

Student proofreading toolkit

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Introduction

Submission time is looming and you want to ensure that your thesis or dissertation is in top-notch shape. There's no disagreement among universities over who should have written the content of your research – that person is you and you alone.

Where there *is* disagreement is in relation to whether and to what degree you can source assistance from third parties (fellow students, friends, internal language-support services, or professional proofreaders). Some universities preclude any form of third-party help; others have a mixed policy that varies from faculty to faculty, even course to course; and some actively support it.

If you're considering seeking help from a professional proofreader, check your university's guidelines first. This will ensure you're not breaking any rules, and, thus, risking neither your professional integrity nor the validity of your dissertation or thesis.

Whether or not you seek professional assistance, there are some self-editing tasks that you can do to tidy up your dissertation or thesis prior to submission. None of them are difficult to carry out, even for the novice Word user. Even professional proofreaders use these kinds of tools to complement their beady eyes and efficiently locate and amend a core group of potential problems.

I've put together a few of my favourites in this toolkit so that you can take advantage of them too. These are simple find/replace and wildcard search strings that you can use with the software already on your desktop. More advanced resources are listed in the [Appendix](#).

None of the assistance provided in this booklet will make your document perfect – we're not dealing here with content and structure – but it will help you tidy up your work. The tidier your document, the fewer distractions there'll be for the panel assessing your research. That's good news for them, and good news for you!

Buying advanced software

Paid-for software that can carry out far more advanced consistency checks is available, but it's just that – paid-for. See the [Appendix](#) for more information.

The find/replace strings I've included here, however, won't cost you a bean and can be carried out on your computer with Word. The DIY approach won't be as fast as the software, or a professional proofreader, but it's a cost-effective alternative that you can take advantage of if you set aside the necessary time to work through the tasks.

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A word on wildcards

When carrying out wildcard searches, it's best to ensure that Track Changes is switched off. Track Changes can interfere with the find/replace function such that your code strings won't be able to locate the problems, or, if they do, won't make changes in the correct format.

See the [Appendix](#) for Jack Lyon's excellent resources on advanced wildcard find and replace. These explain in detail why the strings are structured as they are. Understanding this will help you to build your own custom find/replace strings.

Screen views, operating systems and software versions

I work in Windows 10 with Word 2016 (Office 365) for PC. The shortcut keys I suggest might look different in your version of Word, and the screenshots I've provided might also look a little different to your own desktop view. The find/replace strings, however, are universal.

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Self-editing tasks

The following tasks will help you to polish the appearance of your document so that your dissertation or thesis is more readable, more stylistically consistent, and easier on the eye. None of the tools here will replace a thorough line-by-line edit. Rather, they complement this process.

Always save a backup copy of your file first, just in case you implement changes incorrectly. It's easier to revert to a fallback document than to repair a damaged one. I always test complex find/replace and wildcard search strings beforehand.

Now, let's get going!

Remove double spaces

Unless your university specifically asks you to place two spaces after a full point, then don't! It isn't necessary. Even if you were taught that this is the proper thing to do, or it is something you prefer, follow professional convention. Readers who like two spaces won't notice that you've only used one (because it's not noticeable!) while readers who like one space will be irritated that you've used two. Anyway, it looks rather gappy.

If you love a double space (because thirty years ago your English teacher said, 'That is the right way to do it'), look at the following two options and decide which, created using twenty-first-century word-processing software, looks the most aesthetically pleasing:

Here is an example of text written in Microsoft Word with two spaces after a full point. Can you see that it looks rather gappy? Do you own any professionally published books with text that is spaced like this?

Here is an example of text written in Microsoft Word with one space after a full point. Can you see that it is easier on the eye? Do the professionally published books in your home have text that is spaced like this?

Still not convinced? Think about this. Professional typesetters don't do it. Professional book designers don't do it. Professional publishers don't do it. The *Chicago Manual of Style* discourages it. The Modern Language Association, Oxford University Press's *New Hart's Rules*, the American Psychological Association, and a host of other academic and professional bodies all concur ('[Sentence spacing in language and style guides](#)').

