

## Editing and Proofreading Tips

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### Overview

When you revise a paper (and when I read your rough drafts) the “big picture concerns” of audience, purpose, organization, and development are the main focus. Those aspects should be solidly in place before you begin editing; premature editing wastes time and stifles creativity.

During the editing process, the “big picture” no longer matters. The goal of editing is to methodically focus on each sentence in isolation. Forget about how the sentence relates to the rest of your paper – for now, your primary concern is checking to see that each sentence has meaning and that it’s “correct.”

### Getting Ready

- ✓ *Budget your time.* Editing is time-consuming, so plan to devote sufficient time to the task.
- ✓ *Take a break.* The longer, the better. It’s incredibly difficult to edit a paper that you’ve just finished writing.
- ✓ *Change locations.*
- ✓ *Print out your paper.* Try changing the format of the text (undo the double-spacing, separate the paragraphs, change the font size, etc.) before you print your paper.

### Getting Started

- ✓ *Try starting with the last sentence of your paper.* This will help to trick your brain out of getting caught up in the content or skipping ahead. You’ve likely read this paper a bunch of times and may practically have it memorized, so your brain is going to try to trick you into seeing what it wants you to see. Reading text in a different order is a good way to counteract that.
- ✓ *Read aloud – slowly.*
- ✓ *Read with a “cover” or ruler – slowly.*
- ✓ *SLOW DOWN* – don’t let your eye force you ahead. The slow pace will take some getting used to, but it’s essential for good editing.

### What to Look For

Editing focuses primarily on *syntax* (unclear sentences, fragments, lack of variety in sentence structure, dangling modifiers, etc.) and *word choice* (vague/unclear words, clichés, unclear references [it/they/he/she/etc], etc.). Don’t concern yourself too much with punctuation and stuff at this point – that comes later. For now, you’re basically going to be asking yourself questions like this:

- ✓ **Is it a sentence?** It seems like a silly question, but I see a lot of unintentional fragments in student writing. A sentence needs to have a subject and a verb.
- ✓ **Does the sentence make sense? Is the meaning clear?**
- ✓ **Does the structure of the sentence work?**
  - *Is there a comma splice?* If you see a comma, STOP. Is there a complete sentence on either side of the comma? If so, then it’s a comma splice. See SFH p. 601 for options.
  - *Is it a run-on sentence?* If you read a sentence that has no punctuation, then it may be a run-on sentence (a run-on smashes two or more independent clauses together without any joining punctuation). See SFH p. 603 for help.
  - *Would there be a better way to structure/word the sentence?* With complex sentences, it sometimes helps to break the sentence into pieces. Make sure those pieces are working together.

- *Do sentences seem to be the same length? Could some shorter sentences be combined?* Try to vary your sentence structure and length. Too many sentences of the same structure and length will make your writing feel “choppy.”
- ✓ **Word choice:** Does each word belong there? Are there any words that can be taken out without damaging the meaning or style of the sentence? Can you substitute one or two words for several and retain the same meaning/style? Try to avoid words like “really” and “good.” Strive for an interesting and specific choice of words that accurately reflect your ideas.
- ✓ **Pronouns (you/he/she/it/they/whom/who/etc):** If you see one of these pronouns, STOP. Check to see if there is a clear antecedent (the word the pronoun is taking the place of). Make sure it’s the right one, too. You may want to look at SFH chapter 29.

### **Proofreading**

Proofreading addresses **grammar and usage** (verbs, correct pronoun *form*, subject/verb agreement, shifts in tense, homonyms, spelling); **mechanics** (punctuation, capitalization, numbers, abbreviations); and **manuscript** (MLA documentation, works cited page conventions, page formatting, spacing, etc.)

- ✓ **Start at the end of each sentence** and work your way to the beginning. If you take away the entire context, your brain is left to focus on things like spelling and punctuation.
- ✓ **Stop at every piece of punctuation**, and decide if it belongs there. Is the question mark actually ending a question? Is the period really ending a sentence? Is the comma supposed to be there? Is the apostrophe supposed to be here?
- ✓ **Check every word for spelling.** Stop when you see words like **to/too/two, there/their/they’re**, unfamiliar words, etc. Use a dictionary.
- ✓ When you see a **coordinating conjunction**, like “and” or “but,” “for,” “or,” “nor,” “so,” and “yet,” STOP. Check to see if there is a complete sentence on either side of the conjunction. If so, make sure that there’s a comma before the coordinating conjunction.
- ✓ **Introductory words** (however, therefore, subsequently, etc.): Make sure there’s a comma following the word.
- ✓ **Quotation marks:** Generally speaking, punctuation goes inside of the quotation mark (e.g. “My English teacher is great,” she said.) Watch for proper in-text citation format. **Example:** Jones claims that English is “the best major in the world” (50).

**\*\*Don’t forget to edit and proofread your title, too!**

You may not catch everything, but you’ll probably be surprised at how much you *do* catch. Use the Rubric and the corresponding SFH pages as a guide for additional things to look for. Over time, you will learn to spot patterns of error in your own writing, which will help you to refine your own editing and proofreading strategy.