

Strategies for self-editing

Questions:

- Do you know the difference between “revisions” and “editing”?
- During the writing process, when is the best time for revisions and for editing?
- When is it very important or less important to edit your writing for correctness?
- What are the strategies you usually use to edit your writing?
- What changes can you make to become a more effective editor of your own work?

Note: “*surface errors*” include errors of sentence structure, word choice, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and formatting.

Understanding the importance of editing:

- Editing is more important than you think. Research shows that surface errors can hinder a person’s academic or professional success. Errors in language and mechanics may give readers the impression that the writer is careless, unprofessional, or even unintelligent.
- Careful editing may be especially important when you write the following: an English paper; a job application or CV/resume; when you are applying for admission to graduate school; when you are applying for a grant; when you are writing for professional purposes.
- Anytime you want to make a good impression, you should be especially attentive to editing.
- Remember that “private writing” (on a blog or an internet forum, for example), may some day be read and evaluated by someone other than the intended audience.
- Editing is less important when you are freewriting, brainstorming, or writing first drafts. Focusing on editing at those stages of the writing process may get in the way of the big-picture task of developing content.

Adopting good editing habits:

- Start your writing as early as possible so you have time to revise your draft at least once, go to the Centre for Writers, and edit your paper carefully at the end.
- Remember to **read your assignment description** very carefully before you start writing and after you have written your first draft, too! Good grammar is important but your professor’s directions will also greatly contribute to your getting a good grade!
- Remember to differentiate content and surface errors and to **focus on content first!** Good grammar is important but your own ideas, and the organization of these ideas, will also greatly contribute to your getting a good grade.
- Read your paper aloud (and have other people read your paper aloud, too).
- Read through your paper with your audience in mind.
- Monitor your writing for your own error patterns. Do not try to work on too many different error patterns at the same time.
- Find a good Writer’s Handbook and learn how to use it effectively.

- Find useful tools that will allow you to avoid formatting errors (e.g., *The APA Manual*, the *OWL at Purdue* website) and become familiar with these tools. Don't forget to verify your assignment descriptions regarding the required format.
- Use your word processor's editing tools wisely. Remember that:
 - o If your spelling or typing error is an actual English word, your spell checker will not catch it (e.g., *were*, *we're*, *where*).
 - o The spell checker will flag unusual, field-specific words, or proper names even if you spell them correctly (e.g., *meldometer*, *Moussu*)
 - o Your spell checker will offer you several alternatives if it finds an error but the first item on the list may not be the word you want (e.g., if you mistype the word *tyrant*, your spell checker may suggest Titan).
 - o Grammar checkers are even more limited than spell checkers. They often apply arbitrary rules that most educated speakers of English do not usually follow. They also often miss errors made by people learning English as a second language. Sometimes the terms and rules that grammar checkers offer are confusing.
- Other useful word processing tools are those that give you document statistics such as word count, average sentence length, and the percentage of sentences with verbs in the passive voice. These statistics will not edit your text for you but they may alert you to potential problems.
- Never rely solely on computer tools for your editing!
- Find a second pair of eyes (for example at the Centre for Writers):
 - o Ask the reader to underline or talk through any problems but not to actually correct them.
 - o Ask the reader to point out any place in the text where the ideas are unclear because of word choice, phrasing, punctuation, spelling, or other mechanics.
 - o If you know you have specific error patterns (with verb tenses, subject- verb agreement, or articles, for example), ask the reader to look especially for those problems.
 - o Be sure to do your own reading and decision-making after you get feedback on your paper. The reader may miss something, or you may disagree with the suggestions. You are the author, and the final responsibility for the paper is yours.

Typical errors:

- **Subject-verb agreements:** (e.g., *Many parts of Plato's philosophy is very intriguing*).
- **Missing words** (e.g., *Despite having family in Edmonton, there a gulf between them*).
- **Wrong words** (e.g., *affect* or *effect*).
- **Misspellings** (e.g., *Responsible, a lot, definitely, complement and compliment, loose and lose, then and than*).
- **Apostrophes** (e.g., *its* and *it's*, *you're* and *your*, *their* and *there* and *they're*; *Restrooms are for customer's use only*).
- **Dangling modifiers** (e.g., *Rotting in the refrigerator, our office manager threw the fruit in the garbage*).
- **Tenses** (e.g., *I have visited Niagara Falls last weekend*).