

quicktips

EDITING & PROOFREADING STRATEGIES

Problem

Editing and proofreading are essential aspects of effective writing. However, they are the later steps in the ongoing process of brainstorming, planning, drafting, and revising. Writers who rush or ignore any of these earlier steps can end up with a paper that is unclear, underdeveloped, and very difficult to correct in the later stages of the writing process. When you are ready to proofread and edit your draft, you should do so carefully and thoroughly. While it is important to review your work and seek feedback, the following strategies may also prove useful.

Solutions

LEAVE YOURSELF PLENTY OF TIME for all steps of the writing process, including editing. By making and following a timeline for the paper, you are more likely to have time to finish everything with the proper amount of care and attention. Also, keep in mind that it may be best to lay your paper aside for a day or so before proofreading and editing, as you may be more likely to catch errors or notice structural problems if your writing isn't so "fresh" in your mind.

GET ACQUAINTED WITH YOUR RESOURCES. You don't need to memorize every grammar or citation rule that may apply to the genre or discipline in which you're writing—you can look them up. Take advantage of the resources available to you: dictionaries, thesauruses, handbooks, citation guides, handouts from class, librarians, and writing center consultants.

KNOW YOUR WEAKNESSES. Keep a list of errors you tend to make: it will help you know what to look for when you edit. You can also read the paper once for each error type—if you're only looking for one thing, you'll be more likely to notice it.

PRINT A COPY OF YOUR PAPER TO USE WHEN EDITING AND PROOFREADING. It is much harder to catch errors on a screen than on paper.

READ YOUR PAPER OUT LOUD. Often, when we read silently, our eyes skip over small errors, awkward or run-on sentences, and typos. By reading out loud, you force yourself to notice everything from spelling and word choice to the structure of sentences. You can also have someone read your paper aloud and tell you where they are confused.

READ YOUR PAPER BACKWARDS. Another way to force yourself to notice small details is to take things out of context. Try reading your paper backwards, sentence by sentence or paragraph by paragraph, so that you are focusing on the text, not the ideas. This technique is especially helpful for catching sentence fragments.

CHECK THE PUNCTUATION. Look over the paper on a sentence-by-sentence level to see if your punctuation is correct. Are commas in the right places? Are there any run-on sentences? If you aren't sure about how to use certain kinds of punctuation, look in a manual, explore other quicktips, and/or ask a writing consultant for help.

CHECK EACH IN-TEXT CITATION FOR CORRECT FORMAT, and verify that the source is in the Works Cited or References list. This is also a good time to double-check the spelling of authors' names, book or article titles, and so on.

REREAD QUOTATIONS; it is all too easy to mistype when copying words.

GET FEEDBACK FROM OTHER PEOPLE. Because we are such a part of what we write, it can be difficult to step outside our work and view it critically. When you seek outside opinions, you can break free of the isolation and absorption of writing and receive perspectives and insights that you may have otherwise missed. You are no longer left wondering whether you followed the guidelines of the assignment, whether your structure and language are clear, etc. By asking for feedback from other people, you are taking essential measures to improve your writing and to develop as a writer.

DON'T RELY SOLELY ON COMPUTER HELP. Spell-check and grammar-check tools are useful, but they do not constitute or substitute for proofreading. Develop and follow your own editing strategies, and don't be fooled into thinking that computer tools alone are adequate for the job.

REST. RELAX. REREAD. Leave your paper alone for a day or two. Having some distance from what you've written can make your proofreader's eye more clinical and perceptive. In addition, you may find changes you would like to make after you read your text later.

Adapted from The University of Minnesota's Student Writing Guide, 2004, p. 29, and from The College of Education & Human Development Writing Center's handout, "Editing and Proofreading Strategies."