

Editing your writing

Maximise your marks by editing your work

Careful editing is vital. Errors frequently occur in writing; far more often than we realise.

Editing is a process of adding to and refining what you have written, rather than starting again.

Editing for content

• Is the argument clear and consistent?

In an essay it is important to clearly state your argument as a **thesis statement** in the introduction; e.g. *This essay will argue the case that ...* This argument should then be supported throughout the paper.

In a report an argument, if there is one, may emerge later, in the Discussion or Recommendations section.

• Are the connections between the sections clear?

Paragraphs dealing with separate aspects of a topic should be connected so that they do not look like completely independent pieces of writing. Each should be linked logically with the paragraph before and after, so that there is a clearly defined line of argument running through the entire piece of writing.

Linking can be achieved in several ways:

- Use linking words or expressions to indicate a connection with the previous paragraph:

E.g. *In light of the above ...; In contrast to this ...*

- Repeat some words or phrases from the last few lines of the preceding paragraph:

For example; if the paragraph ends like this:

*Clearly, there was something unique in Delaroche's style and technique that **appealed** to British audiences.*

The next paragraph could begin:

*This **appeal** became apparent when British audiences were first introduced to his work at the annual exhibition of Ancient Masters in 1938 ...*

• Are your ideas planned and presented in a logical order?

Always write from a logically ordered and sequenced plan that outlines the main ideas covered by each paragraph. This is useful as it informs your research; it gives you a clear framework for your writing; and it lets you go back over your writing during editing and check that you have followed a logical order.

• Does the writing have balance?

For example; is any one section too long? Look at what you have written in direct relation to the question. Have you addressed **all** parts of the question and written an appropriate number of words for the importance of the idea?

A good place to check what is expected of you in terms of content and word count by section is the rubric and criteria given to you by your lecturers; they are often quite specific about this.

• Have you answered the question?

Simply; does your writing address the question as it has been presented?

Editing for organisation and structure: paragraphs

Paragraphs are important because they are the framework on which your ideas are built.

• Does each paragraph have one main idea and is it expressed clearly in a topic sentence?

A topic sentence states the central idea of the paragraph clearly. The topic sentence is generally, but not always, the first sentence in the paragraph so it is very clear what the main idea is. The topic sentence acts as a signpost to your readers, letting them know the direction the essay is now taking. For example:

The first and most important reason for the American Revolution was dissatisfaction with taxation by the British without representation.

• Are all sentences in the paragraph relevant to the main idea?

Check that all of your sentences support the topic sentence and are relevant to the development of the point. Delete any sentences which may be relevant to the general topic but not strictly relevant to the idea you are developing.

• Is there a set length to a paragraph?

In short, no. A paragraph is an 'idea unit', not a unit of length, so the length of the paragraph is consistent with the relative importance of the idea. Paragraph length is always determined by the relative complexity and importance of its main point.

However, a series of 'short' paragraphs (less than 2-4 sentences) may give the impression that you have not adequately developed or substantiated the topic.

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Short paragraphs are best used to announce a transition; a change of subject or approach, or to explain how the following part of the essay is organised.

Paragraphs as a rough guide, *generally* average around 10-12 lines in a Word document.

• Is there a set length to a sentence?

Again, no, but there are some guidelines that can be helpful. The average sentence length is 15-25 words (about 2-3 lines in a Word document). Sentences shorter than 15 words are fine, and can have an emphatic effect, but keep in mind that too many short sentences gives your writing a 'choppy' feel to it.

At the same time, don't feel you have to write long, highly complex sentences. Sentences over 25 words are OK, but anything longer than 35 is becoming too long. Consider breaking long sentences up; idea control is lessened the longer the sentence goes.

Editing for expression

• Are the sentences complete; do they make sense?

Is each sentence and idea relevant to the thesis? Is there variety in your sentence construction? A mix of simple and complex sentences adds interest to your work.

• Check your:

- **Punctuation** - is it used appropriately? Keep in mind that punctuation provides the 'intonation' of writing. It also indicates how ideas fit together in a sentence.
- **Spelling** - don't rely on spellcheck, it won't pick up misuses such as 'form' for 'from'.
- **Referencing** - have you been careful to paraphrase and acknowledge the ideas of other authors in your work? Do your references conform to departmental guidelines as to how references should be presented?

Editing for academic style

Despite popular belief, academic writing is not necessarily overly complicated and difficult to read. Clarity and accessibility of the message are the aims. It's worth remembering that simplicity in writing is generally a sign of clarity of thought.

However, academic writing *is* formal and your writing should reflect the style and the terminology of the discourse adopted in your subject area. So, unless you are directed otherwise, it should also be as objective as possible (that is why 'I' is generally avoided), and should not use contracted forms, slang and emotionally charged words.

Editing for formatting

Finally, something that many people probably don't pay enough attention to; editing the formatting of the document.

Does it look like it is supposed to? Does it require headings?

What is the line spacing requirement? (1.5 line spacing is 'standard'.) Do you have a heading at the bottom of a page when it should be on the next page? Have you used an appropriate font type and size? If writing a report, do you need to have a Table of Contents – what should be in it?

Make sure you check these things against the assignment brief; they may prove the difference between a H1 and a H2.

An editing checklist

Read aloud: read the text aloud to yourself. This helps to identify parts which are not well written or don't sound right. It can also be helpful to get someone else to read your work. This also helps identify where to punctuate your writing.

Edit when you are freshest: e.g. early in the day – not 2.30 am after writing for 6 hours.

Take breaks from your work: effective editing requires some distance. Let the writing settle before you edit; leave at least 24 hours between writing and editing.

Review hard copy; print it out and read paper-printed text. We tend to 'skim' read and jump parts of text on screen.

Mark-up your text: Use a pen (or **highlighter**) when you read to identify issues.

Final-read with ruler / finger: read **every** line – read slowly, don't skim or don't skip to the next obvious error – be patient.

Edit in a quiet setting: minimal distractions; no music, TV, Internet; mobile on silent.

Edit for an extended period: you need to have to have a good run at it. Depending on the length of text, it may require an hour or so, not 5 minutes here and there.

Focus-edit: Edit for one thing at a time; edit for content / clarity, then check through for tone, then for structure, then for typos etc.

Double / Triple check final work: once it's submitted, that's it, it's gone. Cautionary tale: at Academic Skills we see students who have failed because they submitted the wrong draft! Don't let that be you.

Further Resources

Australian Government Style Manual. (2002). (6th ed.) Brisbane: John Wiley

Nordquist, R. (2011). *About.com Guide. Top Ten Proofreading Tips. How to Proofread Effectively.* Retrieved June 9, 2011, from www.grammar.about.com/od/improveyourwriting/a/tipsproofreading.htm

Purdue University Online Writing Lab. (2010). Purdue University. *Proofreading.* Retrieved June 9, 2011, from <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/01/>

LR Communication Systems, Inc. (1999). *Proofreading and Editing Tips.* Retrieved June 9, 2011, from http://www.lrcom.com/tips/proofreading_editing.htm

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