

Revising Rhetorically

Editing and Proofreading

Editing is the final step of the writing process. As you learned in the last chapter, many students make the mistake of focusing on error correction and proofreading **before** taking the time to develop, clarify, and organize ideas fully through drafting and revision. Although the parts of the writing process are not finite and sometimes do overlap, editing is a separate activity designed to address what writing specialists call **local issues**, such as

- grammar,
- sentence variety,
- mechanics,
- spelling,
- formatting

When Should You Edit?

Editing should come **after** you feel confident about the choices you have made in content, organization, and style. You might compare editing and proofreading to washing, waxing, and polishing your car. It would be absurd to take the time to do these things to a vehicle that does not run! Drafting and revising ensure that your writing is first fine-tuned; **then**, you edit to make it shine on the surface.

What are the Different Levels of Editing?

Paragraph-Level Editing

The first step in editing is to check your paragraphing. Think of paragraphs as larger forms of punctuation that broaden the connections shown by traditional punctuation marks, such as commas, semicolons, and periods. Punctuation marks indicate pauses, relationships, and connections within and between sentences. Likewise, paragraph indentations and lengths provide readers with visual guidance to relationships and connections between major ideas.

When you begin editing at the paragraph level, ask yourself

1. What does each paragraph say (main idea) and do (introduce, provide proof or support, give an example, illustrate, connect, conclude)?
 - Begin a new paragraph for each new idea.
 - The order of the paragraphs should be logical.
 - Look at what the paragraphs do, and question the usefulness of each.
2. Are sentences within paragraphs unified and consistent? Check for
 - unrelated ideas.
 - illogical sequences and series,
 - mixed metaphors and/or confusing comparisons,

- mismatched subjects and verbs—e.g., *butter reads* or *books believe*,
- transitional words or phrases.

Sentence-Level Editing

When you begin editing on the sentence level, ask yourself

1. Are the connections between ideas effectively communicated through subordination and coordination? Check for
 - Short, choppy sentences.
 - Excessively long, hard-to-follow sentences.
 - Unclear emphasis due to faulty or excessive subordination.
2. Are individual sentence structures clear and easy to follow? Check for
 - Misplaced parts.
 - Modifiers that have no referent in the sentence.
 - Modifiers that are too far from the words they modify.
3. Are ideas balanced through the use of parallel elements?
4. Are there any sudden shifts in grammatical structures, tone, or style? Check for
 - Consistent use of verb tense.
 - Consistency in person and number.
 - A unified tone/style.
5. Do sentences vary in length and construction?
6. Are sentences concise, free of dead weight or unnecessary words? Check for
 - Placeholders like *there*, *it*, *this*, and *these*.
 - Excessive use of forms of the verb to be. Replace be with strong, specific verbs.
 - Are sentences direct? Check for use of active voice, where the subject performs the action of the sentence—e.g., *The registrar misplaced your transcripts*.
 - Purposeful use of passive voice to avoid assigning blame or for emphasis—e.g., *Your transcripts were misplaced*.
7. Are there any fragments, comma splices, or fused sentences?
8. Do all subjects and verbs agree? Do all pronouns agree with their antecedents? Are all verb forms correct?

Word-Level Editing

When you edit for word choice, ask yourself

1. Are any words vague? Check for
 - General nouns—replace with specific or concrete nouns—e.g., replace *school* with *NSU* or *vehicle* with *Jeep Wrangler*.
 - General verbs—replace with specific, active verbs—e.g., replace *says* with *argues* or replace *ran* with *sprinted*.
 - Have you avoided sweeping generalizations that cannot possibly be supported? If not, replace with statements that acknowledge exceptions or qualifications.
2. Are any words or phrases overused? Check for

Editing and Proofreading

- Repeated words at beginnings of sentences.
 - Use of clichés.
3. Have unnecessary words been cut out?
 4. Does the vocabulary reflect sensitivity to audience, purpose, and context? Check for
 - Stereotypes.
 - Biased language based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, religious affiliations, age, or social class.
 - Connotations associated with words—When using a thesaurus, make sure you understand how the word is used and the nuances of meaning associated with the word in various contexts or cultures.
 - Jargon—Technical words should be defined or explained.
 5. Does your tone (attitude towards the subject) engage your readers? Check for
 - A hostile tone.
 - Assumptions about the readers or their beliefs.
 - The use of *you*

When Should You Proofread?

