

Study Skills Guide Series

STUDY SKILL 3: Proofing and editing your work

It's easy to read something you've written and not see the errors and typos because you know what it **should** say. In this study guide, you'll find tips and techniques for proofreading and editing your own work – a vital skill for rewriting any clumsy or unclear sentences and for eliminating any spelling, grammar or punctuation errors.

When you reach the end of this guide, you will:

- be able to look critically at the **structure** and **flow** of your work, considering the reader's perspective
- have learnt to improve the way your work is **paragraphed**
- know how to check your **punctuation** and **spelling**
- have a tried and tested method for giving your work a **final proofread**

Why do proofreading and editing matter?

In your rush to meet the deadline for handing in or presenting your work, it's easy to overlook the proofreading and editing stage. Careless errors will lessen your reader's interest and trust in what you have written and will lower your grades and final degree classification. Thoroughly proofreading and editing your work has three main benefits:

- demonstrating you are a competent and conscientious student
- helping you consolidate your knowledge and understanding of a subject
- showing you are thinking about your writing from the reader's point of view



ACTIVITY 1: STRUCTURE AND SEQUENCE – THE SPLIT PAGE

Take a piece of your written work, then reformat the entire text so the copy is on the right-hand side of each page, leaving the left-hand side free for you to write notes.

You may want to put the text into 1.5 line spacing as well, to give you more room to write notes between the lines. Work steadily through each paragraph, asking yourself these four questions and making notes as you go.

- 1 Are the ideas in the right sequence so the essay has a structure, or are some of the ideas jumbled up illogically or randomly?
- 2 Are my points backed up with facts and evidence, or are my arguments unsubstantiated?
- 3 Am I signposting my reader through the text using words and phrases like 'therefore', 'however', 'overall', and 'in summary'?
- 4 Am I paragraphing coherently? See the CHECKPOINT box for more about paragraphing.

Use your notes to edit your work on screen.

CHECKPOINT: Paragraphs

A paragraph should contain one clear controlling idea and sentences which support that idea. Paragraphs can be very short (a single sentence), or very long, extending to more than a page.

Here are four questions to ask yourself for each paragraph you have written:

- What's the main controlling idea?
- Is the idea stated clearly?
- Is the idea properly supported by facts and evidence?
- Does this paragraph link neatly with the previous paragraph and anticipate the next?

Sometimes, I'm so clear in my own mind about what I want to say that I just don't make it clear enough to my tutor. I've started asking a friend to read through a draft before I do the final edit and proofread. He tells me if there's anything confusing in what I've written.

**Haris, second year
law student**

T H E R E F O R E

I N S U M M A R Y

ACTIVITY 2: A QUESTION OF STYLE

Style is a large and much-debated subject. What is good style? What is bad style? A simple rule of thumb is that good style doesn't intrude on meaning. If the style of a piece of writing gets in the way of its meaning, it's probably written in a bad style. This activity will help you think about your own writing style when you are proofreading and editing your work.

First, find two pieces of writing by other people – one that you have been impressed by and one you have found an uninspiring or difficult read. Read each of them and make notes about what you think works and what doesn't work in terms of style.

“I was listening to the historian Simon Schama on YouTube just before I went to uni, to get myself back into the swing of studying. His comment that history “should sound less like newspaper editorials and more like poetry” got me thinking about how I write, challenging my assumption that writing factually means writing blandly.”

Chloë, first year
history student

GOING

FORWARD

IS

JARGON

Then read a piece of your own work. Consider each of the following points in turn and make notes on how you could improve the style.

- Are you saying one thing at a time? ‘One thought, one sentence’ is a useful rule.
- Have you avoided long, rambling sentences? Edit any you find to make them shorter, paying particular attention to your use of punctuation.
- Is there any unnecessary jargon? If there is, replace it with your own words.
- Does the writing sound pompous? If it does, use a dictionary or thesaurus to simplify the language you use.
- Have you paid attention to when you use the active and passive voice?

