Consultants Still Need Proofreading

Idea In Short

Two typos survived two rounds of proofreading on a proposal that was otherwise strong: differentiated, well-priced and clearly written. The fix is not blaming the proofreaders. It is a structured process that separates strategic review from tactical grammar checks and starts earlier.

A Typo on the First Page

The low point of one Friday was a partner reviewing an already-printed proposal and finding a typo on the first page, a missing helping verb in one spot and a verb in the wrong tense in another.1 Trivial to some, but sloppy and a quality problem regardless. Where was the proofreading supposed to have caught it?

A Genuinely Good Proposal

The document itself had real strengths, the product of two late nights of work: a distinct, differentiated point of view that stood for something, a strong narrative describing how the engagement would help the client, sharp visuals with clear work examples and reasonable, defensible pricing. None of that changes the fact that two typos slipped through, but it is worth naming what worked, since good proposals fail for reasons beyond typography too.

It Was Proofread, Twice

The frustrating part: the document had already been proofread by two separate people, and neither caught the errors. Blaming the proofreaders is tempting and mostly wrong; the more useful question is whether the instructions given to them were specific enough, or whether time pressure made the whole review too casual to catch anything but the most obvious mistakes. Taking more of the blame and giving away more of the credit is generally how managers should operate under these circumstances.

Small Things Signal Big Things

Clients hire consultants to manage ambiguity, wade through messy data, navigate politics and deliver excellent work.2 They are not paying to see the underlying reality that the team is human, occasionally sloppy and sometimes rushed. A typo is small in isolation and outsized in what it signals: if this slipped through, what else might have?

What Good Proofreading Actually Requires

Proofreading operates at different levels depending on available time. Fifteen minutes catches only the most obvious errors. Two hours, with a few days remaining before the deadline, allows for structural and strategic review as well as line-level correction. Each level ideally happens as a separate pass, since reading once for narrative and logic and again for grammar and typos catches more than trying to do both simultaneously. Two to three total passes before returning a document to its author is a reasonable target.

Three Layers of Review

Strategic and structural review checks whether section headers follow a logical order, whether every paragraph has a clear point the reader can follow and whether the language is direct rather than padded with vague, consulting-flavored filler.3 Tactical and superficial review checks spelling beyond what a spellchecker catches, common grammar confusions and parallel structure in bulleted lists, where every item should start the same grammatical way. Visual review checks that graphics are clean and relevant, that fonts, bullets and page numbers stay consistent throughout, and that tables align cleanly within their cells.

Fresh Eyes Beat Tired Ones

Timing matters as much as technique. A proofreader reviewing a document at eleven at night after twelve straight hours on the same project is working at a real disadvantage, regardless of skill, since fatigue degrades attention to detail in ways that are difficult to notice from the inside. Where the schedule allows it, routing the final pass to someone who has not been staring at the document all day, even if that means waiting until the following morning, consistently catches more than adding a third exhausted reviewer late at night.

Reading Backward Catches More

One technique worth adding to any proofreading process: read the document backward, sentence by sentence from the end, rather than in normal reading order. Reading forward, the brain naturally fills in gaps and autocorrects small errors because it is tracking meaning rather than individual words. Reading backward breaks that momentum and forces attention onto each sentence in isolation, which is precisely when a missing helping verb or a wrong tense becomes visible instead of silently skipped over.

Lessons for Next Time

Several changes improve the odds going forward: give proofreaders specific, narrow instructions rather than a vague request to check the document, read the final version aloud personally before it goes out, start the writing process earlier to leave real time for review rather than compressing it against a deadline, and identify which proofreaders reliably catch what others miss. Whether the proposal wins or loses will not hinge on two typos either way, but the process that prevents them is worth building carefully and revisiting regularly, regardless of any single proposal's outcome.

- 1Proofreading
- 2Management Consulting
- 3Editing

Summary

A missed typo on a printed proposal is a small failure with an outsized cost to trust. Separate strategic review from tactical proofing, read the final draft aloud yourself and start earlier. Small things matter because clients pay for polish, not excuses.