editing

Taking the time to edit your paper ensures you have written your best work. This handout will help you effectively edit your writing.

Revision, Editing, and Proofreading

People often use the terms "revision," "editing," and "proofreading" interchangeably, but they have specific meanings worth delineating.

Revision

When you revise, you focus on the "big picture" of your paper. This process includes scrutinizing the argument your paper is trying to make and making sure that your overall organization leads to your intended conclusion.

Note: For more information on revision, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

Editing

When you edit, you improve your text at the sentence level. To do this, try reading the draft out loud. Edit with your audience in mind: refine your sentences until they are clear, concise, and cohesive. Pay special attention to issues with voice, verb tense, pronoun reference, and parallelism.

Proofreading

When you proofread, you look for errors with grammar, spelling, and punctuation. This is best done on a hard copy of the manuscript. As with editing, you will probably want to read the text out loud. You might even want to consider reading the text backwards, which helps defamiliarize it in your mind and makes typographical errors easier to catch.

Note: For more information on proofreading, please see our [handout](#) on this topic.

General Advice

Plan Ahead

As with revision, you will need to build time into your writing schedule to properly edit your work. Editing is not a matter of catching errors—it's the process of refining and reworking your sentences. Do not wait until the last minute to start editing.

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Work with a Hard Copy

Working with a hard copy allows you to interact with your work in a tangible way. Being able to mark, highlight, annotate, and even scribble on your paper gives you more editing options than on a computer screen.

Read It Out Loud

Reading your work out loud offers several benefits. First, it forces you to slow down and makes you pay closer attention to each word. Second, it increases your chances of catching common sentence-level mistakes like run-on sentences and sentence fragments. Finally, it helps you identify passages that are vague, unclear, or poorly worded.

Give It to a Friend

Before you turn in your paper, have someone you trust read it. Additionally, those unfamiliar with your topic can be good readers as their questions will help to focus your own thought process.

Sentence Structure

Vary Sentence Structure

Your writing becomes predictable and boring when every sentence follows the same structure. Use a mixture of the four sentence types—simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex—to keep the reader engaged.

Note: For more information on the various sentence structures, please see our "Sentences" handout.

Example: Patterson Park Neighborhood Association (PPNA) is dedicated to improving the quality of life of residents living around the park. PPNA meets on the first Wednesday of every month to discuss issues such as waste management and pest control. PPNA sponsors biweekly Citizens On Patrol (C.O.P.) walks and quarterly fundraisers. PPNA encourages neighbors to get to know each other.

Note: Every sentence in the example above is a simple sentence.

Example (Corrected): Patterson Park Neighborhood Association (PPNA) is dedicated to improving the quality of life of residents living around the park. Biweekly Citizens On Patrol (C.O.P.) walks and quarterly fundraisers provide opportunities to get involved, and you can even get to know your neighbors while discussing issues such as waste management and pest control at monthly community meetings.

Note: The first sentence is a simple sentence, and the second one is a compound-complex sentence.

Use Strong Parallelism

Parallel structure lets your reader know that information is related and of equal importance.

The easiest way to achieve parallelism is by matching parts of speech (e.g., matching nouns with nouns, verbs with verbs, etc.) or, if using entire phrases, by matching larger grammatical structures (e.g., matching a verb and a direct object with a verb and a direct object).

When editing, pay special attention to lists as this is a site of frequent parallelism errors.

Weak Parallelism: At my previous job, I was in charge of **receiving** applications, **interviewing** candidates, and **trained** new hires.

Strong Parallelism: At my previous job, I was in charge of **receiving** applications, **interviewing** candidates,

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and **training** new hires.

Note: For more information on parallell structure, please see our "Parallellism" [handout](#).

Avoid Dangling and Misplaced Modifiers

A modifier is a word or phrase that provides additional meaning to another element of the sentence. When it is unclear which element of the sentence the modifier is modifying, the modifier is dangling or misplaced.

Example: **After taking their medication**, we placed the mice into the maze.

Note: It is unclear whether the researchers or the mice took the medication.

Example: We observed the subjects enter **through the window**.

Note: It is unclear whether the subjects entered through the window or if "we" watched the subjects through the window.

