Edit and Proofread Effectively

Step 8

Overview

Learn editing and proofreading best practices.

Follow the three-stage editing process—message, organization, and mechanics.

Review how editing can dramatically improve documents.

If I had a magic formula for perfect editing and proofreading, I’d gladly share it with you. And don’t expect Spell Check or some other software to protect you from all errors. They’re far from infallible, though they can be a valuable part of the editing process. Even newspapers, with professional editors and proofreaders, aren’t immune to faux-pas, especially with the pressure to deliver content 24/7.

While your text can’t always be 100 percent error-free, take every precaution to avoid mistakes, especially the obvious ones. Like poor grammar, sloppy proofreading can make you come across as lazy and unprofessional.

Let’s first distinguish between editing and proofreading. Editing involves rereading to ensure that your text is clear, well organized, and in the appropriate style, among other standards. Proofreading helps you catch errors in spelling, punctuation, incorrect words, and other grammar mistakes. While editing typically precedes proofing, the two often overlap, so we’ll treat them as part of a single technique in explaining best practices and the key stages. We won’t look at the specific editorial changes you may want to make in your text (covered in earlier steps), but we’ll examine examples of editing and proofreading in action.

Don’t Write and Edit at the Same Time

When starting to write, let your words pour out as quickly as they come into your head so you don’t interrupt the flow of ideas (see freewriting in step 1 and rhythm in step 3). If you stop after every sentence or paragraph to edit what you’ve just jotted down, you’ll exhaust yourself in switching back and forth from writer to reader. By getting text onscreen (or on paper if you’re old fashioned) as rapidly as you can, you allot more time for the crucial editing and proofreading phase—and in the long run may save yourself time.

Pointer

If you want to write better, know what will read better to others.

Once you’ve completed the first draft, let another person edit and proofread your work if possible. But if you need to go solo, let some time pass—30 to 60 minutes or until the next day if possible—before you start the editing and proofing process. This way you won’t get too attached to your words, and you can refocus your concentration and review the text with a fresh pair of eyes. Taking this break will also help you read from the recipient’s point of view.

To become an effective editor and proofreader, you need to be that reader and answer key questions about the text: Can I follow the key points? Did the writer convince me to support their position or lead me to take the requested action? Are there any wasted words? Does it flow logically from start to finish? And don’t forget your gut instinct: Is it “good”?

Review Tool 8-1 for a list of best practices and select the ones that fit your needs. Over time, you’ll discover the combination of techniques that works best.

Tool 8-1

Editing and Proofreading Best Practices

Read Aloud

Read your text out loud in a staccato, syllable-by-syllable rhythm so you can hear the errors. For example, when sounding out, “Margo outlined four new web marketing strategies is her report,” you’ll probably notice that is should be in (an error that many spell-check functions wouldn’t catch).

Read Backwards

By reading backwards, you’ll force yourself to review one word at a time instead of getting mesmerized by the flow of sentences and paragraphs.

Review Each Sentence as a Separate Entity

Look at each sentence as a separate message, which will also help you avoid being mesmerized by the flow of ideas.

Be Consistent in Style

Even if your organization doesn’t have a style guide, maintain consistency within each document for these options:

capitalization

full names, first names, or last names

abbreviations, such as search engine optimization (SEO) the first time and then SEO for subsequent times

numerals or numbers spelled out

indication of time—2:00 p.m. versus 2 p.m., for example

spacing

use of graphical elements, such as bold, Italic, underlining, font size, and color.

Compose and Edit Emails in Word

Compose and edit important emails and text messages in Word or a similar program, where you can more easily use graphical tools (such as different fonts and sizes, spacing, bullets, and numbers) and spell-check functions. Then, when you’re satisfied, copy and paste the text into an email. This will also help you avoid potential disasters after accidentally hitting send!

Use Track Changes or a Similar Application

Take advantage of the tracking feature of your word-processing program, which should enable you to view in different modes: final with markup, final without markup, original with markup, and original without markup.

