

EDITING TECHNIQUES FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

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Editing Techniques for Academic Writing

Introduction

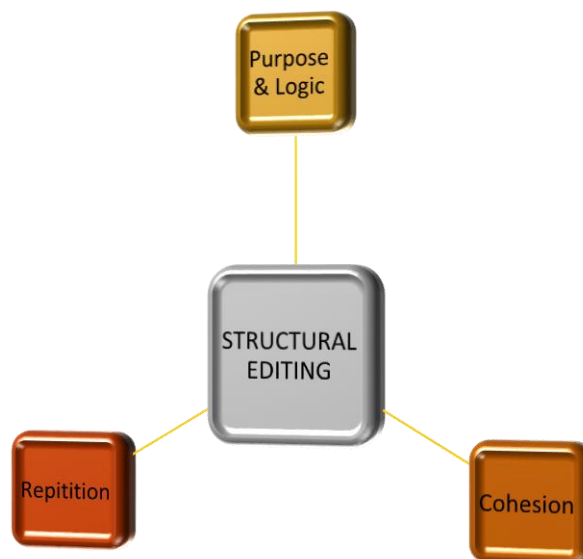
People sometimes assume that editing and proofreading are the same thing, but editing has a different function to proofreading and occurs at different stages in the writing process.

Editing involves a close reading and re-writing of this version. For example, you may improve expression by eliminating redundancies, tautologies, or repetition, or you may improve the structure of your argument by inserting linking sentences between paragraphs, transitional phrases, or sentences that conclude your main point. When you edit your work, you are aiming to improve the sense and logic of your material.

Proofreading takes place after the editing process, using the very last version of your text. When you proofread, you are looking for mistakes that may have escaped the editing process such as spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, and noun-verb agreement errors. You are not reading for sense, but for *mechanics*. Once you have corrected these errors, you should have a clean, final copy ready for submission.

Structural-editing and copy-editing

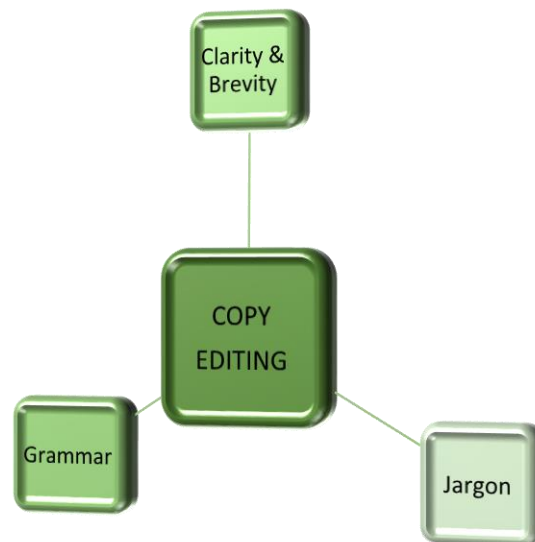
There are two basic forms of editing: structural editing and copy-editing. Structural-editing involves checking your argument for structure, logic and sense. Copy-editing involves checking your written expression.



When editing for **purpose and logic** begin by checking the introduction; does it provide the reader with a ‘map’ for the body of your article? Does it provide all the necessary pieces of information expected in a journal article introduction such as aim, significance, argument, research question, contribution and findings? Does the body of the article achieve what is being promised in the introduction? Does the thread of your argument permeate the whole document? Now check the conclusion and determine whether or not it demonstrates how your argument has been proven.

When editing for **cohesion** begin by checking the links (or transition sentences) between paragraphs. Does the discussion flow logically? Do you have a topic sentence for each paragraph? Is your signposting language adequate to guide the reader? Review the workshop booklet relating to *cohesion* for more elements.

When editing for **repetition** check for information which is repetitive and can be deleted without confusing the reader.



When editing for **clarity and brevity** (conciseness) check sentence structure first to ensure all are clear and concise. Avoid long, run-on sentences that put a strain on the reader. Check for ambiguous or vague expressions. Look for redundancies, tautologies, empty phrases and pointless adjectives and adverbs.

When editing for **grammar** look for common errors including compound nouns, missing subjects or verbs in a sentence, plural-singular verb errors, check tense, pronoun agreement and the use of possessive apostrophes.

When editing for **jargon** look for overuse (and therefore probably unnecessary use) of complex terms. When key terms and concepts are used ensure you define them at the first point you introduce them to the reader.

PARTICIPANT EXERCISE I

Construct your own 'editing checklist' based on the distinction between structural-editing and copy-editing and the writing retreat workshops undertaken to this point.

