Editing and proofreading techniques

Generally speaking, develop the habit of using more than one method for editing and proofreading your work. It is often difficult to find the errors in your own work so the more methods you employ, the more likely you are to identify problems. Editing means more than simply looking for spelling mistakes (though this is important!); you should also check over your referencing format, paragraphing, use of grammar and punctuation and clarity of expression. Finally you should also check to see if you have really answered the question and if you have a clear and logical argument throughout.

Note: Don’t try to edit/proofread for everything at once. Focus on one or two issues at a time. This means that you must ensure you have time to thoroughly edit your work before submitting it.

Editing for spelling, punctuation, grammar and expression

It is often difficult to find mistakes in your own writing. Your brain fills in the gaps of what you meant to write, rather than actually seeing what is on the page. There are a few strategies to combat this and they are best used in combination (ie use as many of them as you have time for).

- Read through your work backwards. Start at the final paragraph and work your way back to the introduction. This way your brain won’t get caught up in the narrative and will focus on individual words and sentences.
- Read your work aloud. Pretend your essay is a speech you are delivering (you can do this on your own or read it to the family pet – you’re not looking for feedback at this stage). Language skills tend to be very auditory and you will often realise something sounds odd, even if it looks fine.
- Pay attention to your word processing software. We all know that this is not always 100% accurate but that’s no reason to ignore it completely. Pay particular attention to the green underlining in Microsoft Word, which suggests a grammatical error may have been made. Click on the link and read the ‘rule’ provided. Make an educated decision as to whether an error has been made before moving on. Also become familiar with common errors that the ‘spellcheck’ won’t pick up (eg European’s for Europeans).
- Have someone else read your work. Never underestimate the value of fresh eyes! Find a partner and swap work. It’s usually a good idea to swap with someone who isn’t studying the same subject, as they will pick up on confusing ideas or terminology more easily than someone already familiar with the topic.

Editing for argument and making sure you have answered the question

Many students find this aspect of essay writing difficult at first, but the practice of checking for argument in your draft can make it easier to formulate in the next piece of writing.

- Highlight the statement of argument in your introduction. Can you identify the sentence (or couple of sentences) that clearly state exactly what the essay is arguing/going to prove? If so, is it really what you ended up arguing? If not, you need to alter your introduction so this element is clear.
- Read your essay question aloud, then read your statement of argument. Do they sound like a clear question and answer? If not, there is a chance that you have not exactly answered the specific question asked. Consider the question again and ask yourself “what is my answer to this question?”, or “how can I put my answer into a clear sentence?”
- Read your introduction, then the topic sentence for each paragraph, then your conclusion. Does this make sense? Is the essay clearly developing a logical narrative or is it jumping all over the place? Is there a gap in
your logic that needs to be filled? Do you come away with a sense of a clear line of argument, or is it unclear how each of the topic sentences relates to your overall argument?

• Read each paragraph as a distinct unit. Does it have a clear topic sentence? Does the topic sentence reflect what the paragraph is really about? Is there a clear link between this paragraph and the next?

Editing for referencing

Before you can do this effectively you need to know what referencing system you are supposed to be using, and obtain a style guide for the correct system.

1. Read your essay again and consider whether each sentence requires a reference.
   • Have you used a direct quote?
   • Have you paraphrased from a source?
   • Have you used a couple of words, in order, from a source within your own sentence?
   • Have you taken an idea from a source but put it in your own words?
   • Have you taken a specific term or descriptive phrase from a source?

Each of these situations requires a reference.

2. Have you provided a complete reference list or bibliography?
   • Check whether your referencing system requires a reference list or a bibliography. Generally a reference list includes only those sources you’ve specifically referred to in your essay. A bibliography, on the other hand, may include sources you’ve read but not made direct reference to, in addition to those which you have specifically referred to in your essay.
   • Make sure every source you mention is actually in your reference list/bibliography.
   • Check that you have provided all the necessary information for each source (author's name, title of work, place of publication, date of publication, name of publisher, name of journal, volume/issue/number of journal, page numbers for articles or chapters, etc).
   • Check that you have presented all the information in the correct order, using the correct punctuation for your referencing system.
   • Once you have checked all these elements, take a look at your formatting. Consider such things as:
      — spacing (usually double or 1.5 line spacing for the whole document)
      — headings (does your style guide tell you whether they need to be bold, underlined, centred etc? Are there different levels of headings and subheadings and are these uniform across the essay?)
      — page numbers
      — paragraphing (do you leave a line between paragraphs or indent the first line? Is this consistent throughout?)

Learning to edit and proofread takes time and practice – it’s a skill, and you need to train yourself to do it. Good luck!