There are two quick ways to fix a dangling or misplaced modifier: either add the implied actor into the modifying phrase or move the phrase closer to the element it modifies.

Example (Corrected): After **the mice** took their medication, we placed them into the maze.

Example (Corrected): **Looking through the window**, we observed the subjects enter.

Keep Nouns & Verbs Close Together

The subject and verb are the two most important parts of a sentence. When these elements are close together, the connection between them is strong; when they are apart, the connection weakens. Also, readers can become confused when it's not clear where the subject and verb are or how they relate to each other.

Example: **We**, after deliberating for several hours about the exact wording, **wrote** our decision in a mahogany-bound book.

Example (Corrected): **We wrote** our decision in a mahogany-bound book after deliberating for several hours about the exact wording.

Concision

Avoid Redundancy

Redundancy can distract readers and disrupt the flow of your writing. Look for unnecessary repetition of words, phrases, and sentences.

Redundant: Take the escalator that goes down to lower you to the lower level beneath us.

Concise: Take the escalator to the lower level.

Use Precise, Forceful Verbs

Strong verbs add precision and force to your writing. Weak verbs cause your writing to be wordy and dull. Weak verbs (also known as light verbs) include "do," "have," "make," "take," "occur," "get," and "cause." Some passive constructions fall into this category as well (e.g., "was seen," "was noted," "was done," and "was observed"). Weak verbs often accompany nominalizations (see below).

Weak Verb: An increase of speed to 50 km/h **was seen to occur**.

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Strong Verb: Speed **increased** to 50 km/h.

Avoid Nominalizations

A nominalization is a noun derived from another part of speech, usually a verb. Verbs take objects; nouns do not. Instead, nouns employ prepositional phrases to do the equivalent work of a verb's object. For this reason, sentences containing nominalizations tend to be longer. Use verbs and objects for actions instead of nouns and prepositional phrases.

Nominalizations: Our **assessment** of the damage led to the **conclusion** that there was a **failure** in the structure.

Verbs and Objects: We **assessed** the damage and **concluded** that the structure **failed.**

Remove Unnecessary Prepositional Phrases

Prepositions connect nouns to other parts of the sentence. A preposition and its object are called a prepositional phrase. Too many prepositional phrases can clutter up your sentence. Many of these phrases can be converted to adjectives or eliminated entirely by using stronger, more precise verbs.

Excessive Prepositional Phrases (Phrases in Parentheses): The reason (for the payment) (of the rent) (by the tenants) (of the building) (on the first) (of the month) is that it ensures an on-time deposit (of the money) (into the bank account) (of the landlord.)

Necessary Prepositional Phrases (Phrases in Parentheses): Building tenants should pay rent (by the first) (of the month) to ensure an on-time deposit.

Note: For more strategies on writing concisely, please see our "Concision" handout.

Words

Choose an Appropriate Level of Diction

Diction describes your tone and word choice. Since your audience will vary from project to project, make sure your level of diction is appropriate for your readers. Scholarly writing is formal writing, so avoid using casual words and phrases. Informal writing signals to scholarly readers that you are not serious about the topic.

However, you will not simply want to use "big words" in order to sound smart. Beginning writers often turn to a thesaurus in order to find "smarter" synonyms for their writing. A thesaurus is a place to remember words, not learn them. Many words found in a thesaurus have special, nuanced meanings and are not exact synonyms.

Example (Casual): Participants showed up for four sessions, watched a movie, and answered some questions.

Example (Formal): Participants attended four one-hour sessions, during which they viewed a 30-minute video and then completed a survey of open-ended questions.

Example (Overdone): Participants graced four one-hour hearings, concurrently they witnessed a 30-minute motion picture and then consummated an inquiry of open-ended queries.

Introduce Acronyms and Abbreviations

Always spell out the full name of an agency, metric, or institution prior to using an acronym.

Example: The headquarters of the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is located in Bethesda, MD.

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Abbreviations should be used sparingly in order to maximize clarity for the reader. In general, an abbreviation should be used only if it is conventional or if the written expression is cumbersome and takes up a lot of space.

Note: For more information on how to abbreviate, please see our "Abbreviations" [handout](#).

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