

CHAPTER 8

STEP 6: EDITING YOUR DRAFT

This chapter covers:

- Editing fundamentals: our goals and some advice on how to get there.
- Edit in multiple steps—always start with the big picture.
- Common grammatical problems to check for when editing.

Spotting problems in our own writing is not easy. Many of us take great pride in what we write. Once our words are on paper, we resent the suggestion that something could be wrong. We don't like to check and change the words, the organization, the limits of the subject, the spelling, the punctuation or anything else, and we often have trouble making time to edit properly.

Yet editing is critical. Take the time to make sure you have a cohesive, clear, error-free product that the audience can relate to. Here's the good news: if you completed the steps described in Chapters 3-7, the editing will be a lot easier... and at this point, you're almost home free.

“... When you revise from the top down, from global structure to paragraphs to sentences to words, you are more likely to discover useful revisions than if you start at the bottom with words and sentences and work up.”

– The Craft of Research

A NOTE ON EDITING (STEP 6) VERSUS FEEDBACK (STEP 7)

In the “Seven Steps for Effective Communication,” we recommend that you edit your own writing before asking for feedback from someone else. There are many reasons to do this. For one, it develops your own editing skills—you’ll be better prepared for those times when you don’t have access to a second opinion. Second, it shows respect for the people you’re seeking feedback from. Why should someone else invest time and effort to improve your writing if you aren’t willing to do so yourself? Finally, you’ll catch the worst mistakes and avoid embarrassing yourself in front of your coworkers. It never hurts to put the most professional product you can out for review, even if the review is an informal one. In this chapter, we’ll assume it’s just you and your draft. In Chapter 9, we’ll talk more about seeking feedback from others.

WHAT’S OUR EDITING GOAL?

This is the easy part. Remember the FOCUS principles from Chapter 1? Good editing all relates to those principles and will tell you how well you followed the steps for effective writing. As you read through this chapter on editing, keep FOCUS in mind. Here are the principles again for your review:

<p style="text-align: center;">FOCUS Principles</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Strong Writing and Speaking:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Focused</p> <p>Address the issue, the whole issue, and nothing but the issue.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Organized</p> <p>Systematically present your information and ideas.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Clear</p> <p>Communicate with clarity and make each word count.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Understanding</p> <p>Understand your audience and its expectations.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Supported</p> <p>Use logic and support to make your point.</p>
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EDITING FUNDAMENTALS

When you edit, there are a few key rules to remember:

- 1. EDIT WITH FRESH EYES.** Give yourself some time between drafting and editing. By that we mean put the draft on a shelf, in a desk drawer or under a paperweight and let it sit a spell, preferably for several hours for shorter projects and at least a day for longer ones. After this down time you’ll come back fresh and will be more likely to catch errors.
- 2. REVIEW THE BASICS.** Take the time to review earlier sections on writing tone (pages 23-24), drafting clear and concise sentences (pages 73-88), common grammatical errors (pages 97-101), and any other material that represents a problem area for you. Editing is your last chance to apply the guidelines you’ve read about in earlier chapters. If the concepts are fresh in your mind when you start editing, you’ll be better able to spot problems in your draft.
- 3. SLOW DOWN AND TAKE YOUR TIME.** You aren’t in a race. If you read at your normal pace you’re more likely to miss errors. Try different approaches to slow yourself down, including reading aloud and reading one line at a time using a “cover” to hide the rest of the page. If you’re checking for misspelled words, move backwards through a sentence.

4. REMEMBER YOUR READERS. Try to put yourself in the role of your audience as you edit. You may catch some areas that may need revision if you read it from their perspective and knowledge base. Also consider your secondary audience—even if you’ve got your primary audience targeted correctly, are you unnecessarily insulting others that may end up reading this?

5. START WITH THE BIG PICTURE, *then* work down to the details. When you begin to edit, don’t focus in on the nitty-gritty—*look at the big picture first*. Misuse of “there” and “their” is really not that important if your paper lacks cohesion, is poorly organized or fails to include a clear purpose statement. Again, anyone can use spellchecker, but a well-edited paper requires much more and begins with *The Big Picture*.

EDITING EFFICIENTLY ... A THREE STEP APPROACH

One way to make sure you edit efficiently is to read your document *at least three times* to allow yourself to really look hard at the problem areas that could botch your product. In the first pass, look at the big picture; in the second pass, look at paragraph construction; and the third pass, look at sentences, phrases and words.