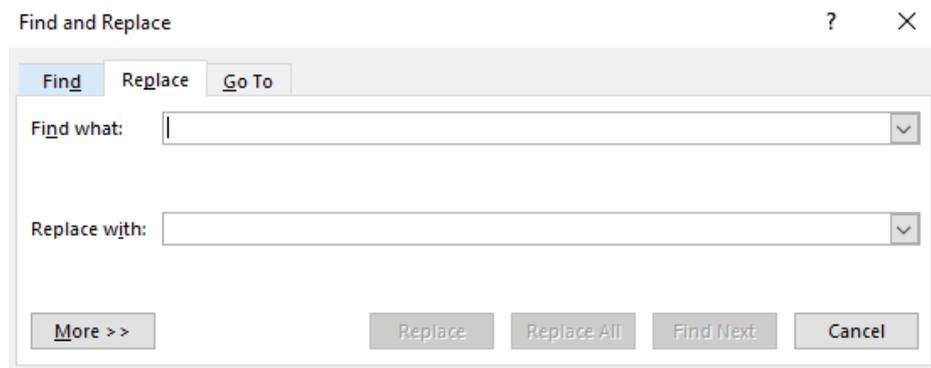
Standard professional publishing asks for one space, and, given that you want your thesis or dissertation to appear professional, I'd recommend you use one, too.

Farhad Manjoo in '[Space Invaders](#)' (Slate, 2011) presents a lively and entertaining summary of why using two spaces is not advisable, and how this practice emerged in the first place.

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To remove all double spaces from your file:

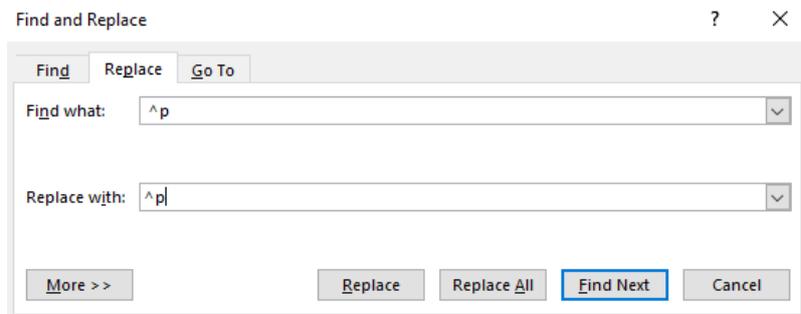
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC).
- Type two spaces in the Find box and one space in the Replace box.
- You can then globally change all double spaces to single, or move through your document, reviewing each instance as you go and deciding whether to amend.



Remove all rogue spaces at the beginning and end of paragraphs

To remove all rogue spaces at the end of paragraphs:

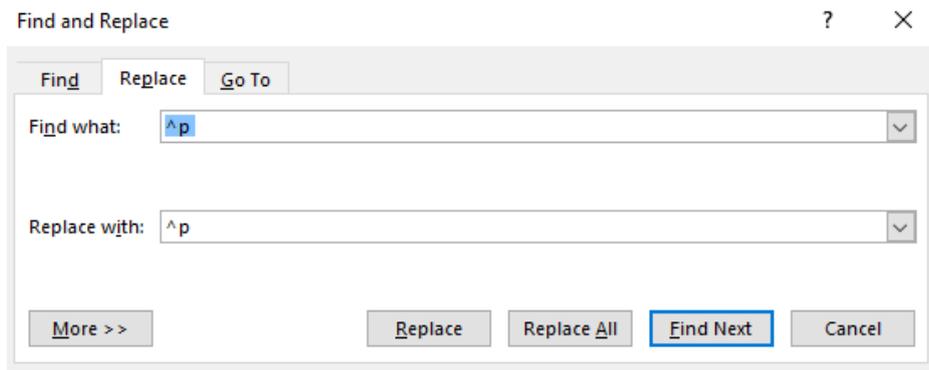
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC).
- Type a space followed by ^p in the Find box, and ^p in the Replace box.



To remove all rogue spaces at the beginning of paragraphs:

- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC).
- Type ^p followed by a space in the Find box, and ^p in the Replace box.

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Remove double line returns

If you've used Word's Styles to define the appearance of the various text elements in your document, you can specify how much space you want there to be before the next paragraph or line return begins. In that case, you won't need double line returns:

- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC)
- Text for Find box: ^p^p
- Text for Replace box: ^p

Change hyphens used as parentheses to dashes

Different style guides call for different ways of using parenthetical punctuation in text – that's the set of dashes either side of a statement – in documents (like the pair I've used in this sentence). I've used spaced en dashes here. Some guides prefer spaced em dashes, and some ask for unspaced em dashes. Here are some examples:

- Spaced en dashes: The cat – a tabby – sat on the mat.
- Spaced em dashes: The cat — a tabby — sat on the mat.
- Unspaced em dashes: The cat—a tabby—sat on the mat.
- Commas: The cat, a tabby, sat on the mat.
- Brackets: The cat (a tabby) sat on the mat.