Once you have revised and edited your essay, you should proofread and format it. The proofreading stage of the writing process is just as important as the other stages; be sure that you proofread carefully. Because you have written the essay, you expect to see what you thought you wrote, so you might miss errors—especially minor ones such as a missing comma or apostrophe. To proofread well, read the essay aloud very slowly or read it backwards. Place a ruler under each line as you read to stop yourself from reading faster than you should be reading. Read the essay more than once while paying attention to every sentence, word, and punctuation mark. Care should be taken to keep the content of the essay from distracting you while you proofread.

Punctuation

When you edit for punctuation, ask yourself

1. Do sentences have the correct closing punctuation?
2. Are commas, semicolons, dashes, apostrophes, and other internal punctuation marks used correctly?
3. Are quotations correctly introduced, punctuated, and carefully cited? Are quotation marks turned the right way—towards the quoted material?
4. Are in-text citations correctly punctuated?

Spelling

When you edit for spelling, ask yourself

1. Are all words spelled correctly? Remember that spellcheckers are **not** always foolproof! Check for commonly confused words.
2. Have you used the correct forms? Double-check any abbreviations, contractions, or possessive nouns.
3. Have you used hyphens correctly? Double-check any hyphenated adjectives.

Capitalization and Italics

When you edit for capitalization and italics, ask yourself

- 1 Are words capitalized appropriately?
- 2 Are quotations capitalized correctly?
- 3 Are proper names and titles distinguished with appropriate capitalization and punctuation?
- 4 Are titles punctuated correctly with italics or quotation marks? (See “Using MLA” for a list of rules.)

Formatting

Formatting correctly shows that you care about the presentation of all your hard work. However, looks can be deceiving; a paper that looks good can still contain serious errors. Computers have made it much easier to produce a professional-looking document, but editing is still essential.

When you edit for formatting, ask yourself the following questions.

1. Have you followed all of your instructor’s directions about formatting?
2. Are the margins correct?
3. Is the spacing correct between words, sentences, and paragraphs?
4. Is the assignment block present and correct? Does it contain all of the required information in the correct order and form?
5. Do you have a title that is centered and spaced correctly and not underlined, italicized, boldface, in quotation marks, or in a different font?
6. Do you have a header with your name and page numbers?
7. If needed, do you have a Works Cited page that follows MLA guidelines? (See “Using MLA.”)

Sentence Guide¹

This list describes some common sentence-level problems.

Agreement: The subject should agree in number with the verbs and pronouns that go with it; that is, plural nouns require plural verbs and pronouns, and so on. Example: **“each of these weasels are enormous.”** (Problem: the verb *are* is plural, but the subject *Each* is singular.) Solution: **“each of these weasels is enormous.”**

Comma Splice: Avoid connecting two sentences with a comma. Don’t say, **“George is always late to the office, I think he loses his keys every day.”** Say instead, **“George is always late to the office; I think he loses his keys every day.”** Or, if you prefer, separate the two sentences by adding a period.

Dead Weight: Eliminate dead weight from your sentences. Don’t say, **“the thing that bothers me about Peterson’s article is that he says the moon is made of mozzarella cheese.”** (nineteen words) Notice the dead weight here: **“~~the thing that bothers me about Peterson’s article is that he says the moon is made of mozzarella cheese.~~”** This rewritten version is stronger, more precise: **“I find Peterson’s proposition about the moon being made of mozzarella silly.”** (twelve words)

Sentence Fragment: Don't write in sentence fragments; instead, write in complete sentences. Fragment: **“Dressing in women’s clothing.”** (No verb) Complete sentence: **“Dressing in women’s clothing, the comedian poked fun at conventional gender distinctions.”** (verb underlined)

Fused Sentence: Don't fuse two sentences without any punctuation. Don't say, **“Phyllis drove to Chicago today in fact I think she’s not coming back.”** Say, **“Phyllis drove to Chicago today. In fact, I think she’s not coming back.”** Or, if you prefer, separate the two with a semicolon.

