

The Writing Center

Editing & Proofreading Strategies

While revision happens many times throughout the writing process, editing and proofreading usually take place when the writer is working on the final draft. Both are essential to making your text presentable and communicating your ideas.

Editing and proofreading ask you to play the role of the reader rather than the writer. Sometimes, people have different meanings in mind when they use these words, but generally, editing targets sentences or, at times, even smaller chunks of text, with a focus on structure and style, word choice, and grammar. Proofreading is the final step: it mostly involves small changes in spelling and punctuation.

In general, effective editing and proofreading require you to slow down and really take a look at your writing. Here are some tips:

Take your Time. Assume that you have made unconscious errors and *really* look for them. Slow down your reading considerably and actually look at every word. Be patient. Good editing takes time.

Know thyself. Identify and track what type of errors you typically make. Pay attention to your instructor's comments on papers you've already gotten back and start learning from your past mistakes. Keep a proofreading log. If you keep a record of which errors you make the most often, you can keep an eye out for them in the future. For instance, a proofreading log might look something like this:

- ✓ I confuse *their, they're, and there*
- ✓ I use too many unnecessary commas
- ✓ Sometimes I switch verb tenses

Fix it! Once you've identified the type of errors you typically make, learn how to fix them. Talk with your instructor, consult a tutor, or pick up a grammar handbook. If you know commas are your kryptonite, study up, practice, and start learning how to use them.

Take a walk. Order a pizza. Play some video games. Waiting a few hours, or even a few days, before proofreading a draft allows you to come at your paper with fresh eyes. You'll become a bit less familiar with the content and gain a new perspective. When you come back to your writing, you'll notice little mistakes that you overlooked during the first stages of writing.

Proofread one paragraph at a time. Paragraphs are the writer's divisions of meaning. A new paragraph means a new topic or a new voice. Therefore, the writer must deal with the old completely

before moving on to the new. Proofreading an entire essay is also a less daunting task when viewed as a series of smaller paragraphs to conquer one by one.

Read your work out loud. This will slow you down, and will help you hear the difference between what you *meant* and what you actually *wrote*. With added sensory perception to your proofreading, you're more likely to catch errors or odd-sounding sentences. **You might also try overemphasizing punctuation when you proofread out loud.** Errors in commas and question marks are easy to identify with this strategy.

Go backwards. Try starting with the last sentence of the paper and reading backwards to the first sentence, or try reading backwards paragraph by paragraph. By reading in reverse order, you won't get caught-up in the flow of your ideas, and will instead be forced to pay attention to each individual sentence.

Don't be afraid to kill trees. Print your paper out to proofread it. If you are used to looking at your work on a computer screen, the change to looking at your writing on paper can "refresh" your focus. (Just make sure you recycle those rough drafts.)

Give your paper a face lift. Try increasing the font size or changing the font to see the words in a new way. **Different formats help us see things differently.** (But remember to always print your final draft using standard academic formatting!)

Attack one type of error per reading. For example, read your essay once for subject/verb agreement, once for segment fragments, etc. Look up anything you're not sure of. Consult dictionaries, writing reference books, and grammar reference books. Guessing doesn't help you; looking something up does, and it will continue to help you in the future.

Get a second opinion. After you have proofread your essay on your own several times, have a friend, classmate, or coworker read your essay and circle errors. Then see if you can identify and fix the problem. You'll learn much more about your writing mistakes and become more self-sufficient this way than by having someone else point out and correct your errors for you.

Listen up! Have someone else read your work aloud to you. Listen for places where the reader stumbles or reads something different than what you wrote.

Use Spell Check, but don't trust Spell Check. Run the spelling and grammar check features in your word processing program, but don't rely on them. The computer can overlook many errors – especially homophones (words sounding the same but spelled differently), omitted words, and repeated words. Spell Check can also locate errors that aren't really errors at all.

Proofread more than once. You'll find mistakes that you overlooked the first time you proofread your paper. Also, as you edit the content of your paper, new errors may arise. And remember: there is no point in proofreading a rough draft of your paper if you forget to proofread your final draft. Feel free to write on a "final" draft. It's not really FINAL until you turn it in!