BackWords* Guide to Proofreading

The key to the exercise is to shift focus from content and meaning to mechanics. That is achieved, primarily, by reading each word or sentence out of context, usually backwards.

1. To catch possible mis-punctuation, read the text aloud one sentence at a time beginning from the end of the text and working forward. When the punctuation interferes with understanding the sentence, or when you stumble or reread a sentence, mark it in the margin. You could correct it now, but don’t let that distract you from checking all of the other sentences in the paper. This is especially useful for checking run-on sentences and sentence fragments.

2. To catch possible grammatical problems, read the paper aloud to someone else one sentence at a time from the end to the beginning. If a sentence sounds "awkward" or "wrong" to the listener's ear, mark it to check later.

3. To find misspelled words, read the text out loud backwards one word at a time. Underline any word you aren't certain is spelled correctly.

4. To identify homonyms, you first need a list of them and the best list is one you create yourself of the ones that you occasionally get wrong. Look for the words in your list by reading the text one word at a time backwards. If you run into homonyms that aren’t on your list, underline those too if you’re uncertain you know which is witch. There are many homonyms, but some of the most common problems are with to, too, and two; your and you’re; their, there and they’re.

Writers re-read their work frequently. Be a writer, re-read your work forward to back often. Then, before turning a paper in, use these back to front reading strategies to find the surface errors.

*Backwards is actually spelled with an “a” not an “o,” but this spelling and capitalizing the “W” makes it a play on words. You can use verbal creativity to your advantage or it can be seen as an error, so be sure you’re making conscious choices.