A Self-Editing Guide

_____

Editing can help you improve the quality of your academic writing. When you edit, you find opportunities to revise your writing and develop your work further. This handout suggests an approach you can use to edit your papers before you hand it in for a grade.

The best approach for editing is to do it in stages. That way you can focus on the various important issues separately, reducing the chance of missing significant revisions in your paper. Although that may sound like a lot of work, each stage is fairly quick because it is so specific.

Have you heard of **AFOSEP**?

It's actually an acronym to help you remember the order of the stages of the editing process, AFOSEP[1].

- **A**ssignment Instructions
- **F**ocus
- **O**rganization
- **S**upport
- **E**diting Language
- **P**roofreading

The rest of this handout explains the stages of AFOSEP, the key questions to consider, and some editing strategies to try for each stage. After you edit for each stage, make any changes to your paper before moving on to the next stage. Editing in this specific order can reduce wasted time and effort. If you need help to learn more about any of these stages, consult with a tutor at the Centre for Writers.

---

[1] Adapted with permission from a rubric developed at the Washington State University Writing Center.

AFOSEP

After you have completed a draft of your paper, work through each of the AFOSEP stages below. Indented under the name of each stage are one or more key questions to consider at that stage. In *italics* are suggested editing strategies that you can try on your own or with a tutor. Remember to make any revisions called for at one stage before moving on to the next stage.

Assignment Instructions

Does your work fit the assignment instructions?

> *Reread the instructions and your paper. The most common reason students lose marks is because they did not follow instructions!*

Focus

Is the main focus of the paper stated explicitly?

Is the focus stated in a thesis statement with the qualities of a good thesis?

Is there any information in the paper that is not clearly related to the main focus and/or thesis statement?

> *After identifying the focus of the paper, read the paper over considering whether each idea is related to the focus. Consider removing parts that do not directly relate to the focus.*

Organization

Does the structure of the paper follow the assignment instructions? For example, if the assignment instructions require essay structure, does the paper have an introduction, body and conclusion?

Does each paragraph have a topic sentence?

If the paper has sections or headings, do they clearly link to the thesis or main focus?

Is each section of the paper clearly linked to the section before it? (coherence)

Are the paragraphs in a logical order? (coherence)

> *A good strategy for doing this is to make a simple outline from the paper. Identify the thesis and the topic sentences. Look for the links between ideas. Add any missing links. Reconsider the order of ideas.*

Support

Is each topic sentence supported by main points and evidence?

Is there specific, concrete evidence (e.g. facts, examples, statistics, description, quotations) for each point?

Does the paper explain the evidence and link it back to the point being supported?

Are sources of information credible?

Are sources documented?

Are the sources cited properly for your required documentation (APA, MLA, CMS)?

> *Mark up each body paragraph by circling each topic sentence. Then, underline the specific evidence for each point. Put a star beside the explanation of the evidence that links it back to the topic sentence. Make necessary revisions. Repeat this stage again with each revised draft.*

Editing the language

Does your word choice appropriately communicate your intended meaning?

Are there sentences that could be worded more effectively?

Do you want to revise sentence structure or punctuation?

> *Ask a trusted person to read your revised draft with a specific task in mind. For instance, ask them to read only for grammar and punctuation errors, or ask them to only read the transitions between paragraphs to see if the transitions are logical.*

> *List your most common types of errors. Review the paper for each error type. If you would like assistance, consult a tutor at the Centre for Writers. A writing tutor can suggest specific editing strategies for different error types.*

Proofreading

Is the paper formatted according to the instructor's requirements?

Did you cross-check citations (in-text) with your reference list, bibliography, or endnotes?

> *Revisit the assignment instructions concerning the required format. Check your page setup, fonts, and required paper length. Go through all citations checking order of information, capitalization, spacing and punctuation with the style guide.*

Self-Editing Strategies from CUNY.

http://www.law.cuny.edu/academics/WritingCenter/students/strategies-techniques/editing/self.html
We suggest the following tips to help you edit and proofread your work:

1. Search for the occurrence of similar errors.

Ask yourself these questions:
- Do my ideas frequently appear disorganized in the text?
- Do my paragraphs lack a topic sentence?
- Do I tend to repeat the same idea throughout the text, unnecessarily?
- Do I always write the same kind of sentence structure, e.g., subject-verb-object?
- Multilingual students: in what grammar areas do I make most of my errors? E.g., are my errors related to the use of prepositions, verb tenses, articles, connectors, etc.?

2. Build up a personalized editing checklist.

Once you've identified your patterns of errors, then you should create a checklist for yourself. The next time you edit a paper, you may want to focus exclusively on those errors, or pay more attention to them, and perhaps tackle them first.

3. Make time for the editing phase.

Remember writing is not over when you have finished your first draft, but after you have revised and edited it. Setting aside time for editing is essential for all of your writing, including in-class exams.

4. Revise on a printed copy rather than a computer screen.

This creates some distance between you and the final product and allows you to manipulate the paper copy in a more controlled way (you can go back or move forward to previous portions of the text as many times as you want). It also allows you to take down notes directly on the text in an easy way.

5. Make focused passes through a text to look at a specific issue.

For example, search the text for errors in subject/verb agreement (-s missing from a 3rd person singular verb). Don't try to look at everything at the same time, because you will miss a lot!

Self-editing looks impossible when you think of it in general. However, when you break down the task in pieces and prioritize types of errors, then self-editing becomes more manageable. If you have difficulties with the use of prepositions, but do not have much problem with verb tenses, then, focus on prepositions exclusively. One or two errors in verbs in your paper will not be as problematic as multiple errors in preposition usage. Then use the same procedure with different editing categories, one pass through for each one.

6. Ask somebody to read your paper aloud to you.

Listening to another voice creates distance from your own writing and allows you to move from the position of the writer to the position of the listener/reader. If this is not possible, then just read the paper aloud to yourself: listening to your own voice gives you some distance from the text itself. You may even record yourself while reading your text: listening to a voice, even when it is yours, creates some distance from your own work.

7. Ask a friend (maybe another student from your class?) to proofread your paper.

However, avoid asking your friend to correct it (if this is the case, you'll never learn how to proofread!). Just ask your reader to mark the potential problems in your paper, and then discuss those problems with him/her.

8. When proofreading, read the paper from back to front.

Breaking the flow of ideas sometimes helps to focus on language issues rather than on the content itself.

9. Use the dictionary (a lexicon or a thesaurus) in order to make an accurate and varied choice of words.

This way you will have access not only to meanings but also to synonyms, antonyms, shades of meaning, etc. A dictionary is a useful tool both for multilingual students and native speakers.