FIRST PASS: THE BIG PICTURE

“If it *needs* major surgery, it’s best to know early!”

In this first “go around” you should be paying attention to the arrangement and flow of ideas. Here are some areas to think about:

Check your tasking and purpose.

- What was my original tasker? Check the wording one more time.
- What is my purpose statement? For short assignments, underline it in your draft. For longer assignments, write it down on a separate sheet of paper and refer to it throughout the editing process.
- Does the purpose statement “answer the tasker,” or does it miss the point?

Check your introduction.

- Does it exist and does it contain my purpose statement?
- Is it an appropriate length? (typically one paragraph long for assignments)
- Does my purpose statement and introduction give the readers a good idea of what they are about to read?

Review:

Elements of an Introduction

In Chapter 7 (pages 66-67) we described how an introduction often begins with optional **stage-setting remarks** that grab the reader’s attention. The introduction should include your **purpose statement**, which informs the reader where you are going and why you are going there (readers love this!). The introduction often contains an **overview** of the main point(s) covered in the body.

These are just guidelines: the composition of an introduction should be tailored to the assignment.

Compare your introduction and conclusion.

- First read your introduction and then read your conclusion.
- Do they sound like they go together without being identical? Does the introduction declare your purpose and does your conclusion show your readers you've accomplished your purpose?
- Do you let your readers down gradually? Or do you stop with a jerk?
- Does the conclusion sum up your point? Don't introduce any new ideas here—you'll leave your readers hanging in limbo!

Check overall page count and length.

- What are my audience's expectations regarding page count? Am I on target? Will I have to make this draft significantly longer or shorter?
- Check the scope and flow of paragraphs in your body.

Check for relevance and completeness.

- Do the paragraphs clearly relate to the thesis statement?
- Are some paragraphs irrelevant or unnecessary?
- Am I missing any main points in this assignment?
- Are paragraphs arranged in a consistent order?
- How does your draft compare with your original outline?

SECOND PASS: PARAGRAPH STRUCTURE AND CLARITY

After your first pass, you know the paper contains what it needs to do the job. In the second pass, you will check whether the main points and supporting ideas are appropriately organized in paragraphs.

Let's take a close look at individual paragraphs in the body of your writing. For each paragraph, ask the following questions:

Unity of Focus

- Is there one, and only one, main point of the paragraph?
- Is all the information in the paragraph related enough to be in the same paragraph?
- Can you identify the central idea of each paragraph?

Organizational Editing Check

Some writers can write powerful and clear sentences but have trouble keeping "on target" in their communication. Their main editing challenge isn't grammar; it's the big picture. If this sounds like you or someone you know, try this simple editing check.

Note: This editing check assumes you followed the paragraph construction guidelines from the previous chapter and placed the topic sentence at the beginning of each paragraph.

Read the following sections out loud:

- Your complete introduction.
- The first sentence of each paragraph in the body, in order of appearance.
- Your complete conclusion.

Does it answer the question? Does it stay on message? Does it flow well? If so, congratulations! It looks like you've got the big picture in place ... now you need to check your paragraph construction.

Topic Sentence

- Does the paragraph have a topic sentence—one sentence that captures the central idea of the paragraph?
- Is the topic sentence the first sentence of the paragraph? (Or, if you're starting with a transitional sentence, the second sentence?)

Supporting Ideas

- Do sentences expand, clarify, illustrate and explain points mentioned or suggested in each main idea? Your goal is to lead the reader in a smooth, step-by-step process to each main idea.
- Are there enough details in the paragraph to support the central idea?
- Are there any “extra sentences” that seem to be irrelevant to the main point?
- Do all transitional words, phrases, and clauses improve the flow and show proper relationships?
- Do most paragraphs contain three to seven sentences?

If you did a lot of rearranging of paragraphs in this step, try the organizational editing check on the previous page—just to make sure you're on track.

THIRD PASS: SENTENCES, PHRASES AND WORDS

Now you're ready to look at the details. Though you've probably corrected some minor errors in the first two passes, now is the time to really concentrate on the “small stuff” that can sabotage your communication: passive voice, unclear language, excessive wordiness, grammatical errors and spelling mistakes. Some of these concepts were covered in the chapter on drafting; while others will be introduced in this section.

