Editing and Editing Strategies

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☰ **WHAT'S COVERED**

This tutorial covers editing, and some strategies for editing essays to be as clear and effective as possible:

1. The Editing Stage

Editing is improving the sentences, word choices, and overall style of an essay or other piece of writing.

This means that editing is about making the writing itself better, not necessarily focusing on the big ideas that the content covers. You're looking at words and sentences—the building blocks of the essay.

Thus, you want to edit for:

- How clear your ideas are
- How precise your language is
- How effectively chosen your words are
- How much variety you see in your sentences
- Whether all of your sentences are complete

Editing is important because it helps make your writing work. The words you choose and how you put them together creates the overall tone of the piece, which in turn influences the way your readers understand who you are and what the purpose of your essay is.
Vague, repetitive, wordy, or unclear writing won't do its job for you. Readers will have an easy time dismissing your ideas if you don't put them together thoughtfully.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Editing
Improving the sentences, word choices, and overall style of an essay or other piece of writing.

2. Common Issues to Edit

Though not the only areas to focus on, there a few issues that you should always look out for when you edit:

- Wordiness
- Vague Language
- Sentence-Level Errors

2a. Wordiness

One common issue is **wordiness**, which is using too many words to make a point. This is the opposite of the precise, concise language that you're aiming for.

Wordy writing often includes redundancies, which occur when you use two or even more words or phrases to express the same idea or make the same point. In other words, this is when you're saying the same thing in multiple ways. The following sentence is an example of this.

The two senators should <u>collaborate together</u> on a <u>shared project</u>.

"Collaborate" means work together, so it's redundant to say "collaborate together." You can't collaborate not together. And this sentence goes one step further, adding more redundancy with "a shared project." Can you collaborate on a project you're not sharing? This kind of phrasing dilutes your writing unnecessarily, so why not just say:

The two senators should collaborate.

Here's another:

The family is <u>in the process of moving</u>.

The word "moving" implies that there's a process. Saying that you're in the process of being in the process of moving is redundant. You could just say:

The family is moving."

Now look at this dependent clause:

<u>In spite of the fact that</u> I don't like orange juice...

That opening phrase is a prime example of wordiness and could be put more concisely as "although."

Although I don't like orange juice...

> **TERM TO KNOW**
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> **Wordiness**
> Using too many words to make a point.

2b. Vague Language

Another common pitfall for writers is **vague language**, which is overly general and nonspecific language. Again this is the opposite of the precise and specific language that you're hoping to use.

Think about just how much more interesting it is for a reader to see this sentence:

Watching fireworks engages every sense as you hear the pops of the explosions, are dazzled by the colors, and smell the acrid tang of the explosive powder.

Versus this one:

Watching fireworks is interesting.

The former is specific and evocative, while the latter is vague and kind of dull.

What makes this next sentence vague?

Study skills are helpful for students.

The word "helpful," for one, could be much more specific. How helpful are study skills, and in what way are they helpful? Will these skills help the students' grades, fashion sense, or ability to fly? The sentence doesn't say which, so it's too vague.

How could you change the vague language in this sentence to make it more specific and clear? You can make the adjective itself stronger and also make the whole context clearer.

Study skills are beneficial for student grades.

📄 **TERM TO KNOW**

Vague Language
Overly-general and nonspecific language.

2c. Sentence-Level Errors

Now that you know some common issues in your language to look for, you can think about the bigger issues with the way sentences are put together.

Just as you can now check for wordy and vague sentences, you'll want to check each sentence to make sure it is complete, as opposed to a run-on or an incomplete sentence.

To do this, look for the subject, verb, and full thought to be expressed in each sentence. Check that each sentence is punctuated correctly, especially if it's made up of more than one clause.

You might look also for variety to see if there's a mixture of longer and shorter sentences, different sentence beginnings, and different sentence structures. Overall, your goal is to look at your sentences to make sure that they're saying the things that you have intended them to say and doing so interestingly.

3. Editing Strategies

Have you ever heard the saying "You can't see the forest for the trees?" It means that if you get too close to each individual tree, you won't be able to see that you're in a forest. You need a different point of view for that.

This is the same process with editing. You need to look at the style and clarity of your sentences to improve the overall quality of your essays. But to do that, you need to get some distance from your own writing so that you can assess your sentences clearly.

Luckily, there are several editing strategies that can help you accomplish this.

3a. Asking a Friend

One method is to ask a friend to read through your writing and point out issues in the sentences and overall writing style. Because your friend doesn't already know what you mean to say, he or she might be better able to see what your sentences are actually communicating.

Making use of the fresh sets of eyes of your friends and family is a great place to start. Discussing your ideas with them can also help you gain greater clarity.

3b. Reading Backwards

You might also go through the essay backwards, reading the last sentence first, then the second to last, and so on. Because this takes each sentence out of its context, it may help you gain better perspective and spot issues.

You can also do this by separating each paragraph and reading it by itself to again remove context and thereby reveal new elements of your writing.

3c. Reading Aloud

Read your sentences, or even your whole paper, aloud to yourself or a friend in a slow and conversational voice. If you read each sentence individually from the start to the finish, you'll have a better idea if each is effectively building support as it's meant to within the paragraphs and as a whole.

Hearing, and even speaking, are really different than reading and writing. When you hear your own words, you might again have the distance you need to notice errors.

This is also a good way to check for confusing sentences. If a sentence is too hard to read out loud, if you have to stop and start again, or if you get puzzled halfway through reading it, then it's going to be just as hard to understand when your reader gets to it.

3d. Using Grammar-Checking Software

Finally, use your grammar-checking software. While you don't want to rely on this totally, as it can be flawed and not wholly foolproof, it can again help you get some distance from your writing.

Using this software is like having someone inside your computer arguing with you. If the word processing application you use is telling you that there's a problem with the grammar, word choice, sentence structure, or anything else in a sentence, take a moment to check that sentence out.

Have that argument with the "brain" in your computer. You might disagree with what it's saying, but the very process of thinking through that sentence and having that conversation with yourself will help you create clearer, better writing overall.

> 🚩 **HINT**
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> As you deploy these strategies, always look for wordiness, vagueness, sentence errors, passive construction, and anything else that just doesn't sound good. There's no wrong way to do this, but there are many great tools that you'll develop as a writer to improve your authorial voice.

> 📋 **SUMMARY**
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> In this tutorial, you learned that **the editing stage** in the writing process is where you focus on making sure your words and sentences clearly communicate your ideas. Some **common issues to look for**

when editing are **wordiness**, or using too many words to make a point,**vague language**, or language that is general and non-specific, and **sentence-level errors**, such as incomplete or grammatically confusing sentences.

Finally, you learned some effective **editing strategies** that you can use during this stage to step back and reevaluate your writing objectively: **asking a friend** to offer a fresh perspective on your essay, **reading backwards** (looking at the last sentence first, and so on) to remove context and reveal new elements of your writing, **reading aloud** to catch errors you might not otherwise notice, and**using grammar-checking software** to again help you consider your sentences objectively.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Martina Shabram.

📄 TERMS TO KNOW

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Vague Language
Overly-general and nonspecific language.

Wordiness
Using too many words to make a point.