THE GREY AREAS OF PROOFREADING: INSTITUTIONAL APPROACHES TO THE USE OF THIRD PARTIES AND GUIDANCE TO STUDENTS.

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Abstract

This session will focus on current grey areas in proofreading through examining institutional policies and guidance to students, before presenting recommendations to improve practice.

Proofreading is an expected stage of the academic writing process before students submit assignments. However, institutional approaches to proofreading can be inconsistent and unclear in policies and academic integrity guidance, particularly regarding the use of a third party. Tutors often emphasise to students the need to proofread their work carefully, or indeed recommend that they engage a third-party proofreader in order to avoid losing marks for unchecked errors and to write in a way considered coherent to markers (Turner, 2012). At the same time, although institutional policies vary, there is a common focus on warning students about the dangers of getting too much help with proofreading. These different messages may result in students experiencing a dilemma if they are not confident about proofreading their own work: they want to hand in polished work to gain a good mark but may be anxious and unclear about how to approach proofreading and the limitations of what a third-party proofreader can do (Conrad, 2019).

Studies of contract cheating have highlighted problems with third-party proofreading. Lancaster and Clarke (2016, p. 639) explain that use of 'copyediting services' may constitute cheating; for example, this could occur if they intervene significantly with a text or take over authorship. Similarly, Draper and Newton (2017) discuss the difficulty of clearly distinguishing between the actions of proofreading, private tutoring and contract cheating and deciding exactly where a line between ethical and unethical practice is crossed. Furthermore, the exact role of a proofreader is unclear, even among proofreaders themselves; as reported by Harwood et al. (2012), proofreaders may take the role of 'helper' as an informal support system, 'cleaner' who tidies up the text, 'mediator' bridging the gap between student and tutor, or 'teacher' to provide instruction. Harwood (2018) also highlights the greatly varying practices between proofreaders in terms of what they correct or consider ethical interventions. It is evident that proofreading remains a very grey area which requires more clarity to guide staff and student decisions about what is appropriate.

Therefore, this research sought to examine and compare policies and guidance documents

about proofreading at five Higher Education institutions in the UK. It was found that these policies and guidance documents tend to concentrate on the following dimensions: defining proofreading and the difference between proofreading and editing; explaining what third-party proofreaders can and cannot do (significantly, all had a longer list for what proofreaders cannot do); warning of the consequences of using third-party proofreaders and where it would be considered cheating; recommending that students do their own proofreading; emphasizing that authorial responsibility rests with students; listing the kinds of errors to correct. Transparency was required by one institution in the sample, through a student declaration about the use of a third-party proofreader.

The study skills advice that these five universities provide about proofreading overlaps in a few areas with the policies and guidance documents, including recommending that students do their own proofreading and detailing the kinds of errors they should correct, the latter seeming to be the primary focus of study skills advice. The types of errors to correct through proofreading are commonly arranged as a checklist or as questions to prompt checking, such as 'Have you formatted citation appropriately?' Other suggestions to students include printing out a text for checking and reading out the text to try to spot errors. The study skills advice is presented for students to undertake themselves through independent learning; very little evidence was found of teaching sessions on proofreading in the sample. So, although

proofreading is an established part of academic writing, it seems to be overlooked in the teaching of academic writing.

However, teaching proofreading is highly recommended to encourage students to develop further writing skills and avoid students seeing writing support tutors as their own proofreaders (Alowayid, 2020). Giving students exemplars to proofread and discuss corrections, applying checklists to their own writing and explicitly building in proofreading as a stage of writing into an assignment preparation schedule are all recommended as engaging ways for students to learn proofreading skills.

Good practice in proofreading policies involving a third party should emphasize transparency with proofreading (requiring students to state if a third-party proofreader was used, and what was corrected). Furthermore, a 'flag but not fix' approach to proofreading (Conrad, 2019, p.179) is recommended, so that students can learn from the check, make the corrections themselves and retain their authorial ownership and development of their texts.

This session connects to the conference theme of institutional requirements regarding the effects of proofreading policies and guidance, and to academic integrity as embedded practice in teaching, with the recommendation that proofreading become part of academic writing instruction. The session will raise participants' awareness of current issues in proofreading policies and provide suggestions for improvement.

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