Proofreading Strategies Every Writer Should Know:

Don’t rush.
The process of academic writing has a certain chronology, and proofreading is its final phase. Before you begin making end-stage edits, you should: a.) be confident that your content and ideation is as sound as possible, b.) confirm that each paragraph contributes to your content in an important and logical way, and c.) ensure that your paper is well-organized and elaborates on a solid thesis. If you’ve already worked through major revisions, then you’re prepared to assess your writing in terms of grammar and mechanical nuances -- but not before.

Instead of multitasking, prioritize.
It’s easier and more efficient to scour an essay for sentence fragments than to read for sentence fragments, pronoun clarity, punctuation mistakes, and subject-verb agreement all at once. To avoid spreading yourself too thin, deliberately tackle errors one by one, finding all instances of each correction before moving on to the next. (UNC)

Be selective and purposeful.
Especially where unusually long or complicated sentences appear, it’s good to consider the reason why you’ve included each word in a piece of writing. If you come across any words that don’t serve a unique and apparent purpose in context, they’re probably just bulking up your paper. Prune away elements like restatement, excessive prepositional phrases, or weak/inexact terminology to show off your idea in its most readable form.

Know your strengths and weaknesses.
If you have a history of run-on sentences or misspelling words, keep that in mind as you edit your writing. Conserve your mental resources by focusing more attention on what you know to be problem areas and less attention on areas where you typically succeed.

Don’t play favorites.
Try to analyze your paper as objectively as possible, and put yourself in your audience’s shoes. Are any descriptions or expressions confusing from this perspective? Don’t spare even your favorite, most creative sentences; the statements that are the most powerful to you, the author, may need some clarifications to be equally powerful from the more removed standpoint of your readers.

Go with your gut (sort of).
Particularly for native English speakers, command of language comes largely from internalized knowledge rather than formal training. That said, if something about a sentence just doesn’t “sound right” to you, you’ll want to consult a resource (like a professor, reference book, or the internet) that can translate your intuitive suspicion into a practical correction. (UNC)

Read your writing aloud, or have it read aloud to you.
Hearing how your writing sounds is a different experience from reading it on paper. Listening to your essay is a good way to detect red flags like awkward wording, omitted or repeated words, confusing syntax, and redundancies that you might not otherwise notice. It may seem tedious -- it may actually be tedious -- but it will pay off in the end. (Harvard, pt. 1)

http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/editing-essay-part-one
http://writingcenter.unc.edu/handouts/editing-and-proofreading/
Grammar and Writing Center Tutors

In order for writers to express themselves in the most effective way, an outcome every Writing Center strives to realize, a working knowledge of grammar and mechanics is indispensable. “Proofreading,” or “checking grammar,” is a part of good writing. It just is. But, as tutors, how do we carry out our mission for helping writers improve technically in light of the ineffectiveness of simply combing students’ writing for mechanical errors? How should tutors ensure that writers remain active, primary participants in sessions centered on grammatical correction?

In general:

Keep in mind (and encourage students to keep in mind) that unless a writer has a fundamentally poor grasp on grammar, and his/her writing is difficult to understand because of it, most of the time a few semantic discrepancies will not be the reason a paper does not succeed. Readers can overlook a misplaced comma; they cannot ignore faulty logic, a muddy thesis, or an unsupported premise. Many student writers consider grammatical correctness to be a synonym for effectiveness where writing is concerned; tutors should help distinguish that these are not interchangeable.

Tutors should emphasize from the outset of a session that “proofreading” is a final step in the writing process, not an introductory one. Other components of a paper, like content, cohesion, and structure, take precedence over grammatical correctness, so editing an incomplete draft at sentence or word-level doesn’t really make sense. The best approach is substance first and aesthetic second.

Session strategies:

- Create a prioritized list of subjects the writer would like to address in the session; it can’t be a list if it only has one item on it, (“checking grammar”) so writers are compelled to identify some other areas of improvement even if grammar is their chief concern.

- If necessary, explain that what makes grammatical errors a problem is their impediment to clarity, but unclear writing often has bigger issues than grammar and syntax. You may fix the broken grammar, but the sentence/phrase/paragraph still isn’t as strong as it could be; how else could it be reinforced (in terms of organization, structure, cohesion, tone, etc.)?

- Although it seems helpful to frame a grammar-centered session with the lead-in, “What do you normally find difficult about grammar?” this may not always be a productive question. It can break the ice, but writers often reflexively answer something like, “commas,” not knowing how to articulate their real stumbling blocks. Where possible, have writers identify particular sentences or sections of the paper that they feel are grammatically questionable or would like to talk over; that way, the tutor is not relegated to the role of spellchecker or comma-monitor, and the writer exercises his/her own discretion.

- Errors that occur once or twice in a paper may be coincidental, but revision is about correcting repeated “patterns of error.” These are the teachable moments in a grammar-focused session. Remember those number sequences from elementary math? Maybe the first three values are provided to give the student a chance to divine the pattern, and then it’s up to him/her to calculate the next three. In the same way, tutors can help elucidate the initial issue, identifying the pattern, but use subsequent instances as supervised opportunities for writers to apply grammar principles themselves.