

How to edit your writing (as well as the writing of others)



Overview

Editing is the most important part of writing. Many writers over the years have correctly stated that the best writing is not written, but rather rewritten. The wisdom behind this is that the first idea that occurs to a writer is not always the best one. Our job, as writers, is to recognize that writing is a process that takes time. It's not something you do once and assume that it's your best. It's a process of drafts, refinement, revision, and finalization.

There are several different kinds of editing described below. Also included are some tips on best practices when it comes to writing.

Developmental Editing

Developmental editing is when you have an idea for a paper but have barely started (or not started at all). Perhaps you feel stuck or unmotivated about where to go next. There are several ways to work your way out of paralysis and into developmental editing, but perhaps the two most reliable methods are outlining and research.

Outlining refers to making an outline and growing it into a paper. An outline is like a map where you guide yourself on what to write next. Through an outline you build the logical blueprint of a piece of work and then start to construct it piece by piece. An outline is not set in stone. It's open to change where needed. But it takes the pressure off you as a writer because instead of guessing where you're going next, you have a game plan right in front of you.

Research is the other main most effective method for kick-starting your writing. Writers often don't know where to go next beyond the idea stage because they simply don't know enough about the topic or research question at hand. Once you do research, you can often see things that you couldn't before. You can see the depth of your topic, what it's connected to, and the most effective way to build an argument/essay/presentation. Even if the way is not clear, through research you give yourself options about where to go rather than just pushing ahead against a virtual brick wall.

No matter what, the key is to remember that the feeling of being stuck is only temporary. The more you know about your subject and the more you plan for how you are going to articulate your written work, the less intimidated you will be to move beyond the idea stage and to start developing your assignment.

Structural Editing

Structural editing refers to when you have a strong paper overall but either the sections' sequences needs adjusting or there are one or more sections missing. Think of it like referring back to the blueprint during a construction project. Some things in the paper are usually built

soundly, but don't logically connect with preceding or following elements. There are several ways to address this. One is to back up and make a new outline that reapproaches the thesis, stance, or research question and looks logically at how this could be best explored. This exercise might make it clear where errors in sequence lie. You might also be missing transitions, which is to say connecting phrases and sentences that gently guide the reader from one paragraph or section to another. Transitions are very important linguistic "sign posts" that help take readers comfortably through a piece of writing. Without them, an essay can feel disjointed and jarring at times.

Additionally, something might be missing from your discussion or argument. For example, it would be impossible to talk about the recent economic downturn in many sectors of the economy without mentioning the extraordinary pandemic conditions of 2020 and 2021. Without acknowledging that detail and context, an argument can fall flat. So part of structural editing is working to identify if any critical elements are missing or if there is an over-abundance of one particular element when more of a balance is needed.

The final aspect of structural editing that is important has to do with paragraphs. Whether you use the ADD structure taught in some Academic Writing sections or some other structure, you must realize that paragraphs should have their own intro/body/conclusion sub-structure, just like the overall paper does. When writers don't prioritize this, they end up with paragraphs that are either too short (like 2 or 3 sentences) or too long (like 10 or more sentences). Although this depends on a number of factors, a paragraph should generally be 4 to 8 sentences long, with the important exception of the notable 1-sentence paragraph.

All in all, structural editing means that there a draft or nearly completed draft of the paper. It's just that some sections of it need reordering, deeper revisions, or transition sign-posting.

Citations

Understandably, students are often confused about how to properly cite sources in their papers. Although this often feels like a minor detail, given how incredibly important this is in any university, it's critical that you get this right. There are essentially two kinds of citations that most students are likely to come across: in-text citations (that appear after specific sentences) and works cited citations (end of paper references). Both of them have their own conventions or expected styles. Students often either mix styles like APA, MLA or others, or invent their own style, erroneously believing that as long as they are consistent, any style will do. In fact, there is only one correct way to do citations.

Thankfully, there are many reliable places to learn about and confirm the correct way to do citations. The best online resource for students to turn to for help with any kind of citation is the Purdue OWL website created by Purdue University in the US. What's so helpful about their portal is that a template for nearly any conceivable source's in-text and works cited reference is mentioned there. Students can see how to cite books, articles, web pages, and films, but also interviews, pamphlets, news broadcasts, blogs, and much more.

Proofreading

Proofreading means doing a final check of your paper for mistakes and typos. Therefore, it's what you do before you submit your work. Having an error-free paper goes a long way towards showing the reader that you are paying attention to the details and that you care about your work.

Some common proofreading errors:

- Spacing problems (double spaces, spaces before full stops and commas)
- Random capitalization of words that should not be capitalized
- Misuse of punctuation (excessive commas, use of semicolon as a comma/full stop replacement, inconsistent full stop use)
- Sentence fragments (clauses) treated as full sentences
- Incomplete or incorrect naming of people or organizations (like use of first name instead of surname)
- Use of slang or casual language
- Mix of British and American grammar or spelling

Best Practices

No matter whether you're editing your own work or someone else's, there are a few crucial things to keep in mind. Always edit towards simplicity and clarity. In other words, edit so that your sentences are as clear as possible, recognizing that the person reading your work might not be familiar with the subject. Put yourself in their shoes. Also edit toward brevity. This means recognizing that while sometimes long sentences might be needed, your default style of sentence should be short and direct. This should be especially true for the first sentence of every paragraph. Next, don't linger on sentences that you find difficult to write. Skip them by putting a placeholder and come back to them. If you don't do this, dwelling on one or two sentences can derail your writing session. It will often be much easier to write problematic sentences once you come back to them. And lastly, be sure to pay special attention to quotes and paraphrases so that they are lined up for proper citation. One method of making sure that you don't inadvertently lose track of cited material is to color code it something different than your normal text. That way, you'll be able to see right on the page that this sentence (or section) requires a citation.

One final note on editing someone else's work. There might be situations at FLAME where you are asked to edit a classmate's work. There are three main things that you should keep in mind when you do this. First, be sure to actually read the material before commenting on it. It's worse to comment on a paper without carefully reading it than to not comment at all. Second, recognize that every paper has a mix of strong elements as well as things that could potentially be improved. Be sure to include both in your comments. When you include only critique, it's possible that the writer could become defensive rather than open to your feedback. And third, make your feedback as specific as possible. Avoid terms like "well written" or "confusing". Terms like those have very limited use to a writer. Providing specifics is far more helpful.