

WRITING CENTER

Editing Tip Sheet

Editing and proofreading can seem like very difficult tasks—tasks for which writers often do not have particularly useful strategies. Here are some suggestions for approaching these tasks that may reduce some of the anxiety associated with them.

1. Give yourself time between finishing the final draft and editing. The psychological “space” will allow you to see what is actually on the page versus what is in your head.
2. Print a paper copy of your text and edit and proof with a pen or pencil. It is easier to catch errors on the printed page than it is to see them on the computer screen.
3. Have someone look over the paper for you to help you learn to recognize errors. Often a fresh reader will see things you do not. Do not, however, have this reader make the corrections for you. The more time you spend working on your own editing, the more you will learn about what works and what does not.
4. Develop a list of common errors you know you make. Use this list as a guide for your editing. Make several passes through the text looking for specific types of errors each time.
5. Once you locate a specific error, use your computer’s find/replace function to look for additional errors of the same type.
6. Try reading your text backwards. Start with the last sentence and read each sentence separately from the rest. This strategy will allow you to check the grammar and style of a sentence outside of its context in the essay.
7. Read your essay out loud. Doing so will help you to “hear” your language and style and locate difficult sentences or punctuation problems. Also ask a friend to read it out loud to you.
8. Keep your dictionary, grammar handbook, and style guide close by to use as resources when you have questions.
9. Use your spell check! Your grammar check program and thesaurus may also be helpful, but keep in mind that your computer cannot think and does not always give you good advice where grammar and word usage are concerned. Never blindly replace words because the grammar or spell check program tells you to. (Few things are more annoying to readers—and professors—than careless spelling or typing errors.)
10. Look for and work on errors that interfere with meaning first. If you make several types of errors, you will be more effective at correcting them if you concentrate on one or two at a time, learn to correct them, and then move on to one or two more. The following sheet lists common errors in the order of their potential to interfere with your meaning.

Editing Checklist

Use the list here as a guide for creating your own. Selected editing concerns are described; the list is not intended to be comprehensive.

1. Sentence structure errors—syntax problems, misplaced modifiers, mixed constructions, faulty predication, and parallelism problems. Sentence structure errors interfere with meaning more than most others because they make your ideas very hard to decode.
2. Subject-verb agreement and tense errors—Your reader will have trouble following a sentence if the verb is not conjugated correctly or its tense is not appropriate.
3. Unclear referents—These errors occur when you use a pronoun (like *it*, *they*, or *you*) to refer to a noun, but it is not apparent to your reader which noun is the antecedent. Readers find this very annoying because they do not know what meaning to assign to the pronoun.
4. Shifts in point of view—Shifts from first person (*I*) to second or third person (*you* or *they*) affect your coherence and flow. Readers don't know which point of view to associate with and will feel frustrated.
5. Incorrect use of idiomatic expressions—Whether you are a native or non-native speaker of English, you will probably find some idiomatic expressions difficult to use. Is it “tow the line” or “toe the line”? Do we say “committed to” or “committed for”—or are both appropriate? Check a dictionary for accuracy.
6. Inappropriate word choice—Be careful about looking up and using words just because they sound more “intelligent.” You want to use the best word for a given situation, but bigger is not always better.
7. Misspelled words—Unfortunately, people make judgments based on spelling. Inaccurate spelling is often associated with lack of intelligence, sloppiness, and inattention to detail. Since you want your readers to respect your message, you also want to be sure they are not distracted by spelling errors you can easily fix with a spell check program and a careful edit.
8. Typos—Like spelling errors, typos are annoying surface-level problems. If you proofread carefully, you can eliminate most typos and show your readers that you respect their time.

You can rate your frequency of typos using the following scale:

Five or more errors per page = severe

Three to five errors per page = moderate

One to two errors per page = mild