

EDITING AND PROOFREADING

Use this sheet to help you:

- recognise what is involved in editing and proofreading
- develop effective editing and proofreading techniques

5 minute self test

Read the following statements and identify if they are true (T) or false (F).

T / F Editing and proofreading are two terms for the one thing

T / F It is a good idea to ask others (e.g., friends, other students) to help edit and proofread

T / F Microsoft Word has functions which can help you edit and proofread effectively

T / F Editing and proofreading tend to have a large impact on your marks

T / F Editing and proofreading are best done immediately after you finish writing

T / F It is best to edit and proofread your work after printing it

Check your answers on Page 7

Why edit and proofread?

Would you take seriously a book or article full of careless errors? If you were to hand a manager a report full of careless errors, how do imagine he or she would react?

Of course, at university, lecturers are keen to see the quality of the content of your work: the facts, the ideas, the argumentation. But your success as a student is fundamentally affected by your ability to express yourself in a clear, accurate and persuasive manner. In the workplace, the situation is no different.

Lecturers and employers may not always talk about such things as grammar, spelling, punctuation and presentation. But they notice them. And they will look harshly on work that does not meet acceptable standards of style and literacy.

Thus, editing and proofreading are skills that you will need to take very seriously.

What is the difference between editing and proofreading?

Some people think that editing and proofreading are two words for the same thing. In fact they have different functions:

Editing involves close reading and re-writing of a version of the text which is approaching completion. It involves, for example, improving expression by eliminating redundancies or improving argumentation. Amongst other things, editing involves improving the *sense* of the material.

Proofreading involves checking of a final text for mistakes that may have escaped the editing process (such as spelling, noun-verb agreement errors, punctuation and capitalisation). Proofreading does not necessarily involve reading for the sense of material.

Can your computer proofread for you?

Your computer can help you proofread, but it is a poor substitute for what you can do. The following 'pome' should make this clear!

Spell Chequer Pome

I have a spelling checker
It came with my P.C.
It clearly marks for my revue
Mistakes I cannot sea.
I've run this poem threw it
And I'm shore your please to no
Its letter perfect in it's weigh
My chequer tolled me sew.

10 Editing and proofreading tips

1. Allow enough time

Don't edit and proofread your work immediately after writing. Put aside your work for a few days before beginning the checking process. In this way, you can look at it fresh and with a critical eye.

It's a good idea to allow at least four weeks to complete an essay of average length:

- Week 1 for brainstorming, research and initial writing
- Week 2 for writing (you can still do additional research during this period)
- Week 3 for correcting and revising the first draft
- Week 4 for correcting and polishing

2. Print your work before editing and proofreading

Looking at your work after you have printed it can be valuable, particularly when proofreading. Looking at your work on paper can uncover presentation mistakes, language mistakes, even content mistakes you may never have noticed otherwise.

3. Edit with problem areas in mind

If English is not your first language, it is possible that you frequently make particular language mistakes in your work.

Perhaps you often make mistakes in relation to some of the following areas of grammar: verb tenses, subject-verb agreement, articles, prepositions and use of pronouns. Perhaps you tend to write sentences that are too long and complicated. Perhaps your paragraphs tend to lack focus. The more awareness you have of mistakes that often appear in your work, the more successfully you will be able to address them when editing and proofreading.

5. Read aloud

Reading aloud, ideally to others but also just to yourself, is a great way to focus attention on your work. Reading aloud often makes you aware of instances in which sentences are too long and complicated, grammar or vocabulary problems are present, sentence structures are unclear, or arguments are unclear and lack logical structure.

Remember this: if your work is not clear enough to enable someone to follow it when listening, do not consider it clear enough for a person to understand when reading. Reading your text aloud can often help you simplify your sentences, and thereby make your writing clearer, more accurate and more persuasive. In addition to reading aloud, you may also consider asking others to read your text to you.

6. Consider editing forwards but proofreading backwards

When editing, you are checking for sense amongst other things, so read in the normal way. But when proofreading, you should be looking more for residual errors than content problems. One way to proofread involves reading each sentence independently starting from the final sentence in the last section and working backwards. Sounds boring? It is! But it helps you see the mistakes.

7. Vary your editing activities

If you are pressured for time, you might try drafting one chapter, section of a thesis or essay while editing or proofreading another. This keeps you interested in what you are doing while keeping the whole project moving along.

Don't edit or proofread for too long at a time; you will find it difficult to identify mistakes.

8. Familiarise yourself with the university requirements (for theses):

Find out how the university requires your dissertation or papers to be formatted. How do they want tables and charts to be presented? What margins are required? What spacing is needed? How should you set out the bibliography? How should you order and arrange the chapters and sections of your work?