Editing paragraphs

1. Are your paragraphs roughly the correct length? Paragraphs are units of sentences in the development of an idea or argument. Each paragraph contains one main idea which is introduced, supported and concluded in a conventional structure which includes the elements of topic sentence, controlling idea, supporting sentences and summarising transition. A paragraph *cannot* consist of only one or two sentences. (Zooming out in Word will help you to identify any sentences of this nature). It may be worth considering what Tredinnick (2006) has to say about paragraph length: '[I]n good writing, paragraphs vary in length and form and manner depending on what the author has in mind for them; notice that variety is part of the large-scale music of the work'.
2. Use a reverse outline (see below) to identify the topic - is there more than one? - of each paragraph and test the logic of the sequence of ideas you have presented in your argument.
3. Do not begin a paragraph with a transition word or phrase (such as 'consequently', 'in other words', 'for example').
4. Does each paragraph link to the next to ensure coherence and flow? If not ensure each paragraph has a 'summarising transition' which prepares the reader for the topic sentence of the next paragraph. This is an important element that ensures the reader feels comfortable progressing from one point to the next in your discussion.



Reverse outline

The reverse outline addresses the global criteria of writing and refers to the big-picture issues of logic, coherence and flow of information.

The Reverse Outline is created *after* the first draft has been written. It can be used to determine if the topic sentence in each paragraph accurately states that paragraph's main idea *and* if each claim or supporting idea is coherent, flows logically and is supported with evidence or relevant details.

How to create a Reverse Outline:

1. Print a clean copy of the paper.
2. Go through the paper and number each paragraph.
3. On a separate sheet of paper, write #1 and the main idea and supporting points of that first paragraph. (Alternately, the main idea and supporting points may also be written into the margins of the paper while reading. This will help the writer to verify that the **MEAL Plan – main idea, evidence, analysis, and link** – is intact for each paragraph.

4. Continue this process through the second paragraph and all remaining paragraphs in the paper.

You should then be left with an outline which allows the writer to see more clearly the content and organisation of the paper and allows the writer to better judge whether the ideas are presented in the most effective order. You will be in a better position to reshuffle information to improve COHESION and FLOW (or logic) of ideas.

Editing sentences

1. If you have written a long sentence ask yourself if you are putting too much stress on the reader. Can you simplify the message or messages that are embedded in the sentence? Can you reconfigure the sentence into more manageable chunks?
2. Can you reduce the punctuation you have included in the sentence? OR can you make better use of punctuation to assist the reader to navigate through the information you are presenting? (see handouts)
3. Strive for conciseness, use an economy of words and keep your writing trim. Lose those unnecessary prepositions; delete lead-in words and phrases that are redundant; avoid clichés, jargon where possible, archaic terms, tautologies and elongations (i.e. rather than 'owing to the fact that' try 'because').
4. Always try to use active rather than the passive voice.
5. Replace verb phrases with punchy and powerful verbs ('have the effect of' = changes, 'play a leading role in' = help, 'put up with' = tolerate).

Revising

Skilled writers revise constantly, trying to resolve the tensions between what they want to say and what the sentences actually record. For many skilled writers revising is the crux of the writing process. It is the way they shape prose into meaning for an audience and the way they discover what they want to say, sometimes to their own surprise (Yang, quoted in Elphinstone & Schweizer, 1998, p.83).

As you revise your drafts look for weaknesses in:

1). Your argument

- Is the argument clear
- Are your inferences defensible?
- Do you need examples to illustrate this point?
- Do you need to use citations to substantiate this point?

- Is this a convincing way to use data?
- Have you considered any potential objections that may be made to your assertions?

2). The structure of the document

- Look at how your thoughts are organised by examining your headings and sub-headings.
- Do your headings comprise a hierarchy of ideas that moves from more general ideas to more specific ones?
- Do the headings accurately predict the content that follows? Are the headings informative and interest-provoking?
- Might the information be more effective with the addition of a diagram?

When revising your drafts, try to read as an editor would.

Try marking your draft with the following (or similar) symbols to help with the process of revision.

(?) Lack of clarity

© Check accuracy

(x) Material could be deleted

(r) Repetitive

(e) Evidence required

(i) Interpretive weakness

Proofreading

Don't waste time proofreading your article before you are happy with your final version. Only proofread the last printout as small errors can turn up between the editing process and the final check for mechanical errors.

Read backwards

When you edit your work, you are checking for sense and logical development. But when you proof read, you are looking for residual errors, like, use, typing errors, or apostrophe placement errors. The eye will often read what's meant to be there, rather than what is actually on the page. Trick your eyes. Read each sentence independently, starting from the final sentencing work back. It's tedious, but slows down your eye and helps you to see the mistakes. Another way to slow down your eye is to place a ruler under each line, and check your text word for word.

Reading aloud can also help, as you can often hear where, should go, where verbs are incorrect, or where expression is clumsy. If your tongue stumbles, it's likely that your expression has also stumble.

In summary:

1. Read your text out loud to yourself – listen for anything which sounds clunky.
2. Read your text backwards - that way you are likely to pick up typos.
3. Keep an academic style manual close by to check on correct grammatical use.
4. Share your work with others. Ask them for feedback on your writing.