Editing and Proofing Tips

Editing and proofing are important stages in the writing process. It is highly important to review the piece as a whole before submitting it anywhere. It is important to be able to edit and proofread on your own. Below are some tips for editing and proofing.

Are editing and proofing the same thing?

Not exactly. Although many people use these terms interchangeably, editing and proofing are different stages of the writing and revision processes. They are similar in what they both demand close and careful reading, however they focus on different aspects of the text and use different techniques.

Tips for Editing and Proofing

- **Leave the text alone for a while**. It is hard to edit or proofread a paper that you have just finished writing. You are too familiar with the content and are likely to skip many errors due to this. Put your paper aside for a few hours, days, or weeks if deadlines allow. Distract your mind from this particular text. Go for a run. Take a nap. Read a book. **Clear your head of what you wrote so that when you come back to it, you are able to look as it with a fresh perspective**. If possible, have a friend look it over if you cannot come to the Writing Center. Someone who is reading your paper for the first time can read it with fresh eyes.

- **Decide how you edit and proofread more effectively.** Do you tend to notice more errors while working with a print copy of your text? Do you see more mistakes when reviewing your paper on the computer. **Sometimes the medium can affect your ability to review the text**. Try both of these a few times and find out what works best for you.

- **Find a quiet place to work**. Do not edit while watching television or while listening to loud music. Find a place where you can **concentrate** on the task at hand.

- **Try changing the look of your text.** Sometimes changing the size, color, spacing, or style of the text might trick your brain into thinking the text is a different document. The more distanced you can become with the text, the better able you will be to catch mistakes.

- **Try to do your editing and proofing in several intervals**. Taking a break a few pages into your editing and proofing might be beneficial. If your text is long, your focus is more likely to thin out and thus you will miss errors. If you look at the document in several intervals, you will be more likely to keep your focus throughout the document.

- **If you're short on time, focus on editing and proofing for the higher order concerns**, such as clarity and content.

What is Editing?

Editing is what you do, or should do, once you finish your first draft. You reread your draft to see whether it is well-organized, if there are transitions between paragraphs, if your evidence supports your argument, and if your citations are correct according to the format you are using. There are several components to editing:

Content
- Have you met all of the requirements for this project?
- Are your claims accurate and constant?
- If required, does your paper have a solid, complete argument supported by evidence?
- Is all of the information on your paper relevant to the assignment and your overall writing goal?

Structure
- Does your paper have an appropriate introduction and conclusion?
- Is your thesis clearly stated in your introduction?
- Do you have clear, smooth transitions between paragraphs?
- Is the relation between your body paragraphs and your thesis clear?
- Does each paragraph have a clear topic sentence?
- Does each paragraph focus on one main ideas relating to your thesis?

One way to check the structure of your paper is to make an outline after you've written the first draft. To create an outline, copy the thesis statement and the first lines of your body paragraphs into a new document. Do these sentences relate and support each other?

Clarity
- Is the meaning of each sentence clear?
  * Is it clear what each pronoun (he, she, they, it, which, who, this, etc.) refers to?
  * One way to check for this is to read your paper one sentence at a time, starting from your conclusion and working your way backwards. This will prevent you from unconsciously filing in content from the previous sentence.
- Have you defined any important terms that might be unclear to your reader?
- Have you chosen the proper words to express your ideas?
  * Avoid using words found in a thesaurus that are not a normal to your vocabulary—you mind end up misusing them.

Style
- Have you used the appropriate tone (formal, informal, persuasive, argumentative, etc.)?
- Have you varied the length and structure of your sentences?
- Do you tend to use passive voice too often?
- Does your writing contain a lot of unnecessary phrases like "there is," "there are," and "due to the fact that," etc.?

Citations

- Have you appropriately cited quotes, paraphrases, and ideas you found in your sources?
- Are your citations in the correct format?

As you edit these components, you will usually make significant revisions to the content and wording in your text. **Keep an eye on what types of errors you made most**—knowing what kind of problems you tend to have will be helpful in your awareness of your strength and weaknesses, and will help you progress as a writer. Being aware of these common errors can help you develop a pattern to use in the future to prevent and spot them.

What is Proofreading?

Proofreading is the final stage in the writing process, where you focus on surface errors such as misspellings and grammar. Ideally, this should be the last step in your process. If you add more information after you have proofread your paper, make sure to proofread it again.

You might be asking yourself: **Why proofread? It's the content that really matters, right?** Content is important, yes, however the way a paper looks affects the way others judge it. When you have worked hard to develop and present your ideas, you do not want careless errors distracting your readers from what you have to say. Looking for and revising surface level errors will help you make a good impression. Most people skim their piece for these types of errors, and as a result of quickly scanning the piece, they end up missing quite a lot of them. It is better to look for errors slowly and carefully because while this might take more time, it pays off in the end.

Try to keep the editing and proofreading processes separate. When you are editing an early draft, you do not want to concern yourself with proper grammar and spelling. If you do both of these stages at the same time, you will most likely end up not focusing on the most important tasks of developing and connecting your ideas.

Tips for Proofreading

- **Don't rely entirely on spell checkers.** While spell check can be a useful tool, it is far from foolproof. Spell checkers will not catch misspellings that form another valid word. For example, If you type "their" instead of "there," "your" instead of "you're" or "its" instead of "it's," the spell checker won't catch these errors.

- **Grammar checkers can be even more problematic.** These programs have a limited set of rules so they cannot identify every error and often make mistakes. They do not provide explanations to help you understand why a sentence should be revised. While these could help you identify run-on sentences and passive voice, you should not rely on only these for proofreading.

- **Proofread for one kind of error at a time**. Trying to identify and revise too many things at once puts you at risk of losing focus, and your proofreading will be less effective. It is easier to catch grammar errors if you are not checking spelling and punctuation at the same time. Read your paper

carefully for misspellings, then reread it for run-ons, and then read it again for passive voice, verb tense, and punctuation separately. Reading your paper multiple times and checking it for errors will ensure you do not miss errors.

- **Read slowly, and read every word**. Read out loud whenever possible—reading out loud forces you to say each word and lets you hear how they sound together. It can help you catch more errors than reading silently. When you read silently or quickly you may skip over errors or make unconscious corrections.

- **Separate the text into individual sentences**. Read each sentence separately, and look for **grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors**. If you're working on a computer, hit the return/enter key after each period to separate your sentences and make it easier to read them individually. If you're working with a printed copy, try using a ruler or a piece of paper to isolate the line you are working on.

- **Read the paper backwards**. This is particularly 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. Reading backwards prevents you from focusing on the content, punctuation, and grammar, pushing you to focus on spelling. You can also read backwards sentence by sentence to check grammar.

- **Circle every punctuation mark**. This forces you to look at each punctuation mark, and allows you to question if it is being used correctly.

- **Proofreading is a learning process**. Don't be discouraged if you do not find all your errors the first time around. As you continue proofreading and developing your own strategies, you will be able to recognize more and more errors.

Further Assistance: For more detailed help or if you have questions, visit the Writing Center located in the Lewis University Library, or call 815-836-5427.