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Writing@CSU Writing Guide

Editing and Proofreading Strategies

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Main Page

Editing and proofreading are writing processes different from revising. Editing can involve extensive rewriting of sentences, but it usually focuses on sentences or even smaller elements of the text. Proofreading is the very last step writers go through to be sure that the text is presentable. Proofreading generally involves only minor changes in spelling and punctuation. This module presents strategies for editing and for proofreading under the two links below. Just remember that both editing and proofreading require some practice before the strategies feel totally comfortable.

Editing Strategies

It's easiest to approach editing as a multi-step process that starts with sentences in clusters and moves to smaller elements of the text (e.g., commas and apostrophes). Generally, you can follow the steps below in the order they're listed here. But if you know you have trouble with some of the steps, plan to leave yourself enough time to work through that step more than once before you turn the paper in or send it to your reader.

Always Think About Your Target Audience

As you edit, keep in mind the target audience for your writing. If you're writing about technical information to an audience that isn't technically expert, you may need to add a step to eliminate or define technical jargon. If you're writing to an audience of ten-year olds, you'll need to consider sentence length more carefully than if you're writing to an audience of adults.

Start with Sentences

Ask yourself these kinds of questions as you look carefully at sentences:

Do I need to change sentence punctuation? Because readers find these errors so distracting, writers should edit separately for sentence punctuation if they have any problem at all in using periods, semicolons, and commas with coordinating conjunctions correctly.

Do I need to combine sentences for clarity, precision, variation? To answer this question, most students go through the paper concentrating on one sentence at a time or on two adjacent sentences. If they see wordy repetition, they combine sentences to reduce repeated words and phrases. If they see sentences repeatedly beginning with the subject, they reorder sentence parts. If they see a phrase that doesn't fit or make sense where it is, they rearrange or rewrite. Reading the paper aloud often helps writers catch those sentences that need work.

Do I see any wordy, cliched, or empty sentences I should rewrite?

Consider Words

Think about the words you've chosen throughout your paper. Do you need to choose more precise, active words? In some papers, particularly those that express a personal perspective, you'll want to check for words that create your personal impression. In persuasive papers, you may want to check for neutral words to avoid emotionalism. Let the audience and purpose of your paper determine how much time to spend on this step.

Check Grammatical Details

Don't forget to look for the major kinds of problems that crop up in student writing. Use these questions to help you edit for grammatical problems:

- Do I see any errors in subject-verb agreement?
- Do I see any errors in pronoun usage?
- Do I switch from present tense to past tense?

Don't Forget Punctuation and Spelling

This final list of questions should help you edit for punctuation and other remaining errors that could distract your readers:

- Have I used commas only where they belong and can I explain each one I use?
- Have I used apostrophes to show possession for nouns? Have I used apostrophes to show contractions with pronouns (if that level of informality is appropriate for your paper)?
- Have I checked commonly confused words, such as affect/effect, to make sure I have the correct one where I use it?
- Have I used the spell checker on my word processor? Have I read the paper again to check for misspelled word the checker doesn't catch?
- Are there other errors I know I make that I need to check for?

Try a Sample

The following paragraph has errors of several sorts. Copy and paste it into a word processor and then edit it as carefully as you can. First look for sentence punctuation errors (fragments, comma splices). You might also consider combining some sentences to reduce repetition and wordiness. Then check subject-verb agreement and pronoun reference. Finally, check all commas and proofread one last time for spelling.

Most people visualize sorority girls as snobby and very "house" oriented, my friend Lisa is much more friendly and barely involves herself in house activities or conforms to their regulations. Snobbery is an aspect of the sorority girl image, they accomplish this task by interacting with a selective crowd which consist of girls from the house, fraternity boys, and possibly family. The frat boys serve as potential dates; seeing as frats and sororities exclusively party together. A sorority girl would never think of picking up a man off the street. On the other hand, theres Lisa who is no snob, as a matter of fact shes in no way

judgmental of who she talks to, if they are friendly to her she will be the same. Its obvious that shes friendly to just about everyone because thats how she met her boyfriend by just saying "hi" one day. Another aspect of the sorority girl stereotype is strict conformity to house rules which prohibit drinking and men in the room, making the girls seem so disciplined and innocent. But then there is Lisa who loves to party, and theres nothing she likes more than to stay out late at a good party completely blowing off curfews. Also, if she wants to bring a guy home she won't hesitate to sneak him in the back way and up to her room. Another way the sorority girls seem so house oriented is shown in the constant dances, parties, and dinners they attend. All the girls goes as a house and are expected to act like she's having a good time even when its a terrible party and they're bored. Lisa refuses to go to these boring parties. And pretend she's having fun. She'd rather forget the party the house goes to and go out with other friends, even if she knows she'll be in trouble. Threfore, as you can see by my description of Lisa's personality she doesn't fit the normal stereotype of a sorority girl.