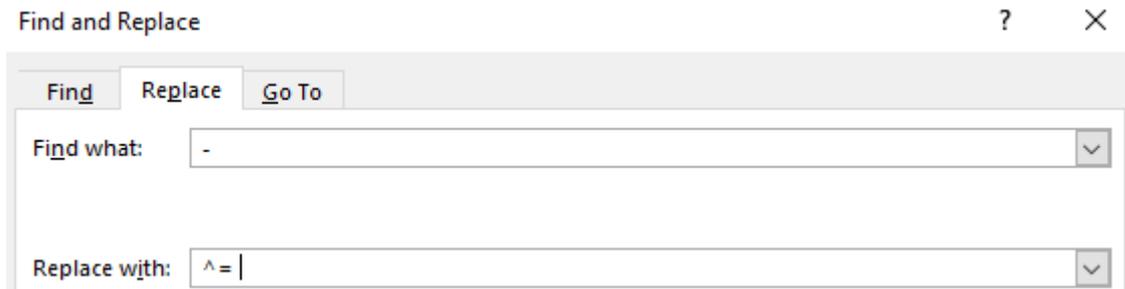
Avoid using hyphens as parentheses (The cat - a tabby - sat on the mat). The hyphen is not the correct piece of punctuation to use in this situation and it may confuse your reader if you use it inappropriately. After you've identified which dash style your university prefers, aim for consistency.

To locate and change your style, use the following find/replace strings:

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Spaced hyphens to spaced en dashes

- Text for Find box: <space>-<space>
- Text for Replace box: <space>^=<space>



Spaced hyphens to spaced em dashes

- Text for Find box: <space>-<space>
- Text for Replace box: <space>^+<space>

Spaced hyphens to unspaced em dashes

- Text for Find box: <space>-<space>
- Text for Replace box: ^+

Unspaced hyphens to spaced en dashes

- Text for Find box: -
- Text for Replace box: <space>^=<space>

Unspaced hyphens to spaced em dashes

- Text for Find box: -
- Text for Replace box: <space>^+<space>

Unspaced hyphens to unspaced em dashes

- Text for Find box: -
- Text for Replace box: ^+

Spaced en dashes to unspaced em dashes

- Text for Find box: <space>^=<space>
- Text for Replace box: ^+

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Change tabbed paragraph indents to proper line indents (using Word's 'Styles')

Using tabs to indent paragraphs can lead to all sorts of display problems and inconsistencies. It's better to create an indented paragraph style. That way, if you want to change the size of your indent, you can apply the change to your entire file, rather than having to amend each indent manually.

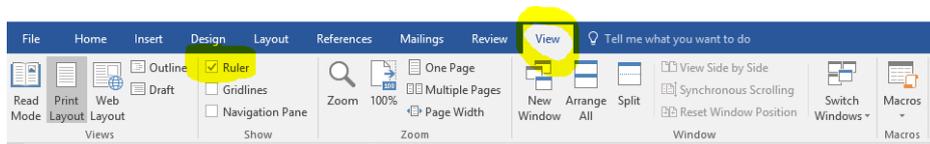
First, I'll show you how to remove the tabs simply; then, I'll show you how to create an indented paragraph style.

Locate and remove unnecessary tabs

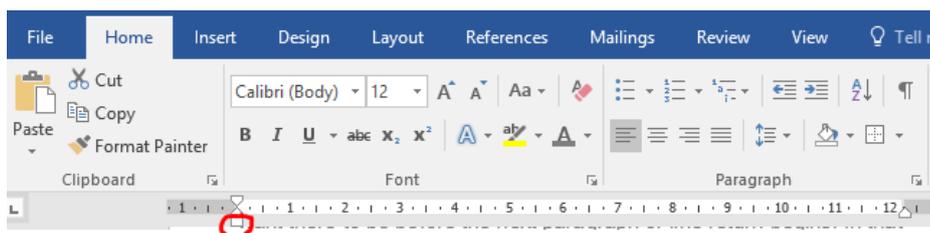
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC)
- Text for Find box: ^t
- Text for Replace box: [leave blank]

Create an indented paragraph style

- Make sure the ruler is showing in your document (in later versions of Word on a PC, this is found in the 'View' tab)



- Click somewhere in the paragraph
- Slide the bottom square section of the tool to the right until you're happy with the size of the indent

