Tips for proof reading your own work
(Produced by Helen Grant for the RLF Fellowship Scheme)

Another pair of eyes will often pick up errors of punctuation, grammar, etc which the writer has overlooked. But what should you do if there is nobody available to look through your work for you? Here are some techniques for proof reading your own writing, and some common errors to look out for.

Techniques

First of all, use a spell checker. However, remember that this can't pick up everything. It can't, for example, tell the difference in meaning between "manner" and "manor" or between "buoy" and "boy".

Try reading your work out loud. Sometimes, this will make errors obvious. This can also help you to notice repetition of words.

Many people also find that printing out your work and checking the paper version is easier – you could try that too.

You may find it easier to identify errors if you check your work several times, looking for a specific thing each time, eg. tense, singular vs plural.

If you know that you tend to repeat the same word too often, you could try using the "find" function in Word to locate all the uses of a particular word. You can also use this to find participles (words ending in --ing, see below) if you know you have a habit of using them incorrectly, and you want to check.

If you know that you tend to write long, rambling sentences, you could try this: make a copy of your essay, and then press "return" at the end of every sentence. It is then very easy to identify the long sentences that run on for line after line!

When you've finished proof reading, it can also be useful to have a final "scan". Some people find it helpful to start at the bottom of each page and let their gaze move up it, or to start at one corner and scan diagonally across the page. Try not to consciously "read" the text as then you may automatically read what you expect to read! Sometimes this technique can help pick out repetitions or spelling mistakes.

Things to look out for!

Common grammatical mistakes

Mixing tenses (eg past tense and present tense). An example of this kind of mistake would be "He gets on a train and went to London."
You can say "He gets on a train and goes to London" (present tense) or "He got on a train and went to London" (past tense), but don't mix the two!

**Mixing singular and plural.** An example of this kind of mistake would be "The students studies at the university" or "the student study at the university."
Correct versions would be "The students study at the university" or "the student studies at the university."

**Using a participle as the main verb in a sentence.** A participle is a verb ending with –ing, for example, being, going, having, seeing.
An example of this kind of mistake would be "This theory explaining that an individual act can have long term effects." The correct way to say this would be "This theory explains that an individual act can have long term effects."

You can however use a participle in a subsidiary clause, eg you could say "He walked down the street, whistling a tune."

You can find out more about using participles here: https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/en/quick-grammar/participle-clauses?page=2

**Confusing their, there and they're.**
Their = belonging to them
There = a place
They're = they are

**Confusing who and whom**
Who is used when the person in question is the subject of a verb. Example: "Who stole my pen?"
Whom is used when the person in question is the object of a verb. Example: "Whom did you see at the meeting?"
Whom is sometimes also used after a preposition. Example: "To whom does this belong?"

The difference is explained in more detail here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_16.htm

**Common punctuation errors**

**Leaving out punctuation altogether**
This may seem an obvious point, but make sure you end each sentence with a full stop (or an exclamation mark if appropriate, or question mark if it is a direct question)!

If a sentence is very long and contains several clauses, you may want to break it up with commas at the places where you would normally give a tiny
pause when reading it. However, note that you should avoid comma splices (see below).

You don't normally have to add a full stop to titles, or to shorter bullet points. Longer bullet points, comprising full sentences, can have a full stop at the end of each, or else a semicolon at the end of each of them except the last one, which should have a full stop.

Confusing the semicolon ; with the colon :
Put simply, a semicolon is often used where you could also use a full stop. For example, you could say "The sun is shining; all the birds are singing." You could also say "The sun is shining. The birds are singing."

A colon signals that a list or explanation is about to follow. An example of this is "The zoo has the following dangerous animals: two lions, a tiger, six wolves and a grizzly bear."

The comma splice
The comma splice is a very common error. It occurs when a comma is used to connect two sentences which could exist on their own. Here is an example of the comma splice: "She went to the shops, she wanted to get some apples."

You could however say "She went to the shops because she wanted to get some apples". You could also say "She went to the shops; she wanted to get some apples" or "She went to the shops. She wanted to get some apples."

You can find further information about punctuation here: http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_03.htm

Other things to look out for

Contractions. In academic writing, contractions ("can't, don't") should be avoided. Instead of "can't", say "cannot"; instead of "don't", say "do not", etc.

Inconsistency in the way words are written. For example, you could write "Village Hall" with a capital V and a capital H, to show that the building is an official one. You could also write it as "village hall" with a small v and a small h. However, you should not use the two different versions in one document. Choose one, and stick to it! The "find" function in Word is useful if you want to check that you have been consistent.

Inconsistency within a sentence. If you start out with one kind of sentence structure, don't swap to another kind halfway through!

Here is an example: "I like my cat Ginger because they always catch mice." This statement starts out talking about one particular cat (Ginger) but then switches to talking about all cats (they). You could correctly say "I like my cat
Ginger. I like cats because they catch mice" or "I like my cat Ginger because he catches mice."

Another example would be: "I am going to London to see a film, buy a book and shopping." The sentence begins by saying "I am going to London to..." so the things that follow have to fit that construction. You can say "I am going to London to see a film" and "I am going to London to buy a book" but you cannot say "I am going to London to shopping."
The correct thing to say would be "I am going to London to see a film, buy a book and do some shopping."

**Word choice** is one of the most difficult things to check. It's a good rule of thumb never to use a word if you don't know what it means, even if you've come across it in your reading. If you have to use a word you don't recognise because it's part of a quotation, look it up!
Do not assume that words given in a thesaurus are exact synonyms. For example, an online thesaurus gives the following as synonyms for "argue": contend, squabble, batter, hammer and jump! These words are not freely interchangeable. If you must use a thesaurus to find a synonym for something, check the definition of the new word before you use it in your essay.

Finally...

Avoid informal or slang words! Your tutor does not want to read "Macbeth knocks Duncan off, and then Lady Macbeth freaks out"...