Self-editing and Proofreading

Note: the Odegaard Writing and Research Center **cannot** edit or proofread your work for you. Our mission is to be an interdisciplinary center that supports the long-term development of writers and researchers across UW—undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff— through high-quality, conversation-based peer learning, which does not include editing or proofreading services. That said, we *can* talk to you about strategies for revising, as well as share tools and resources with you to help with that process. This handout is one such resource!

WHEN TO SELF-EDIT AND PROOFREAD

When it comes to "polishing" our writing, the first thing to note is that you can't polish something when you're in the middle of creating it. In general, **edits and proofreading should be saved for the end of your writing process.** Why? Because if you make a bunch of edits, then realize that your paper would make more sense if organized differently, then make a bunch of changes, you will have created even more editing work for yourself. It's much better to hold off with the proofreading until you're sure your writing contains everything you want it to and is in the order you want it to be in.

QUICK TIPS FOR SELF-EDITING AND PROOFREADING

In a hurry and don't have time to read a whole handout? No problem! Here are some quick tips to get you started on your editing now that the big structural stuff is out of the way:

- **Read your work backwards.** This technique helps you focus on individual words and grammar instead of the meaning of the text, making it easier to spot errors.

- **Take a break before proofreading.** Give yourself some time away from your writing before you start proofreading. This will help you approach it with fresh eyes and spot more mistakes. It's best to give yourself at least a week, but if you're super pressed for time, you can skip this step.

- **Use the Hemingway app.** This online tool helps you identify and fix problems with grammar, style, and readability in your writing. Just search "Hemingway Editor" in your browser and copy and paste your writing into the document provided.

- **Read your work out loud.** This technique helps you hear errors in sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation that you might not have noticed when reading silently.

- **Use the find and replace function.** This tool in your word processor can help you quickly identify and correct common errors, such as misspellings and repeated words.

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- **Get a second opinion.** Just because OWRC tutors can't edit your paper for you, doesn't mean you can't ask a friend or colleague to read your work and provide feedback. They may spot errors that you missed.

- **Check your grammar and punctuation.** Pay special attention to punctuation marks and make sure they are used correctly, or at least deliberately. Check your grammar and make sure your sentences are clear and easy to understand. (We also have a grammar handout that you can use to help you with this part!)

- **Check your formatting.** Make sure your document is formatted consistently and that all headings, subheadings, and bullet points are properly aligned.

- **Check your citations.** Make sure all citations are accurate and formatted correctly according to the citation style you are using. While our writing tutors at the OWRC don't specialize in citations, the research desk in the center can help with this part of the editing process.

MORE STRATEGIES

What's Your Job?

Every element in a piece of writing should serve at least one purpose, i.e., do at least one "job." In general, the shorter a piece of writing is, the more jobs each element must do.

Think of poetry. A good poem is dripping in meaning, like a single slice of the richest vegan cheesecake. Each element in a poem, down to the word and even the syllable, has many jobs. But the rule applies to longer writing too. Even in a thirty-page scientific research paper, every paragraph should serve a purpose.

To find jobs for all your writing elements, start by asking each of them:

- What's your *job*?

- Are you doing *no* jobs?

- Are you doing *someone else's* job?

Once you have interrogated your paragraph, sentence, or even word, it's time to make some decisions.

- **If the element has no job, either give it one, or cut it out.** A paragraph that doesn't support the thesis can be cut. A sentence that doesn't introduce any new information can be expanded on.

- **If two elements are doing the same job, cut, combine, or reassign.** Two paragraphs that make the same point might be combined if they both have something unique to

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offer, or one can be used to make a different point, or one can be cut out entirely. No mercy!

- **If one element has too many jobs, expand or simplify.** This can be a paragraph that addresses two or more parts of your thesis. Generally, it's best to have each paragraph or section make *one* major point or argument. An element doing too many jobs can confuse the reader.

Rewrite, Don't Cut

Cutting an existing sentence into pieces is a *destructive process* and can be very difficult because you don't want to destroy something you've made, especially when you worked hard on it. So don't! Instead, try *rewriting* sentences and paragraphs instead of cutting things out of them. Unlike cutting, **rewriting** is a *constructive process*, because you're building something new from scratch.

- Rewrite a long/repetitive/difficult sentence in a separate document (or by hand), trying to say the same thing in as different a way as possible

- if the new sentence still isn't what you want for the original, at least now you have two distinct points of reference that you can use to triangulate your third (and hopefully final) version

Even More Strategies

If you've done all the above and want to make extra sure you've caught everything you can, or if none of the above strategies for self-editing and proofreading are working for you, you can try any combination of the following:

- **Print out a hard copy.** Sometimes it's easier to spot errors on a physical copy of your work, rather than on a computer screen.

- **Use a different font or background color.** Changing the font or background color can help you view your work differently and make it easier to spot errors.

- **Check for consistency.** Make sure that all elements of your work are consistent, such as font, spacing, and format.

- **Check for subject-verb agreement.** Make sure the subject and verb agree in number and tense.

- **Check for parallel structure.** Make sure that parallel elements in a sentence are expressed in the same grammatical form.

- **Check for sentence structure.** Look out for run-on sentences, sentence fragments, and sentence structure that is too choppy or too complex.

- **Check for transitions.** Make sure that the transition between sentences and paragraphs is smooth and logical.

- **Check for consistency in capitalization, punctuation, and spelling.** Make sure that you have used these elements consistently throughout your work.

- **Read your work more than once.** It's hard to catch everything in just one reading, so read your work multiple times, focusing on different aspects each time.

- **Practice!** The more you practice editing and proofreading, the better you will become at it.

Even if you use every trick in the book, you might still miss things. It happens to everyone. Remember that editing and proofreading are essential steps in the writing process and the more time you spend on them the better your final product will be, but that writing is ultimately as much about *what* you say as *how* you say it.