Print It Out

Print out or an important email or document, perhaps in larger type. The average person is more likely to catch errors on a piece of paper than on a screen. But use discretion (you don’t need to print out a two-sentence email) to help protect the environment.

Follow the Three-Stage Process

Editing and proofreading can be divided into three major focus areas: message, organization, and mechanics. Each area is addressed separately because it’s impossible to pay close attention to all three at the same time. Let’s look at these stages.

Pointer

Editing is a three-stage process that focuses separately on message, organization, and mechanics.

Message

Editing should begin with the message because it makes no sense to waste time reorganizing or reviewing the mechanics of text that isn’t conveying your points clearly. To review the clarity of your message, ask yourself a few simple questions. These are similar to the ones you asked when you started writing the document (see step 1):

Is the purpose or bottom line clear?

Is the action required of the reader clear?

Are the other important points clear?

Is the tone appropriate for the message?

Is the message written in a positive rather than negative way?

As you answer those questions, mark any text you’re not satisfied with, such as a confusing action step. Onscreen, use the highlighting feature or put that block of text in a different color. On paper, circle or highlight a group of words or sentences that may need revision. Then work on clarifying your message in each of the places you’ve marked.

Organization

Everything you write—from lengthy documents to brief emails and text messages—needs to be organized so that the reader can see where you’re going and then follow you to the end. This second stage of editing takes a hard look at how well you’ve imposed a logical order on what you’re trying to say.

Here are some questions to ask yourself to determine if your text is properly organized:

Is information separated into chunks that are easy to digest?

Are those chunks arranged in a logical sequence?

Does each paragraph contain just one basic idea so readers won’t get confused?

Are there transitions unifying sentences, paragraphs, and sections to help ideas flow smoothly from start to finish?

Is the structure reasonably similar throughout different sections?

One method to separate and arrange your ideas is to read your text and list all the key points conveyed. In essence, you’re reoutlining it. This can be much easier when you’re looking at text you’ve written than it is when you’re staring at a blank screen or page. Reoutlining also helps identify any important concepts you may have omitted. You can list them separately at the bottom of the page or on a separate page and incorporate them as you reorganize the text. You’ll also be able to spot repeated or similar ideas scattered throughout and then merge them into a single paragraph or section.

If you developed an initial outline before you started your first draft, compare that version to the reoutline to see if you omitted anything you initially intended to include. During this stage, you may decide to change the order in which ideas are presented so they flow more logically from one to the next.

Consider adding subheads or a few words before each section (set in bold or italic or underlined—or a combination of these) to pinpoint the key message that follows and to further separate each concept. (See step 3 for more discussion of subheads.)

Some aspects of good organization are more subjective than the message and proper mechanics, and may depend on your personal style or the reader’s preference. For example, the same information can be effectively conveyed through shorter or longer paragraphs. And you can explain a multifaceted concept by using bullets to list the facets or by writing a few traditional paragraphs with no bulleted items.

When you get comfortable with your own method of organizing, you’ll find that it not only promotes readability, but also simplifies your writing process, because you can move text around into separate categories more quickly and confidently.

Mechanics

Most of the grunt work comes in the third stage: reviewing the mechanics of your text (which can also be considered proofreading). Mechanics form the micro level of the document, not the macro message or the midlevel organization. It’s the nitty gritty of editing.

Reviewing spelling, punctuation, grammar, and word usage may require you to be in a different frame of mind than you are when evaluating message clarity and organization. You need to scrutinize individual words or groups of words instead of the entire text. Here are some questions you need to ask:

Typos and Punctuation

Are any words misspelled?

Are any incorrect homonyms (soundalikes such as there and their) used?

Are any words missing or out of place in a sentence?

Have you placed apostrophes correctly?

Are all proper names spelled correctly?

Do all your sentences end with appropriate punctuation?

Are all commas and periods placed inside quotation marks?

Grammar and Syntax

Do subjects and verbs agree in number?

Do nouns and pronouns agree in number?

Is text written in a consistent tense?

Are sentences written in a parallel structure?

Are bulleted or numbered lists written in a parallel structure?

Does each introductory phrase directly relate to the noun that immediately follows it?

