Objectives

This handout aims to provide a guide to the editing and proofreading processes by discussing:

- The difference between editing and proofreading.
- Strategies for editing the content of your paper.
- How to edit writing style for verb choice, sentence structure and phrasing, and overall clarity.
- How to proofread for grammar.

Editing vs. Proofreading

- **Editing**: adjusting idea development, writing structure, and writing style.
- **Proofreading**: correcting the “surface errors,” i.e. grammar and spelling.
- Try to separate these processes by editing before you proofread—there’s no point in correcting the grammar of a sentence you may end up deleting entirely.
- If possible, try to not look at your paper for a few days between the completion of your first draft and the editing and proofreading processes. This will help you see the paper from a fresh perspective.

Editing for Content

- Make sure you have met minimum source requirements.
- If there are no source requirements, make sure you develop your ideas using specific examples and supporting details.
  - Don’t just re-phrase the same thought repeatedly throughout the body of a paragraph—explain in depth while adding new layers of complexity to the idea.
- Balance your major points.
  - Every point you make should include adequate citation, based on the expectations of your professor. A point which has significantly less citation than other points is a weak spot in your paper which must be strengthened by doing more research and/or elaborating on the idea.
  - Each major point should be of roughly equal length.
    - Keep in mind that a major point is generally made up of several paragraphs—don’t write page long paragraphs in order to keep a point restricted to one paragraph.
    - If a point is overly long, consider trimming repetitive sections, or finding a place to break the point in two.
- Every paragraph requires a strong topic sentence which accurately summarizes the content of the paragraph and relates to the thesis or purpose of the paper.
Sentences which don’t add to the paragraph’s content should be moved to another point in the paper, relegated to a footnote, or removed entirely.

- Make sure you are confident that every statement made is either true or arguable.
  - A true statement is a fact which cannot be disputed such as “Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980.”
  - An arguable statement is one which is open to debate, but can be supported using true statements such as “Ronald Reagan’s election marked the beginning of both the end of organized labor’s political power and a renewed ascendancy of corporate influence in American government. Whereas in 1980 nearly 35% of the private sector workforce was unionized, by 1984 the figure was closer to 25%. Scholars have credited this shift to the message sent to businesses by Reagan’s firing of all members of the PATCO union in response to their strike for a better contract.”
    - Arguable statements which are not backed up using facts need to be developed further, and you may need more research.
  - Underline or highlight all statements that are neither factual nor arguable, and decide how to adjust or replace them.
    - If more than half a paragraph is marked, cut it entirely and re-write.

Editing for Style

Verb Choice

- Use strong verbs and avoid passive voice.
- Wherever possible, replace weak verbs like: make, to be verbs (is, are, were, was, be, been, being), do, go/goes/went/going, etc. These verbs often do not convey as much meaning as they ought to, and when used too frequently lead to mundane prose.
  - “Mistakes were made,” a statement often repeated in press conferences and public relations statements, is vague as a result of the presence of the passive voice and two weak verbs.
    - “The American diplomat made a mistake” is in the active voice and conveys more meaning but is still vague over what exactly that mistake was.
    - “The American diplomat mistook the Bolivian foreign minister for a smuggler” uses a stronger verb (mistook instead of made) and as a result clearly conveys both the nature of the mistake and who committed that mistake.
  - Use the search function (ctrl+f) to catch weak verbs. This is particularly helpful for is/are/were/was since the passive voice often coincides with these verbs.
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Editing and Proofreading Strategies

Sentence Structure and Phrasing

- Vary the structure and length of sentences.
  - Be particularly careful about starting multiple sentences in a row with the same subject.
    - For example, if a section of a paper deals with another author’s ideas at length, we often fall into the trap of starting several sentences in a row with that author’s name, as in “Schirmer argues… Schirmer contends… Schirmer’s findings suggest…”
    - To avoid this, consider using transitional phrases and nouns which clearly describe the subject of the last sentence. A series of sentences might start “Schirmer argues… As a result, the author finds that… This particular conclusion has generated considerable controversy since…”
  - Read the paper out loud and make note of sentences which are awkwardly phrased.
    - Avoid run-on sentences. (for more information see Run-Ons and Fragments handout at http://www.sfsu.edu/~carp1/helpfulhandouts.htm)
    - Ensure that your word choice is appropriate by consulting a dictionary and thesaurus.
      - Don’t just use the thesaurus blindly to vary your vocabulary; make sure that you know the specific connotations of a given word before you use it by looking up its dictionary definition.
    - Sentences with inappropriate voice or tone will sound out of place in an academic essay. If a sentence sounds like something you would say in conversation, you should find a way to rephrase it in a more academic tone.
      - “Schirmer mostly talks about the Guatemalan military” is less academic than “Schirmer’s book centers on the culture and policies of the Guatemalan military.”

