

Editing and Proofreading Guide

Is proofreading the same thing as editing? Not exactly. Although many people use the terms interchangeably, proofreading and editing are two different stages of the revision process. Both demand close and careful reading, but they focus on different aspects of writing and employ different techniques.

EDITING

Editing is what you begin doing as soon as you finish your first draft. You want to reread to see, for example, if the paper is well-organized, if the transitions between paragraphs are smooth, and if your evidence really backs up your argument. You can edit on several levels:

Content

Have you done everything the assignment requires? Are the claims you make accurate? If it is required to do so, does your paper make an argument? Is the argument complete? Are all of your claims consistent? Have you supported each point with adequate evidence? Is all of the information in your paper relevant to the assignment and/or your overall writing goal?

Overall Structure

Does your paper have an appropriate introduction and conclusion? Is your thesis clearly stated in your introduction? Is it clear how each paragraph in the body of your paper is related to your thesis? Are the paragraphs arranged in a logical sequence? Have you made clear transitions between paragraphs? One way to check the structure of your paper is to make an outline of the paper after you have written the first draft.

Structure Within Paragraphs

Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence? Does each paragraph stick to one main idea? Are there any extraneous or missing sentences in any of your paragraphs?

Clarity

Have you defined any important terms that might be unclear to your reader? Is the meaning of each sentence clear? (One way to answer this question is to read your paper one sentence at a time, starting at the end and working backwards so that you will not unconsciously fill in content from previous sentences.) Is it clear what each pronoun (he, she, it, they, which, who, this, etc.) refers to? Have you chosen the proper words to express your ideas?

Style

Have you used an appropriate tone (formal, informal, persuasive, etc.)? Is your use of gendered language (masculine and feminine pronouns like "he" or "she" and words like "fireman" that contain "man") appropriate? Have you varied the length and structure of your sentences? Do you tend to use the passive voice too often? Does your writing contain a lot of unnecessary phrases like "there is," "there are," "due to the fact that," etc.? Do you repeat any words unnecessarily?

Citations

Have you appropriately cited quotes, paraphrases, and ideas you got from outside sources? Are your citations in the correct format?

PROOFREADING

Proofreading is the final stage of the editing process—focusing on surface errors such as misspellings and mistakes in grammar and punctuation. You should proofread only after you have finished all of your other editing revisions.

Why proofread? It's the content that really matters, right?

Content is important. But like it or not, the way a paper looks affects the way others judge it. When you've worked hard to develop your ideas and present them for others on paper, you don't want careless errors distracting your reader from what you have to say. It's worth paying attention to the details that help you to make a good impression.

The Proofreading Process

You probably already use some of the strategies discussed below. Experiment with different tactics until you find a system that works well for you. The important thing is to make the process systematic and focused so that you catch as many errors as possible in the least amount of time.

- *Proofread for only one kind of error at a time.* If you try to identify and revise too many errors at once, you risk losing focus, and your proofreading will be less effective. It's easier to catch grammar errors if you aren't checking punctuation and spelling at the same time. In addition, some of the techniques that work well for spotting one kind of mistake won't catch others.
- *Read slowly, and read every word.* Try reading out loud, which forces you to say each word and also lets you hear how the words sound together. When you read silently or too quickly you may skip over errors or make unconscious corrections.
- *Circle every punctuation mark.* This forces you to look at each one. As you circle, ask yourself if the punctuation is correct.
- *Read the paper backwards.* This technique is helpful for checking spelling. Start with the last word on the last page and work your way back to the beginning, reading each word separately. Because content, punctuation, and grammar won't make any sense, your focus will be entirely on the spelling of each word. You can also read backwards sentence by sentence to check grammar; this will help you avoid becoming distracted by content issues.

SOME TIPS THAT APPLY TO BOTH EDITING AND PROOFREADING

- *Get some distance from the text!* It's hard to edit or proofread a paper that you've just finished writing--it's still too familiar, and you tend to skip over a lot of errors. Put the paper aside for a few hours, or days, or weeks. Go for a run. Take a trip to Aruba. Get the point? Clear your head of what you've written so you can look at the paper fresh and see clearly what is really on the page.
- *Read a printed copy of the paper.* Hard-to-find errors often stand out when viewed in real ink.
- *Find a quiet place to work.* Don't try to do your proofreading in front of the TV or while you're chugging away on the stairmaster. Find a place where you can concentrate and avoid distractions.
- *If possible, do your editing and proofreading in several short blocks of time,* rather than all at once—otherwise, your concentration is likely to wane.