Is all text written in complete sentences, where appropriate?

Are there short, choppy sentences that can be combined for better flow?

Word Usage

Is there any stuffy language that can be replaced with simpler words?

Are there any weak, passive verbs or verb-nouns that can be replaced with more powerful, active verbs?

Can you eliminate any redundant language?

Is there jargon or “business-speak” that can be simplified with more widely understood terminology?

You can start with the available spelling- and grammar-checking feature. It helps catch obvious mistakes—but don’t depend on it. Despite advances in language usage, the spell-check feature will not catch every homonym you’ve used incorrectly (here, hear; do, due; there, their, they’re). miss it. And as for the grammar-checking feature, sometimes the software’s suggestions are just plain wrong.

Examples of Editing in Action

Editing strategies often depend on who your readers are, what your message is, and what you hope to accomplish with your text. Learning to edit your own words is hands-on work, and I wish I could sit with you and make specific suggestions as you do it. The second-best option is for you to look at several first-draft documents and evaluate their message, organization, and mechanics and examine how to improve each aspect. Going through this process will help you learn to edit your own work more effectively.

What follows are three documents (which all could be within the text of an email): a meeting review, an explanation of the company purchasing policy, and a blog post. Some of the documents may need corrections in one or two of the focus areas of message, organization, and mechanics; others may need changes in all three areas.

You’ll find the rough-draft versions of each document first, followed by an evaluation of the message, the organization, and the mechanics. Because the evaluations are brief and general, you’ll gain most from studying the text in “tracked” format—that is, with deletions, additions, and changes showing. In this format, you’ll be able to see exactly what was replaced or inserted with a degree of detail that the evaluations don’t offer. The tracked and final versions of each document are shown after each evaluation.

Meeting Review

Rough Draft

Sarah,

This email is to review and confirm all of the critical and key issues we discussed at the meeting yesterday morning from 9 to 11:00 a.m. In that meeting, we talked about the fact that your staff of employees needs to provide assistance to my team with the different facets of the execution of the direct mail campaign.

Below, I have listed the important next steps, which are bulleted, that need to be followed by your staff:

Assuming responsibility for the phone calls to the sources you have in order to be able to build a complete and comprehensive database.

Conducting meetings among your staff and my team in which all personnel present would gain an understanding of what each is responsible for during this entire process.

Handling each and every occasion of complaining by the various customers, many of whom may be displeased with the level and quality of customer service they receive.

How the execution of the database marketing program will proceed, including how much it will cost, what we expect the revenues to be and what type of follow-up we should consider implementing.

I have all the confidence in the world that both of our teams will work together well to complete all that we need to do and be in a great position to produce an effective direct mail campaign with a lower cost.

Should there be any questions, concerns, or items that you feel should be clarified, please don’t hesitate to pick up the phone and call me. Or, if you prefer, you can email me directly.

Sincerely,

Sean

Evaluation

Message: OK

Organization: OK

Mechanics:

weak, passive verbs

stuffy language, wordiness

redundancies

nonparallel structure in bulleted items.

Editing, in Tracked Format

Sarah,

~~This email is to review and~~ Let’s confirm ~~all of~~ the ~~critical and~~ key issues ~~we~~ discussed at ~~the~~ yesterday’s meeting ~~yesterday morning from 9 to 11:00 a.m. In that meeting, we talked~~ regarding ~~about the fact that~~ the help needed from your staff ~~of employees needs to provide assistance to my team with the different facets of the execution of~~ on the direct mail campaign.

Here are ~~Below, I have listed~~ the ~~important~~ next steps~~, which are bulleted, that need to be followed by~~ for your staff:

Call your ~~Assuming responsibility for the phone calls to the~~ sources to help ~~you have in order to be able to~~ build a ~~complete~~ ~~and~~ comprehensive database.