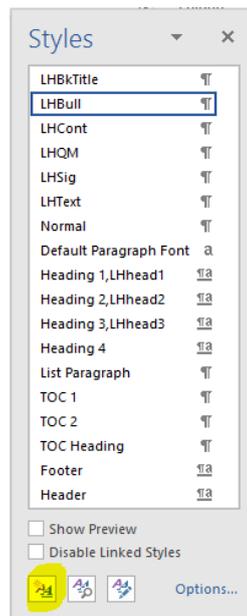


- Go to the 'Home' tab so that the 'Styles' pane is visible

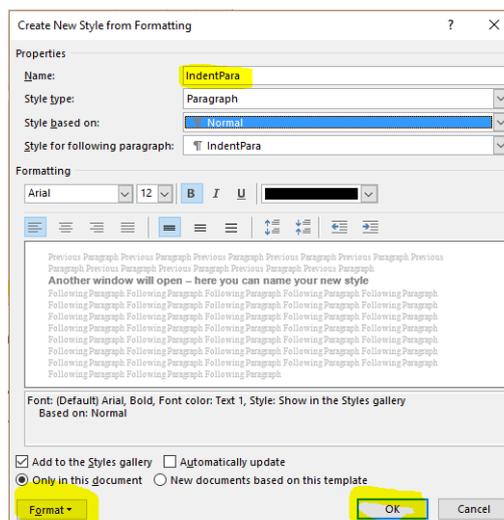


- Double click on a word in the now-indented paragraph
- Click on the small arrow in the bottom-right-hand corner of the 'Styles' pane
- A window will open. Click on the 'Create New Style' button highlighted below

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- Another window will open – here you can name your new style, and define any properties via the 'Format' button



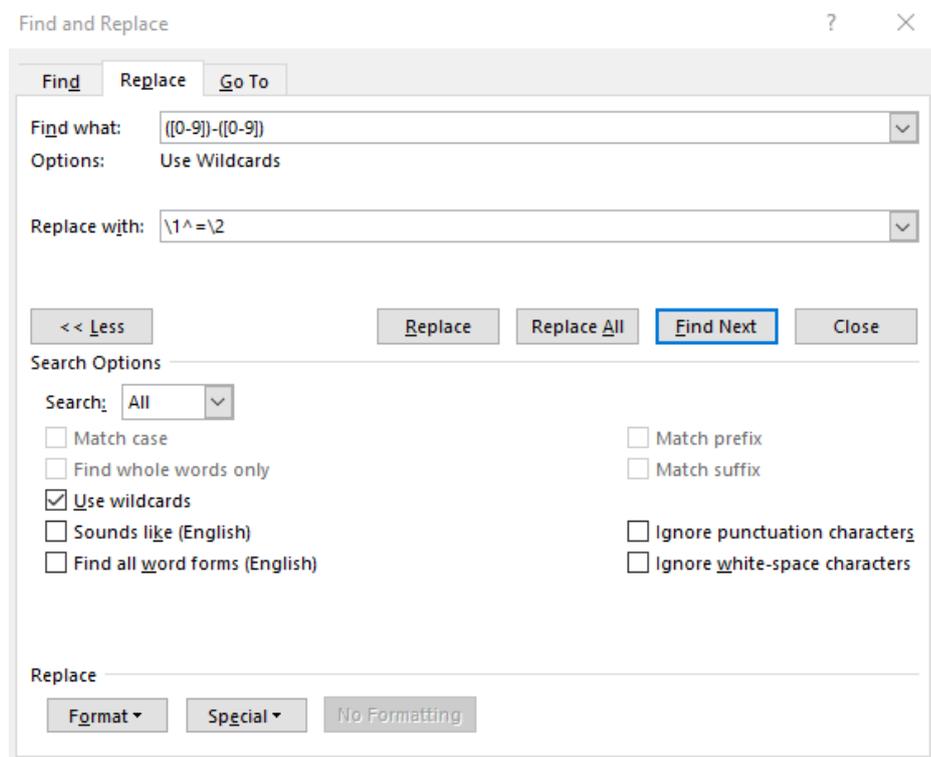
- If you decide to change the font, letter size, spacing, colour, indentation, etc., of a particular text element, you need only do so once – by amending the style rather than the individual lines of text in your document.

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Change a hyphen in a number span to an en dash

To change a hyphen in a number span to an en dash, using wildcards:

- Ensure Track Changes is switched off
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC)
- Check the 'Use Wildcards' box
- Text for Find box: `([0-9])-([0-9])`
- Text for Replace box: `\1^\2`



Here's a quick explanation of what those find/replace strings mean:

- Find box: 'Find any number between 0 and 9, followed by a hyphen, followed by any other number between 0 and 9.'
- Replace box: 'Keep the information you found in the first set of round brackets, replace the hyphen with an en dash, and keep the information you found in the second set of round brackets.'