Lacks Transition: Provide transitions, or bridges, between sentences and paragraphs. Consider these sentences: **“Dennis wrecked his car. the cost of his insurance increased.”** No transition links these sentences, but the ideas *should* be connected. State this connection: **“Dennis wrecked his car. As a result, the cost of his insurance increased.”** Here, **“As a result”** indicates the proper relationship between ideas. Always link your ideas (and your sentences and paragraphs) whenever you can.

Dangling Modifier: Modifiers are parts of a sentence that describe or modify other parts. Do not misplace modifiers within a sentence and create unintended, incorrect meanings: **“Plagiarizing a famous poem, the dean suspended the student indefinitely.”** The modifier (“Plagiarizing a famous poem”) is supposed to describe the student. But because it has been placed immediately beside “the dean,” the sentence suggests the dean is plagiarizing, not the student. A corrected version of this sentence reads: **“the dean suspended the student for plagiarizing a famous poem.”** Notice how much clearer this version is.

Overgeneralization: Do not make sweeping generalizations that ignore possible exceptions. Example: **“All people who live in Florida have dark tans.”** The troublesome word here is “all”; not all people in Florida are tan. Think carefully before making sweeping statements such as this one.

Reference: Be sure that your reader knows exactly who or what each of your pronouns refers to. If you don't, the reader will become frustrated. Example: **“Cheryl washed her car, bought groceries, folded her laundry, and ordered a pizza. this helped her prepare for the weekend.”** *Which* of these actions prepared Cheryl for the weekend? A better lead for the second sentence is **“these activities helped prepare. . .”**

Weak Repetition: Avoid repeating the same words or phrases unnecessarily. For instance, if five sentences in a row begin with the same word or words, your repetition is most likely weak because you are ignoring variety.

VAGUE Always prefer a precise word (i.e., **“Guatemalans”**) to a general (**“people”**). If you write vaguely, you will confuse your reader or give the impression that you don't know what you are talking about.

VOICE Prefer active voice to passive voice whenever possible. Try not to say, **“the suspect was given a sentence of twenty years in prison by the judge.”** Instead, say, **“the judge sentenced the suspect to twenty years in prison.”** Notice how the second example uses a stronger verb (*sentenced* vs. *was given*) and presents the information more concisely and forcefully.

Weak Lead: Eliminate passive or weak subject-verb combinations (e.g., “There is,” “It is ...that”) whenever you can. Be suspicious if you discover you are using forms of the verb “to be” (*is*,

¹ Source: McDowell, Sean. “To Grammar, or Not to Grammar?: The Question and an Answer.” In *Our Own Voice: Graduate Students Teach Writing*. Ed. Tina Lavonne Good and Leanne B. Warshauer. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000. 251-261.

are, am, be, being, been, was, were) or “to have” (*have, has, had, having*) excessively. Example: **“there is a reason why jack drove to the store.”** Solution: **“~~there is a reason why~~ jack drove to the store.”** If you want to, add the reason: **“jack drove to the store because he wanted a candy bar.”**

Weak Verb: Substitute strong verbs for weak verbs. Don’t say, **“the author gets the point across that we should treat people equally.”** Instead, say, **“the author suggests that we should treat people equally.”**

YOU (Addressing reader) Avoid addressing the reader in your writing, especially as “you.” Example: **“stephanie would teach you everything you needed to know to make a pillow.”** Do not make assumptions about what the reader does, learns, and so on. Instead, say, **“stephanie taught me everything I needed to know to make a pillow.”**