Conduct~~ing~~ meetings with both of our teams to discuss responsibilities. ~~among your staff and my team in which all personnel present would gain an understanding of what each is responsible for during this entire process.~~

Handle customer complaints. ~~ing each and every incidence of complaining by the various s customers, many of whom may be displeased with the level and quality of customer service they receive.~~

Determine costs and anticipated revenues. ~~How the execution of the database marketing program will proceed, including how much it will cost, what we expect the revenues to be and what type of follow-up we should consider implementing.~~

I’m confident that ~~I have all the confidence in the world that both of~~ our teams will work well together to ~~complete all that we need to do and be in a great position to~~ produce an effective direct mail campaign at ~~with~~ a lower cost.

Please call or email me if you have ~~Should there be~~ any questions.~~, concerns, or items that you feel should be clarified, please don’t hesitate to pick up the phone and call me. Or, if you prefer, you can email me directly.~~

Sincerely,

Sean

Final Document

Sarah,

Let’s confirm the key issues discussed at yesterday’s meeting regarding the help needed from your staff on the direct mail campaign.

Here are the next steps for your staff:

Call your sources to help build a comprehensive database.

Conduct meetings with both of our teams to discuss responsibilities.

Handle customer complaints.

Determine costs and anticipated revenues.

I’m confident that our teams will work well together to produce an effective direct mail campaign at a lower cost.

Please call or email me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Sean

Explanation of Company Purchasing Policy

Rough Draft

So we can do a better job in handling our claims with regard to materials purchased at the MNO or XYZ stores, we are requesting all Contractors to use the supply report for those particular stores. When you use our firm’s accounts for these stores, please be absolutely sure that you make a complete purchase for the job at one time. Every time you make a purchase, the store is generating an invoice. As a result, more work is created not only for us, but for you as well.

An example of this occurred when one contractor went to the XYZ store five times in one week for the same claim. Each purchase were for very minor items. This takes time out of your employee’s production and project efficiency, as well as costing our firm and you more money for that particular claim.

We’ve heard many contractors who complain that it takes longer for their employees to relocate the materials at the stores, and this may be the reason why. It’s my recommendation that you and your subcontractors email all of the orders into MNO store or XYZ store at least 24 hours prior to the pickup time. Please make sure that you order the materials necessary for a repair job, and have them put it on one invoice. By doing this, we should minimize your employees’ and subcontractors down time, travel time, and reduce operating expense for you and our company.

In addition, make certain that you use indicate the correct purchase order number, not the customer’s phone number or social security number. If you do not use the correct purchase order number, you will be adviced to go the website of either of the appropriate stores and make all of the corrections for each claim. This needs to be done. For those of you who continue to have problems with getting the correct purchase order number on the invoices, I will have to take you out of the rotation until this can be corrected.

Evaluation

Message: Fairly clear—procedures for purchases at these stores

Organization: Good

Mechanics:

misspelled words

redundancies

words missing

vague use of pronouns, such as this and that, with no clear noun reference

weak, passive verbs

lack of number agreement between subject and verb

stuffy language, wordiness

inaccurate capitalization

inaccurate use of apostrophe

phrases and sentences without parallel structure

dangling participle.

Editing, in Tracked Format

To So we can do a better job in handling our handle claims for with regard to materials purchased at the MNO or XYZ stores, we are re- questing all Ccontractors should to use the supply report for those particular stores. When you use our firm’s accounts for these stores, please bBe absolutely sure to that you make a complete purchase everything you need for the job at one time. Every time you make a purchase, Otherwise, the store is generatesing multiple an invoices for each purchase, resulting in unnecessary work for both of us. As a result, more work is created not only for us, but for you as well.

For An example, of this occurred when one contractor went to the XYZ store five times in one week for the same claim, each time Each purchase were for very minor items. This duplication of effort costs employees valuable production time, and takes time out of your employee’s production and project efficiency, as well as costing our firm the stores and you more money for that particular claim. time and money to produce the extra paperwork. We’ve heard many contractors who complain that it takes longer for their employees to relocate the materials at the stores, and this may be the reason why. It’s my I recommendation that you and your subcontractors email all of the orders to into MNO store or XYZ store at least 24 hours prior to the pickup time, and be. Please make sure that all you order the materials needed for a job are necessary for a repair job, and have them put it listed on one invoice. By doing this, Doing so should minimize your employees’ and subcontractors down time, travel time, and reduce operating expenses for you and our company. all parties.