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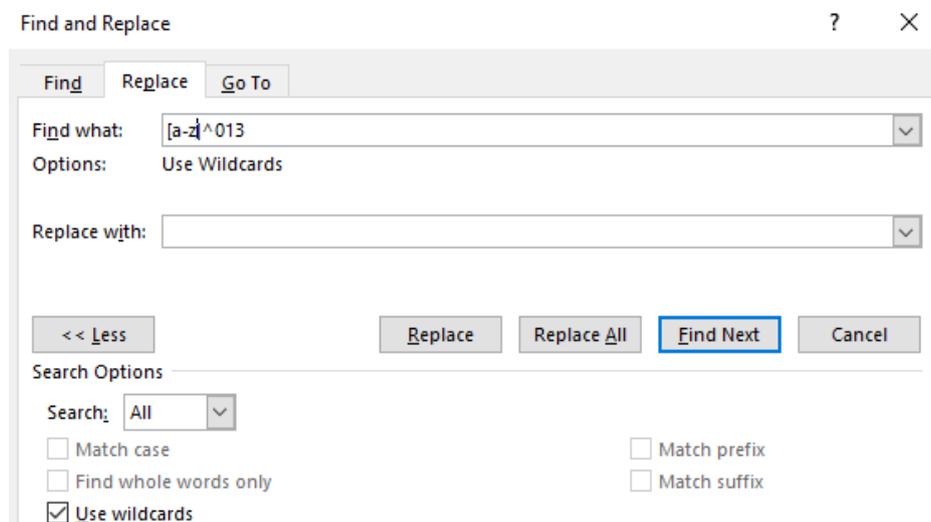
Find lower-case letters at the beginning of paragraphs

- Ensure Track Changes is switched off
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC)
- Check the 'Use Wildcards' box
- Text for Find box: ^013[a-z]
- Use the 'Find Next' button to check every instance

Find a paragraph that ends with no punctuation

If you have bulleted lists in your document, your chosen style may not ask for full points. It's nice to be able to check though, just in case you've accidentally omitted closing punctuation:

- Ensure Track Changes is switched off
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC)
- Check the 'Use Wildcards' box
- Text for Find box: [a-z]^013
- Use the 'Find Next' button to check every instance



Find a full point followed by a lower-case letter

- Ensure Track Changes is switched off
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC)
- Check the 'Use Wildcards' box

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- Text for Find box: . ([a-z])
- Use the 'Find Next' button to check every instance



Add or remove spaces between initial capital letters in names

Your style guide may ask for spaces between cited authors' initials. Here's how to locate and amend instances of closed-up initials:

- Ensure Track Changes is switched off
- Open Find and Replace (Ctrl H on PC)
- Check the 'Use Wildcards' box
- Text for Find box: ([A-Z]).([A-Z])
- Text for Replace box: \1. \2
- Use the 'Find Next' button to check every instance



If your style requires closed-up initials, the find/replace strings are as follows:

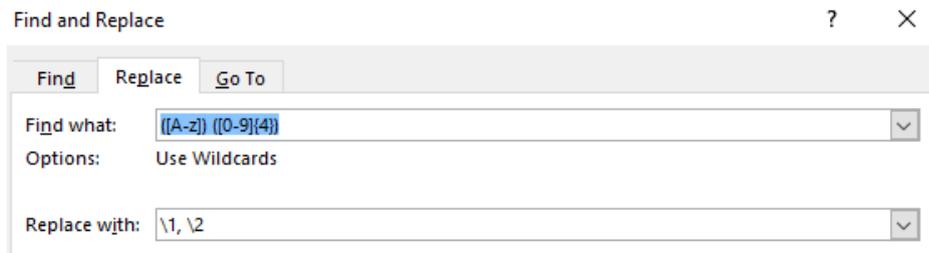
- Text for Find box: ([A-Z]). ([A-Z]).
- Text for Replace box: \1.\2.
- Use the 'Find Next' button to check every instance

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Find, add or remove commas in bracketed citations

To add a comma in a bracketed reference, e.g. so that Harnby 2016a becomes Harnby, 2016a:

- Text for Find box: ([A-z]) ([0-9]{4})
- Text for Replace box: \1, \2
- Use the 'Find Next' button to check every instance



To do the reverse, and change Harnby, 2016a to Harnby 2016a:

- Text for Find box: , ([0-9]{4})
- Text for Replace box: type a space followed by \1
- Use the 'Find Next' button to check every instance

Changing date styles with wildcard searches

Here are some simple find/replace strings you can use to identify and amend dates that aren't rendered according to your preferred style. Make sure 'Use Wildcards' is ticked:

7th August 2001 to 7 August 2001

- Text for Find box: ([0-9]{1,2})([dhnrst]{2}) (<[AFJMNSOD]*>) ([0-9]{4})
- Text for Replace box: \1 \3 \4