Clarity

- Make sure your ideas are clearly articulated.
  - When you use pronouns (it, they, he, she, etc.), the reader should understand to what or to whom you are referring.
  - Draw connections from one idea to the next by ensuring the transitions from one paragraph to the next are done as smoothly as possible.
    - Transition words and phrases include: since, as a result, as such, similarly, unlike, in contrast, despite, given, this, that, for example, etc.
  - Don’t be afraid to move sections around if it makes for a more logical flow of ideas.
    - Consider drafting your major points separately in different word documents or sheets of paper before combining them into a new document so that this process is easier.
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- Revise your transitions if you do decide to move around your points, since the order in which you present the ideas will naturally change how you move in between them.
- Cut down on wordiness. If something can be said as clearly with fewer words, change the sentence.
  - For example, don’t say “due to the fact that” when you could just as easily say “since” or “because.”
  - Below is an example of a wordy sentence that has been rephrased concisely:
    - Original sentence: “American policymakers would be ill-advised to consider yet another intervention without a clear timetable and achievable goals, due to the fact that the invasion of Iraq contributed to a rising tide of anti-Americanism around the globe.”
    - Revised sentence: “Future American military interventions are ill-advised without a clear timetable and achievable goals, since the invasion of Iraq heightened anti-American sentiment around the globe.”

Proofreading Grammar

Before you begin proofreading for grammar, take a break from the paper. Depending on how much time you have before the deadline, this could be as short as ten minutes or as long as a week.

Keep the pace of proofreading as deliberate and consistent as possible. When you have become very familiar with your essay, there is a tendency to read through sections too quickly to see the mistakes.

- Below are proofreading strategies for grammar:
  - Read out loud again and let your ear catch the issues your eyes can’t.
  - Consider reading out loud beginning with the last sentence, followed by the second to last sentence, and so on, since this allows you to isolate sentence level issues even more effectively.
  - If you’ve printed out a copy, use a blank piece of paper to cover up all of the writing below a given line. Read each sentence line by line, uncovering the next sentence as you read.
  - Adjust margins, font, and type size to force your brain to see the paper differently.
- Don’t rely exclusively on spellcheck for spelling and grammar! Consult a dictionary for the spelling and follow the below process to double-check your grammar.
- Identify your weaknesses so that you know which issues to focus on most. If you have a great deal of grammar issues, take them one at a time, even though this means reading your paper several times.
  - Some of the most frequent grammar errors are article choice, subject/verb agreement, preposition choice, punctuation (especially semi-colons, colons, and commas), and tense choice.
Create a checklist of all the issues which you need to address while proofreading.

- Use the search key (ctrl+f) if doing this can help you identify points of difficulty.
  - Use this if you know you mix up homonyms like there/their/they’re, its/it’s, affect/effect or to/too/two.
  - This is also especially helpful for punctuation and prepositions.
    - For example, if you know you tend to misuse semicolons, search for semi-colons, and ensure that each one was used properly.
    - Similarly, if there are certain prepositions which you mix up, you can search for each time you used those prepositions and double check that you used them properly.

- Make sure there are no sentence fragments. Every sentence needs a subject and a verb.
  - Be aware that in some instances even the presence of a noun and a verb is not enough to create a complete sentence. When starting a sentence with a conjunction, take extra care to make sure that you are not writing a fragment.
  - Below are examples of how to make a sentence fragment beginning with a preposition into a complete sentence:
    - Fragment: “That the general population disagreed with government policy.”
    - Sentence: “That the general population disagreed with government policy was of no concern to the dictator.”
    - Fragment: “Whether or not this was the case.”
    - Sentence: “Whether or not this was the case, people generally acted as though it was.”

**Useful Links**

http://www.mhhe.com/mayfieldpub/tsw/esl-link.htm#choice

http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CommonErrors.html
Bibliography


Purdue University Online Writing Lab, “Proofreading,” accessed 25 April 2014, https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/561/01/