In addition, remember to submit make certain that you use indicate the correct purchase order number, not the customer’s phone number or social security number. If you do not use the correct purchase order number, If not, you will be forced adviced to go to the website of either of the appropriate store and make all of the corrections each claim. This needs to be done. For tThose of you who continue to submit the wrong have problems with getting the correct purchase order numbers on the invoices , I will be have to taken you out of the rotation until this error can be corrected.</extract>

Final Document

To better handle claims for materials purchased at the MNO or XYZ stores, contractors should use the supply report for those particular stores. Be sure to purchase everything you need for the job at one time. Otherwise, the store generates multiple invoices for each purchase, resulting in unnecessary work for both of us.

For example, one contractor went to XYZ store five times in one week for the same claim, each time for minor items. This duplication of effort costs employees valuable production time, and the stores time and money to produce the extra paperwork.

I recommend that you and your subcontractors email all orders to MNO store or XYZ store at least 24 hours prior to the pickup time, and be sure that all materials needed for a job are listed on one invoice. Doing so should reduce operating expenses for all parties.

In addition, remember to submit the correct purchase order number, not the customer’s phone number or social security number. If not, you will be forced to go to the website of either store and correct each claim. Those of you who continue to submit the wrong numbers on the invoices will be taken out of the rotation until this error can be corrected. </extract>

Blog Post

Rough Draft

With stories, the earlier they’re introduced into a speech the better. This way, one is able to create engagement from people right from the start. I recently attended a seminar in Manhattan where I, as an attendee, heard the speak open by saying how happy he—an ex New Yorker—was to be back in the city where he came from and was now able to indulge in New York bagels. The audience immediately, from the start, felt a greater sense of connection!

Everyone loves to be the recipient of good storytelling. Incorporating the practice of storytelling into your public speaking can make a difference. This difference could be between putting your audience to sleep or being able to wow them with a memorable message.

What’s also important is tailoring your story to the requirements of the audience. What moves this audience? What are this audience’s day-to-day challenges? What is this audience’s long-term goals? Don’t simply add a random story—relate it to your message. By sharing experiences that they’re more likely to care about, you’ll add personal meaning and make your stories more relevant.

One example is if you’re speaking about effectively hiring to a group of small employers. In this specific case, you might share a story about a colleague who used a really offbeat technique to recruit someone who turned out to be her most valuable employee.

Want to learn more? Check in with us again next week when we’ll provide three more simple tips for incorporating storytelling into your public speaking.

Evaluation

Message: Clear—storytelling can help speakers connect with their audiences.

Organization: Poor. The blog post opened with a statement that stories should be introduced early in a presentation to engage the audience, leading the reader to believe more discussion on this theme would follow. But then the second paragraph shifted to a more general point of how speakers can effectively use storytelling. The third paragraph mixed up two distinct (albeit similar) suggestions—tailoring the story to the audience and relating the story to your message.

Mechanics:

redundancies

wordiness

repetitive language

weak nouns that could be turned into strong verbs

shifted tenses (singular and plural)

errors in subject–verb and noun–pronoun agreement

typos (wrong words) that spell check won’t catch.

To revise this blog post, start by reorganizing the information into a logical order:

First, open with a clear theme: Why storytelling is an effective tool for speeches

Then list and number the three tips for incorporating stories into speeches:

Introduce the story early in the presentation.

Tailor the story to your audience.

Relate the story to your message.

After your opening, lead into these suggestions: Here are three tips for integrating stories into your next speech:

Editing, in Tracked Format

Everyone loves a good story. Incorporating the practice of storytelling into your public speaking can make the difference between putting your audience to sleep or wowing them with a memorable message.

Here are three tips for integrating stories into your next speech:

1. Introduce the story early in your speech With stories, the earlier they’re introduced into a speech the better. This way, one is able to create engagement people from the start. I recently attended a seminar in Manhattan where I, as an attendee, heard the speaker opened by saying how happy he—an ex–New Yorker—was to be back in the city where he came from and was now able to so he could indulge in New York bagels. The audience immediately, from the start, felt a greater sense of more connected! on!