August 7 2001 to 7 August 2001

- Text for Find box: (<[AFJMNSOD]*>) ([0-9]{1,2}) ([0-9]{4})
- Text for Replace box: \2 \1 \3

August 7, 2001 to 7 August 2001

- Text for Find box: (<[AFJMNSOD]*>) ([0-9]{1,2}), ([0-9]{4})
- Text for Replace box: \2 \1 \3

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August 7th 2001 to 7 August 2001

- Text for Find box: (<[AFJMNSOD]*>) ([0-9]{1,2})([dhnrst]{2}) ([0-9]{4})
- Text for Replace box: \2 \1 \4

August 7th, 2001 to 7 August 2001

- Text for Find box: (<[AFJMNSOD]*>) ([0-9]{1,2})([dhnrst]{2}), ([0-9]{4})
- Text for Replace box: \2 \1 \4

Author in-text citations: and or &

Some style guides ask for ampersands between author names in bracketed in-text citations. If you want to check that you've used ampersands consistently, try the following find/replace strings, designed for two- and three-author bracketed citations. Make sure 'Use Wildcards' is ticked:

Two authors: changing (Smith and Harnby, 2016) to (Smith & Harnby, 2016)

- Text for Find box: [^40]([A-z]@) and ([A-z]@), ([0-9]{4})[^41]
- Text for Replace box: (\1 & \2, \3)

Three authors: changing (Smith, Ramesh and Harnby, 2016) to (Smith, Ramesh & Harnby, 2016)

- Text for Find box: [^40]([A-z]@), ([A-z]@) and ([A-z]@), ([0-9]{4})[^41]
- Text for Replace box: (\1, \2 & \3, \4)

Run a confusables macro

Even the best writers have blind spots when it comes to confusables. Confusables fall into several categories:

- Some confusables are spelled differently and sound very different too, e.g. imply/infer; militate/mitigate; reactionary/reactive. In this case, the writer might have misunderstood the meaning.
- Some confusables are homophones – words that are spelled differently but sound the same, e.g. rein/reign; stationary/stationery; prophecy/prophesy; loath/loathe. In this case, the writer understands the different meanings, but is unsure of the appropriate spelling.
- Then there are errors that are simply a result of hands moving too fast over a keyboard – the meanings and correct spellings are known to the writer, but, in their haste, perhaps they've transposed a couple of letters or omitted a character. Or it may be that the automatic spellcheck has kicked into gear and the writer hasn't noticed the problem

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because they're concentrating on the bigger picture. Examples might include, e.g., filed/field; adverse/averse; pubic/public.

There's a free macro that'll help you spot those pesky snafus! My recommendation is CompareWordList, created by Allen Wyatt of WordTips. Full instructions for how to use this macro are available at ['Using proofreading macros: Highlighting confusables with CompareWordList'](#) (Harnby, 2016).

Change straight quotes to curly

Make sure Track Changes is switched off. Then select all the text in your document. Now use the following find/replace strings for single and double quotation marks respectively:

- Text for Find box: ‘
- Text for Replace box: ’

and

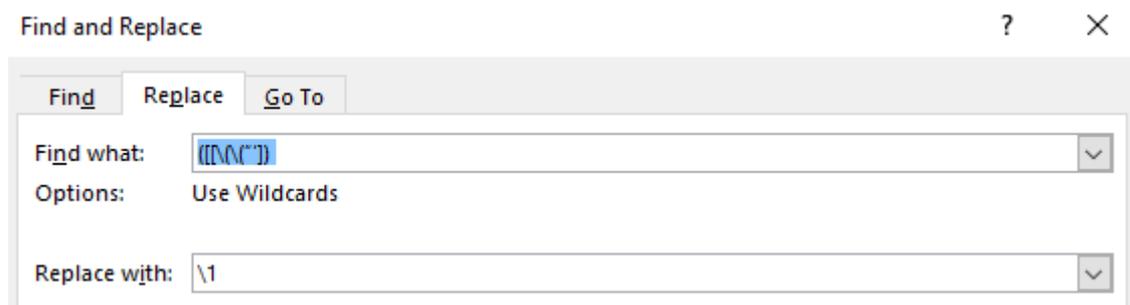
- Text for Find box: “
- Text for Replace box: ”

Remove unnecessary spaces before or after punctuation

You can locate rogue spaces before and after a range of punctuation marks – in one fell swoop. Make sure 'Use Wildcards' is selected:

Find spaces after opening brackets (square and round) and opening quotation marks (single and double)