9. Familiarise yourself with the departmental and faculty requirements (for essays and reports):

Find out about your specific disciplinary requirements for essays and reports. How do they want references to be cited? Do they want footnotes or endnotes or in-text references? If the latter, which style? How much can you quote from a given text without fear of overdoing it? Can you use bullet points when explaining something, or is a prose format preferred? Is the third person required, or can first person pronouns be used? What tense use is required? Are headers and/or footers needed?

Note for thesis writers

It is usually not sufficient just to rely on the comments of your supervisor, even if they are willing to edit and proofread your work. After your supervisor has finished reading your work for content, they are often not in any better position than yourself to offer editorial comments because they are then too familiar with the material to see the errors. You must involve the assistance of readers unfamiliar with the project. It is not essential that these individuals are working in your subject area, though it does help if they have written a dissertation themselves.

NOTE: The Melbourne School of Graduate Research offers UpSkills, a series of free workshops, classes, seminars and webinars designed exclusively for currently enrolled University of Melbourne graduate researchers.

10. Get others to read your work

Everyone can benefit from editing and proofreading help, even professional writers. We are usually too close and too familiar with our own writing to see mistakes or better ways of making a point. Thus, recruiting assistance to help you with the task is not "cheating", it is good sense. This might involve:

- asking a family member to read your material
- swapping your work with colleagues
- paying a professional editor

The more people you involve in this process, the less chance you have of errors appearing in the final version. You will be surprised how several people reading the same work independently can find quite different errors!

The following checklist may prove useful. Note that the checklist is best used in conjunction with other **Helpsheets** on specific areas such as Essays, Reports, Literature Reviews and The Harvard System, as well as the task guidelines specified by your lecturer.

Editing and proofreading checklist

Content

- Have I addressed all elements of the task?
- Have I demonstrated sufficient understanding of the topic and issue?
- Have I used a sufficient range of sources?
- Have I referred to ideas from other sources critically?
- Is my central argument clear?
- Are my supporting points clear?
- Is sufficient evidence provided to support my points?
- Does my text fit the word limit?

Text structure

Have I structured my text in the accepted manner? eg:

- Essay: introduction, body, conclusion, references
- Report: front matter, abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, procedure, results, discussion, conclusion, recommendations, appendices, references
- Have I structured each of these sections in the accepted manner?
- Have I avoided unnecessary repetition of concepts and ideas?

Paragraphs

- Are paragraphs sequenced logically?
- Does each paragraph contain a topic sentence?
- Do all following sentences in the paragraph support the topic sentence?
- Does each paragraph contain only one main idea?
- Are linking words used? (eg. 'given this point...', 'first...', 'second...', 'in conclusion...')
- Are paragraphs of appropriate length?
- Are titles used where necessary?

Grammar

Have I checked for grammatical errors? These may involve:

- verb tenses
- subject-verb agreement

Sentence structure

- Are most sentences in the active voice?
- Do most sentences begin with the subject?
- Are sentences short and clear enough?
- Does sufficient sentence variety exist?

Vocabulary

- Is my vocabulary clear, accurate and formal?
- Do I refer to subjects themselves instead of overusing pronouns such as 'it', 'they' or 'them'?
- Do I explain all technical terms and abbreviations when first used?
- Do I avoid overuse of abbreviations?

Expression

Is my writing as clear and concise as possible? Does it avoid:

- redundancies, (eg. 'absolutely perfect', 'completely surrounded', 'serious crisis')
- tautologies (eg. 'A comparative study covering both aspects')
- empty expressions or "waffle" (eg. 'in terms of', 'reflected in', 'in regards to')
- vague words ('factor', 'some', 'significant', 'aspect')
- empty modifiers (eg. 'huge', 'very')
- slang and informal terms

Spelling and punctuation

- Is spelling correct?
- Is punctuation correct?

Presentation

Have I checked the presentation? This will include:

- font size and type
- indentation
- justification of paragraphs
- margins
- spacing
- section and page numbering
- headers and footers
- capitalisation
- italicised, bold-printed or underlined words (don't overuse)
- wording and fonts of titles

Tables, graphs and illustrations

Have I checked that tables, graphs and illustrations are:

- positioned properly?
- referred to directly?
- titled and labelled correctly?
- cited appropriately?
- listed in the List of Tables or Illustrations?

Referencing and citations

- Are all sources acknowledged?
- Are citations formatted correctly?
- Are ideas from other sources paraphrased or summarised adequately?
- Are my positions on ideas from other sources clear?
- Are quotation marks used for direct quotes?
- Is the reference list complete and accurate?
- Is referencing consistent?

Want to learn more?

Spend time looking in some of the many style manuals to help you so you edit and proofread. The *MLA Style Manual* is a very good manual but there are also many others such as Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* and K. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*. The *Australian Government Publishing Service Style Manual* is essential reading. All of them are in the library. Taking time to read such manuals now will save you time later.

Answers

5 minute self test

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