Everyone loves to be the recipient of good storytelling. This difference could be

What’s also important is 2. Tailoring your stories to the requirements of the audience. What moves this audience group of people? What are this audience’s their day-to-day challenges? What is this audience’s are their long-term goals? Don’t simply add a random story—relate it to your message. By sharing experiences that they’re more likely to care about, you’ll add personal meaning and make your stories more relevant.

3. Relate the story to your message instead of plugging in a random story. One For example, is if you’re speaking about effectively hiring to a group of small employers, . In this specific case, you might share a story talk about a colleague who used a really an extremely offbeat technique to recruit someone who turned out to be her most valuable employee.

Want to learn more? Check in with us again next week, when we’ll provide three more simple tips for incorporating storytelling into your public speaking. </extract>

Final Document

Everyone loves a good story. Incorporating storytelling into your public speaking can make a difference between putting your audience to sleep or being able to wow them with a memorable message.

Here are three tips for integrating stories into your next speech:

Introduce the story early in your speech to engage people from the start. I recently attended a seminar in Manhattan where the speaker opened by saying how happy he—an ex–New Yorker—was to be back in the city so he could indulge in New York bagels. The audience immediately felt more connected!

Tailor your story to the audience. What moves this group of people? What are their day-to-day challenges? What are their long-term goals? By sharing experiences that they’re more likely to care about, you’ll add personal meaning and make your stories more relevant.

Relate the story to your message instead of just plugging in a random story. For example, if you’re speaking about effective hiring to a group of small employers, you might talk about a colleague who used an extremely offbeat technique to recruit someone who turned out to be her most valuable employee.

Want to learn more? Check in with us again next week, when we’ll provide three more simple tips for incorporating storytelling into your public speaking.

(Blog post example courtesy of Jayne Latz, president of Corporate Speech Solutions.)

Your Turn

Editing requires a meticulous review of your document’s message (clarity of content), organization (logical structure and flow), and mechanics (punctuation, spelling, grammar, and word usage). Try these exercises:

Find the word-usage errors:

The principle reason for Grayson’s disappointment is that nobody on the team complemented him on the keynote speech he delivered at the annual meeting.

Find the typo:

Be extra careful in reviewing all of the exercises in this section to see if you can find the the mistake, which is often difficult to spot.

Revise the following document using these guidelines:

Delete unnecessary words.

Use simple words and parallel structure.

Ensure that verbs and subjects agree in number.

Make verb tense consistent throughout.

Fix spelling, punctuation, grammar, or usage mistakes.

If desired, insert subheads and bullets to improve organization.

Dan,

Everyone in our division believes strongly in the need for accuracy in shipping. We take it seriously and consider its the part our business that distinguish us from the rest of the competition. Mistakes on orders can be heavily damaging to the company.

Too many errors have occurred on shipments. It has come to my attention that shipment errors have gone up 2 15 percent over the time period covering the past nine months. It is my opinion that this is probably a result of outdated technology. Thus the only, solution is to make the investment in the latest, state-of-the-art shipping technology. This technology will be so much better for all partys involved.

Nobody likes sloppy work by any one or group. After my observations, I have concluded that a good many of the shipping clerks do work that many, including I, consider sloppy. No way can this be tolerated any more. The entire department needs to undergo training on proper procedures. This training can be handled by PXX Partners, experts in this type of training.

We have also notice a large number of safety violations, that can be dangerous if they’re not corrected. So let’s get on it. I want those violations to be corrected within a four-month time period. The best ones to handle this is RLS Risk Services, a prominent risk management firm. Let’s get on this.

Regards,

Gail

Answers to 1 and 2

Change principle to principal and complemented to complimented.

Delete the extra the.

The Next Step

While careful editing and proofreading are essential for longer documents such as reports and proposals, they’re also crucial for emails and texts. We’ll take a closer look at how to compose these messages effectively in step 9 (Master Emails and Electronic Communication).