



How to Edit

*"The secret to editing your work is simple: you need to become its reader instead of its writer."
-Zadie Smith, British novelist and short-story writer*

Once you've finished writing your paper, the next step is to carefully edit the overall structure and content of your writing to ensure that your ideas are clear. Here are some tips:

Take a break between writing and editing. Take a walk or go for coffee so you can come back to your work with fresh eyes.

Be clear on your assignment. Have you followed the instructions and requirements?

Use your voice. Read your paper aloud. Are your ideas clearly stated? Does one idea flow into the next? Reading aloud activates a different part of your brain that will help you catch confusing language and poor organization.

Start off strong. You want to grab the attention of your readers with your opening paragraph. Is there a compelling "hook"? Do you clearly state the direction your paper will take? Do you tell the reader how you will support your main idea?

Review your structure. Compare your writing with your outline if you have one. Do your body paragraphs follow the same sequence of points introduced in your opening paragraph? Did you fully and clearly explain your points in a way your reader can follow? Does your conclusion reflect and/or summarize the main points?

Check your level of formality. College writing assignments usually follow the formal academic writing convention of using neutral, third person pronouns (it/one/they). Using the first person (I/we) is not appropriate except when indicated by your instructor (like in reflective writing). Avoid using casual language, contractions, slang or idioms.

Use clear and simple language. Beware of writing "above" your comfort level. Everyone wants to sound impressive, but you will likely mis-use words you don't really understand and confuse your reader.

Be concise and avoid unnecessary repetition. If there is a simpler, briefer way to say something, then do it. Sometimes we accidentally repeat ourselves because we forget that we've already dealt with an idea or used that same word in a nearby sentence. You can repeat points for emphasis, but cut unintended repetition.

Avoid plagiarism. Stealing sentences or ideas from other writers, without giving them proper credit, is considered "academic dishonesty" and can have serious academic consequences. You can refer to other people's ideas in a direct quote or paraphrase, but you must give them correct attribution and cite them in the format requested by your instructor (MLA, APA, etc).

Get ready to proofread. Save proofreading for last as editing can significantly change your content. You don't want to waste time proofreading paragraphs that won't be there in the final version. Check out the Learning Centre's **How to Proofread** handout.





Guidelines for Editing an Essay

Ask yourself the following questions about the content of your essay:

1. Do I have a thesis?
2. Is my thesis clearly stated?
3. Do all the other ideas support the thesis?
4. Do I have plenty of examples and specific details and few generalizations?
5. Have I checked all my facts and statistics for accuracy?
6. Have I made clear what in the paper is opinion and what is fact?
7. Is the paper as interesting as I can make it?

Ask the following questions about the organization of your paper:

1. Does my introduction include some background to catch the reader's interest?
2. Is my thesis statement the final sentence of the first paragraph?
3. Is the body of my essay divided into paragraphs?
4. Are the links between paragraphs smooth and clear?
5. Are there adequate transitions within each paragraph?
6. Are the ideas arranged in logical order?
7. Is the length of each paragraph proportional to its relative importance?
8. Is my strongest supporting information placed last?
9. Does my conclusion strongly signal the end of my paper?
10. Is the conclusion clearly related to the thesis?

Ask yourself the following questions about your grammar:

1. Are there any sentence fragments?
2. Are there any run-on sentences?
3. Are all sentences unified?
4. Do my subjects and verbs agree?
5. Do all pronouns agree with their antecedents?
6. Have I used a variety of sentences?
7. Have I checked for article errors?
8. Have I used the correct forms of words?
9. Have I checked the spelling of words I am unsure of?
10. Have I checked for tense errors, especially in past and compound forms?
11. Are my sentences and documentation punctuated correctly?

