



SETTING THE SCENE

A spot of history

The word proofreading came from the traditional publishing industry. Letterpress printing was the normal form of printing text from its invention by Johannes Gutenberg in the mid-15th century to the 19th century and remained in wide use for books and other uses until the second half of the 20th century. In this process, a worker called a compositor or typesetter inserts and locks movable type – one letter at a time - into the "bed" or "chase" of a press, inks it, and presses paper against it to transfer the ink from the type, which creates an impression on the paper. The first copies of the print run would be called proofs, and these had to be carefully checked to ensure that the compositor hadn't made mistakes. There are many famous examples of missed errors in this type of printing, some of which are worth a great deal of money. My personal favourite is the 1,000 copies of the King James bible printed in 1631, which missed out a very important word in the Ten Commandments. Thus the seventh commandment read, "Thou shalt commit adultery." This print became known as the Wicked Bible.

This printing method was also responsible for a very commonly used description which is still used today. Back in ancient Rome, the Latin alphabet was carved all in capital letters of equal size. This writing is known as Roman majuscule - meaning an all-capital script. As hand writing became more common, a new type of script to write Latin developed, known as uncial script, which employed more rounded capitals. After this, came half-uncial, which changed the form of some letters to resemble the lowercase letters of today. In the middle ages, monks and scholars were the trained scribes, who produced most medieval manuscripts. A book could take months to copy by hand, so a new script called minuscule became common, which was a rounder, smaller and more efficient method than the older painstaking uncial script.

As the printing press became more common and compositors work more pressurised, each workspace was organised in such a way that it was easy to access the metal letters. There were two pieces of type for each letter. Individual pieces of metal type were kept in boxes called cases. The smaller letters (miniscule) which were used most often, were kept in a lower case that was easier to reach. Capital letters (majuscule) were used less frequently, so they were kept in a case above the main working station. Because of this old storage custom, we still refer to small letters as lowercase and capital letters as uppercase.