Proofreading Strategies

The "finished" paper always takes effort; sometimes it takes sweat and tears. But never fear to make changes, major changes during revision or minor changes during proofreading. The best papers are those that we give our best thoughts to and those that show we can reject our less-than-best writing.

Proofreading is the very last step in preparing a final draft. Just because it's the last step, though, don't assume that it will go quickly. Sometimes it take two or more additional "passes" through a paper to be sure you've found all the remaining typographical errors, misplaced pieces of punctuation, or inaccurate words.

Start with Problem Areas

When proofreading, look first for those problems you know you have. If you know you make errors with sentence punctuation, check all sentences for completeness first. For instance, many proofreading errors involve using commas where semicolons are required. As a separate proofreading step, look at each sentence in your final drafts. Check that any commas in the middle of sentences aren't separating two sentences that could otherwise stand alone. If you have just a comma between what could be two sentences, change that to a semicolon.

Then read the paper again for each problem teachers have suggested you work on. You may have to look at the paper five or six times to be thorough, so try splitting up your proofreading. Check for sentence punctuation and one other problem in one sitting, and then come back after a break to look for other problems.

Read from the End to the Beginning

The final product you share should not distract readers with any errors. A good way to proofread for spelling is to read from right to left, from the bottom to the top of the page. If you read only from the beginning to the end of the paper, you may overlook typos. Also, as you discover spelling errors, keep track of those. You can keep a list of common misspellings taped to the front inside cover of your dictionary so that you don't have to look up the same words over and over. Or you can tape short lists of words to several books you carry with you during the day. Just by glancing at the list from time to time, you can learn to spell the words correctly.

Look Just for Typos

Even after you go through this sequence of steps, don't forget to proofread once more for typos and spelling errors. As good as today's word processing programs are in highlighting potential problems in spelling and wording, this software can't catch certain kinds of errors (such as commonly confused words like affect and effect). That error-checking can only be done by a careful proofreader. So take the time to read what you think will be the final printout just to be sure you've found all the little mistakes.

A Proofreading Checklist

Proofread a paper several times, never just after you finish typing or writing. Here's a short list of steps to go through to be sure you've proofread your final draft thoroughly.

Proofread one sentence at a time, again from the end of the paper to the beginning. Look especially for sentence punctuation and any errors you know you often make. By looking at each sentence--because it will be out of context--you'll see more of the punctuation errors and missing words than you catch by reading from the beginning to the end of the paper.

Proofread once more, looking for problems you know of in your writing. Always make one special reading just for your common flaws and errors.

Read the paper aloud. Sometimes, because you have to read more slowly to read aloud, you'll "hear" problems that you otherwise miss as you read the paper silently. Pay special attention to the sound of words (check for endings) and of sentences (check for choppy sentences that should be combined and for sentence fragments).

Proofread slowly, reading each word from right to left and from bottom to top on the page; in other words, read backwards so that you catch spelling or typing errors. Or read the entire paper from the end to the beginning. By looking at each word--because it will be out of context--you'll see more of the spelling errors than you catch with your current proofreading process.

Final Advice

When you need to be sure that your final papers are perfect, as you will for an application to professional school or a job-application letter, you might still want to find someone to

proofread for you. Your proofreading skills will improve as you practice the steps I've noted above, but when you don't want to miss any errors, then having someone else you can count on is valuable.

Try a Sample

The following paragraph has errors of several sorts. Copy and paste it into a word processor and then proofread it as carefully as you can. First look for sentence punctuation errors (fragments, comma splices). Then check to see if you can spot any of the errors you know you make in your own writing. Finally, proofread one last time for spelling.

To enhance my ego, I tell little white lies to my friends. "I am the best football player in town"; is an example of a little white lie I tell. I tell this lie to my friends so they will think I play football well. It does not matter that the last time I played football, I fumbled the ball six times, threw three interceptions, and scored a touchdown for the opposing team. If a little white lie is available, and my friends will believe it, I will use a little white lie to avoid embarrassment, and to inflate my ego. When a friend ask me how my date with Marcia was; I certainly will not tell him the truth: that she dropped me flat for some football player. I will tell a little white lie, to inflate my ego, and say: "Marcia and I had a great time together," or "I broke up with Marcia, she's too ugly, I have a better looking girlfriend now." I will not tell the truth and damage my ego when a little white lie can mask the truth and magnify my ego. To avoid embarrassment and to protect my ego; I tell little white lies to my freinds.

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