CHECKPOINT: Your conclusion

Your conclusion is the final paragraph of your essay and should be about 10% of the length of the whole essay. Here's how to check it's doing what it needs to do:

- Read the essay through from the beginning and make a note of the main points you have made. Then look at whether all the points are referred to in your conclusion. If they're not, rewrite the conclusion, adding in the missing points.
- Does the conclusion include any new points not discussed in earlier paragraphs? If it does, take them out.
- Look again at the title of your essay. Does your conclusion directly answer the question you have been asked to write about? If it doesn't, rewrite your conclusion, linking it to the title.
- Does the conclusion make clear your point of view on the subject you have written about? If it doesn't, add in one or two sentences that will help the reader sum up what you think.

ACTIVITY 3: GETTING YOUR PUNCTUATION UP TO SCRATCH

Correct punctuation is important if you want your reader to fully understand what you have written. Think of it as a way of making the reader's job easier. When we speak, we punctuate naturally. Our voices and pauses indicate emphasis without us even thinking about it. Punctuation marks, like the comma and full stop, show where the pauses and emphasis are in written language.

“In my subject, punctuation is something that can literally be a matter of life or death. My tutor's comments on my essays in my first term brought home to me that I wasn't communicating exactly what I wanted to say, mostly because I only knew the basics about punctuation. I was determined to get on top of it. I took me a while, but it's second nature now.”

**Miriam, third year
pharmacology
student**

THE

DETAIL

COUNTS

A colon is used to provide a pause before introducing related information.

Example – A good website needs three things: engaging content, intuitive navigation and visual impact.

A semicolon is used to join together two clauses that could each be standalone sentences.

Example – The English say aubergine; Americans say eggplant.

CHECKPOINT: References and citations

When you start your degree, get hold of a copy of the guidelines you will be expected to follow for references and citations in written work. Although the details may vary from university to university, there are some general principals common to academic writing. Here's how to check the references and citations in your work:

- Print out a paper copy of your essay and highlight all the direct quotations you have used from other published work. For each of them, check that you have:
 - used quotation marks and indented quotes correctly
 - included page numbers of the source for each quotation
- Highlight all other references and check that you have included:
 - the names of all authors
 - the year of publication
- Check that the list:
 - is in order, e.g. alphabetically by surname of author
 - is consistently formatted, e.g. author's surname then family name
- For internet sources, have you:
 - listed author and date published?
 - included the URL and the date on which you accessed the source?

ACTIVITY 4: THREE-PART PROOFREADING

However careful you are when drafting a piece of work, mistakes nearly always creep in. The purpose of proofreading is to get rid of any spelling, grammar, or punctuation errors in your final copy. Here is a three-part process to help make your proofreading thorough and effective:

- 1 First, use the spellchecker on your laptop, tablet or PC. Remember, it will only do part of the job. For example, 'to' and 'too' are both words the spellchecker will recognise. Only the human eye can be certain to weed out the mistake in *'It's easy too set up your own website.'*
- 2 Next, print out a copy of your work. Reading it through on paper helps you spot errors you might miss on screen and means you can mark them up as you come across them.
- 3 As a final check, proofread the whole piece of writing backwards, i.e. read the last sentence first. Starting at the end ensures your attention is focussed on individual words, rather than on the overall meaning of each paragraph. Try it with one of the most famous opening lines in English fiction, written here backwards:

"Wife a of want in be must fortune good of possession in man single a that acknowledged universally truth a is it."

Emma by Jane Austen

BE MUST

FORTUNE

GOOD

CHECKPOINT: Proofing and editing round-up

Just before you email your tutor the final draft or prepare to give your presentation, do a final check using these four prompts:

- Is my work within the stated word limit, if there is one?
- Have I read my essay aloud?
- Have I checked my grammar, punctuation and spelling?
- Have I left space for my tutor's comments?

Resources to help you

Mind the Stop: A Brief Guide to Punctuation, G. V. Carey, Cambridge University Press. Originally published in 1939 and revised several times since, it is still the most practical and shortest book about punctuation available. Second hand copies are cheap and easy to find.

Eats, Shoots and Leaves, Lynne Truss, Fourth Estate, 2009. Not so much of a practical guide, but more a catalogue of amusing examples that show how poor punctuation means you end up communicating something other than what you intended.

Oxford Dictionaries and Cambridge Dictionaries both offer a free online combined dictionary and thesaurus.

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