- Text for Find box: `([\(\["]<space>`
- Text for Replace box: `\1`



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Find spaces before full points, commas, question marks, semi-colons, closing quotation marks, (single and double), closing brackets (square and round), and colons

- Text for Find box: <space>([.,;:\?!\'""])
- Text for Replace box: \1



Ellipses

Most style guides ask for ellipses to be spaced ... like this. Follow your university's guidance. If you want to change closed-up ellipses...like this, to the spaced version, here are the find/replace strings:

- Text for Find box: ...
- Text for Replace box: <space>...<space>
- Take care when using the 'Replace All' function here – you might introduce unnecessary spaces between ellipses and other punctuation marks such as question marks and quotation marks. Instead, review each instance and decide whether to amend.
- Alternatively, run 'Replace All' and then rerun **Remove unnecessary spaces before or after punctuation** to eliminate any spaces that you've introduced.

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Using Word's Styles function

A document that is styled consistently is easier to read and to navigate. Using the Styles palette is the easiest and most efficient way to bring consistency to the appearance of the various elements in your document. These might include:

- Bulleted and numbered lists
- Figure headings
- Headings
- Main paragraphs, indented or full out
- Position of images (left, right, centred)
- Quoted matter
- Source captions
- Subheadings
- Table headings

By defining the style of each element, you can easily control the following:

- Alignment (left, right or centred; justified or ragged)
- Colour
- Font
- Indentation
- Line spacing
- Roman, italic, underline
- Size

There's an example of how to create a style in the section [Change tabbed paragraph indents to proper line indents \(using Word's 'Styles'\)](#).

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Your stylistic preferences for the text

Decide on your stylistic preferences for your text. Your university's guidelines should take precedence. Follow these in the first instance, and aim for consistency thereafter. It's worth taking the time to record these preferences on a style sheet. If you decide to seek third-party assistance, you can provide your reader with a copy.

Be sure to leave direct quotations from your primary and secondary sources as they are.

Issues to consider include:

- Is/iz word endings (e.g. organise versus organize). Iz word endings are not American; this style has been used in British English for centuries.
- Language spelling choice. There is more than one English (British English, colour; American English, color).
- Abbreviations. Your university's style may call for abbreviations to be formatted with or without full points (e.g. U.S. versus US).
- Contractions. Some style guides (e.g. *Chicago*) ask for full points to be used in contractions (e.g. Dr., Ms., Mr.). Others prefer no full point (e.g. Dr, Ms, Mr).
- Author initials. These might be spaced or unspaced, with full points or without. Thus: AL Harnby, A L Harnby, A. L. Harnby or A.L. Harnby.
- Number formatting. There are numerous styles for number treatment. You might be asked to spell out all numbers below 10 or 11, or all numbers under 100. There may be different 'rules' for numbers attached to ages and measurements. The most important thing is to be clear on the terms of the style and apply them consistently.
- Date styles. Different style guides ask for different presentations of dates, e.g. 7 August 2001 versus August 7th 2001. Make a note of the preferred style and apply consistency to your document.
- Style of citation (e.g. author, date).

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Should you bother?

Whether you're hiring professional proofreading or going it alone, I'd recommend you carry out these tasks. Here's why:

- The more polishing you do, the less work for your proofreader. You can tell them they don't need to spend time on these tasks and they may offer you a more competitive price. I reduce my price by 10% if a student informs me that they've run the tasks in this booklet.
- Making life easier for your assessors. Even if your university states that the content alone is what you will be assessed on, the tidier your document the fewer distractions for your readers. That means they can focus on your research arguments rather than tripping up over inconsistent (and potentially confusing) formatting and sloppy presentation.
- Professionalism. Your thesis or dissertation should reflect your academic professionalism. You wouldn't dream of turning up to an interview wearing a shirt that had the remains of your breakfast on – instead you'd present yourself appropriately. Your submitted document should be approached in the same way!

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References and citations

Do take care to ensure that your in-text citations and bibliography conform to your university's guidelines. Taking a professional approach to referencing and citation is an essential part of academic rigour. Sloppy attention to detail could seriously count against you.

In particular, you must ensure that all your in-text citations are listed fully in your Reference List or Bibliography. A superb resource to help you cross-check your citations is ReferenceChecker. See the [Appendix](#) for details.

