for its audience, without trying to change the way the document has been structured, the plot has been developed or the characters have defined themselves. Throughout this document, unless otherwise qualified, “editor” means “copy editor”.

Proof reading (two words!): technically means comparing the final version of the manuscript with the printer’s (or designer’s) “proof”, to find printing errors before a book is published. In this context it does *not* mean checking for errors in the author’s work, although the word is often used interchangeably with “copy editing”, which does.

Style guide: the list of conventions you want your document to follow after the editor has done whatever they are going to do. It tells the editor how to format numbers (as numbers or spelled out, and where the change-over occurs), the preferred spelling for special words (e.g. a doctor has a “specialty”, the rest of us have “speciality”), and any other conventions you need the manuscript to follow.

Further reading

If you care about reading up on some of the things above, the following are potentially useful sources:

Hughes, Janet, and Wallace, Derek, *Fit to print*, Dunmore Press 2010, subtitled “The Writing and Editing Style Guide for Aotearoa New Zealand”. An exhaustive discussion about all the minutiae of the printed word in our part of the world, including punctuation and formatting conventions, and the editors’ markup for hard-copy editing. May be available from the library; probably not a book you would want to use often.

New Hart’s Rules, which may or may not be a component of the *New Oxford Style Manual* (mine is). This is the conventions the Oxford University Press use to structure everything, unless they are overridden by the author. It covers everything I have asked it so far, including the laws of copyright, quotations – including translations and non-English words – and lots I haven’t looked into yet. Excellent, but expensive.

Strunk, William, and White, EB, *The Elements of Style*. There are a number of editions of this available, with and without pictures by Maira Kalman. This has been a bible for writers since 1918, when it was first written, and has excellent guidance on word usage, composition and style. It is short – the edition I have, with pictures, is only 152 pages long – and can be read in an afternoon. Can be downloaded from numerous places on the Internet. It is also available in some libraries.

Truss, Lynne, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, Gotham Books 2003, which is a dissertation on punctuation and its misuse. Well-written and amusing; may also be available from the library.

A thesaurus – I prefer a book, and the “Roget” format, where there is an index of options, which you look up in the main part of the book to find the best alternative for the word you have used. The common “Dictionary” format seems to me to restrict what it offers, and the index in the Roget version can often be all the looking up you need to do.