Here are some links to online academic style summaries, though your university may have its own custom style guide, which should always take precedence:

- [American Anthropological Association \(AAA\)](#)
- [American Institute of Physics \(AIP\)](#)
- [American Sociological Association Style Guide](#)
- [APA style tutorials](#) (free; one for the uninitiated and one with an overview of key changes); see also the [Anglia Ruskin summary](#)
- [APSA Style Manual for Political Science](#)
- [Bluebook](#)
- [British Psychological Society \(BPS\)](#)
- [Chicago Manual of Style](#)
- [Economist](#)
- [Harvard System](#)
- [IEEE Citation](#)
- [MHRA \(Modern Humanities Research Association\) Style](#)
- [Modern Language Association \(MLA\) Style Guide](#)
- [OSCOLA \(Oxford Standard for the Citation of Legal Authorities\)](#); see also the [Anglia Ruskin summary](#)
- [Oxford University Style Guide](#)
- [Vancouver System](#)
- [World Health Organization \(WHO\)](#)

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Choosing a professional proofreader

If your university supports your hiring a third-party professional, here are some issues to consider:

- Book well ahead. Experienced proofreaders might be booked several weeks or even months in advance so start looking well ahead of time to avoid disappointment.
- Be sure to establish clear guidelines as to what will and won't be done by your proofreader. If they don't outline the scope of their services on their website, ask them to clarify. The level of intervention should be agreed as part of the booking-confirmation process to avoid misunderstandings. You should also tell your proofreader what your stylistic preferences are (see: [Your stylistic preferences for the text](#)).
- Research more than one supplier. Different proofreaders specialize in different subjects. For example, I have a degree in Politics and worked for a social-science publisher for many years. I'm therefore comfortable with the language of the social sciences. If your research is in the field of the life sciences, medicine or engineering, I'd recommend you source proofreaders who have an academic and career background in those fields.
- I appreciate that very few students have bottomless pockets, but please do be realistic about your budget, and save up if necessary. Proofreaders' rates vary. Ask yourself whether you want a cheap job or a great job. If you opt for cheap, there's a very real danger you'll end up with a rushed piece of proofreading. A poor proofread isn't value for money – it's wasted money.
- Does your proofreader have experience of working on academic material? Proofreading a sociology dissertation requires a different approach to that of proofreading a crime thriller.
- Be realistic. Don't expect absolute perfection. A professional proofreader will *aim* for perfection, but one editorial pass is simply not enough to guarantee that every problem will be spotted. Publishing houses routinely take their books through several rounds of editing prior to publication because they know that authors, copyeditors and proofreaders are only human. If you only have your work professionally proofread once, it is possible that a few tiny misses will slip through.
- Time frame. Be sure to give yourself at least two weeks between receipt of your edited file and submission. It's your responsibility to ensure your thesis or dissertation is ready for submission, not your proofreader's, and there may be work to do. Your proofreader may have highlighted parts of the text that don't make sense and need rewriting by you. There may be missing references that you need to insert, or existing references that need formatting properly. You will need to review all the amendments to ensure you are happy with the changes that have been made.

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Final words

I hope you've found this toolkit useful. I wish you every success with your research and submission. If you'd like to discuss commissioning me to proofread for you, please get in touch.

I'm a social-science specialist with plenty of experience of working with students and mainstream publishers. Take a look at my [academic portfolio](#) for more information about the projects I've worked on, and my [Students](#) webpage, which outlines the scope of my service. I'm also a native English speaker.

Time-wise, I can usually turn around a job of up to 80,000 words in 7–10 days.

Remember, if you've carried out the tasks covered in this booklet, I'll give you a 10% discount.

Finally, if we can't agree on a time frame that suits you, I'll do my best to put you in touch with a trusted colleague who'll be able to help.

Thanks for reading!

Louise

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Appendix

The following resources are available for those who want to take self-editing to a more advanced level. These tools (apart from two) need to be paid for, but they *are* excellent and used by many editorial professionals the world over. If you're a Mac user, check that the software is compatible before purchase. Most of the suppliers offer free trials.

I've also included links to a couple of books that focus on writing your thesis or dissertation.

- Becker, Lucinda (2014). *Writing Successful Reports and Dissertations*. London: SAGE Publications
- Beverley, Paul (2016). [Computer Tools for Editors](#). Norwich: Archive Publications (**FREE** suite of editing macros)
- [Editor's ToolKit](#) – suite of editing macros from Jack Lyon (editorium.com)
- [EditTools](#) – suite of editing macros from Rich Adin (wordsync.com)
- Lyon, Jack (2015). *Wildcard Cookbook for Microsoft Word*. The Editorium
- Lyon, Jack (2012). *Advanced Find and Replace for Microsoft Word*. The Editorium (**FREE**)
- Oliver, Paul (2008). *Writing your Thesis*, 2nd ed. London: SAGE Publications
- [PerfectIt](#) – consistency checker (intelligentediting.com)
- [ReferenceChecker](#) – citation/reference list cross-checker (goodcitations.com)