Let's start with some general advice. **Read the paper *out loud*.** Reading the paper out loud will increase your chances of catching errors because it requires you to slow down and use two senses—seeing and hearing. What one sense misses, the other may pick up!

Listen to the sound of words, phrases and sentences. Remember, the quicker your audience can read and understand it, the better. If you have to read a sentence two or three times, chances are they will too. Not good!

DRAFTING BASICS: DID YOU APPLY THEM?

As part of your editing step, you need to check some of the same concepts discussed in the previous chapter on drafting. Remember these guidelines, and refer back to the referenced pages if you need more details or additional examples.

1. Write in active voice (pages 73-74). In active voice, the subject comes first in the sentence. In passive voice, the “doer” or subject of the sentence shows up late in the sentence or is missing entirely. Avoid overusing passive voice; it often creates lengthy and confusing sentences.

Passive: Captain Smith was given a choice assignment by his career field monitor.

Active: The career field monitor gave Captain Smith a choice assignment.

2. Avoid smothered verbs (page 75). Use one specific verb instead of a general verb and several extra words.

Smothered: This directive *is applicable* to everyone who *makes use of* the system.

Better: This directive *applies* to everyone who *uses* the system.

3. Check for misspelled or commonly misused words (pages 78-79). In today’s computer age, your software’s spell checker is your first line of defense against misspelled words. Still, you can get into trouble by misusing synonyms or easily confused words like “there” and “their” and “accept” and “except.” Spell check will not flag these words because they are spelled correctly, but used in the wrong context. When in doubt, check the dictionary—it still exists!

4. Use parallel construction (parallelism) in lists and series (pages 75-76). Use a similar grammatical construction within a list or series. Make items of equal importance look equal. If one starts with a verb, start the other with a verb. If three items in a list are commands, make the fourth a command. Parallelism helps make sentences clear.

Needs work: Remember the following when editing: *write in active voice, parallelism, smothered verbs should be avoided, and spelling.*

Better: Remember the following when editing: *write in active voice, use parallel construction in lists, avoid smothered verbs, and check for misspelled words.*

5. Avoid unnecessary redundancy and word doublings (page 80).

Don’t use one word to modify another unless both add value.

Needs work: *Repetitive redundancy* hurts readability.

Better: *Redundancy* hurts readability.

Don’t use two nearly identical words unless both add value.

Needs work: We must comply with the *standards and criteria for controlling and reducing* environmental pollution.”

Better: We must comply with the *standards* for *reducing* environmental pollution.”

COMMON GRAMMAR TRAPS...

Grammatical errors can confuse your readers and undermine the credibility of your communication. We've listed some of the most common mistakes below—look out for them when editing your work.

1. MISPLACED MODIFIERS

A modifier is a group of words that describes another group of words within the sentence. Modifiers should be placed near the words they describe. Improperly placed modifiers can create ambiguity or imply an illogical relationship. There are two kinds of misplaced modifiers: dangling and ambiguous.

a. Dangling modifiers literally hang illogically on sentences, usually at the beginning. They are placed so they seem to modify the wrong word and, thus, show an illogical relationship. To correct a dangling modifier, either place the modifier next to the word it modifies or change the subject of the sentence to clarify your intent.

Confusing: Approaching the flight line from the east side, the operations building can be easily spotted by a pilot. [The operations building doesn't approach the flight line—the pilot does!]

Better: A pilot approaching the flight line from the east side can easily spot the operations building.

Confusing: To make a climbing turn, the throttle is opened wider. [The throttle doesn't make a climbing turn.]

Better: To make a climbing turn, open the throttle wider. [The subject you is understood.]

b. Ambiguous modifiers seem to modify two different parts of a sentence. Readers can't tell whether they modify words that come before or after them. To correct an ambiguous modifier, place the word so its relationship can't be misinterpreted.

Confusing: People who drive cars to work *occasionally* can expect to find a parking space.

Better: People who *occasionally* drive cars to work can expect to find a parking space.

Confusing: Although working conditions improved *slowly* employees grew dissatisfied.

Better: Although working conditions *slowly* improved, employees grew dissatisfied. [Case #1: the conditions improved slowly]

Better: Although working conditions improved, employees *slowly* grew dissatisfied. [Case #2: employee morale dropped slowly]

2. ERRORS IN SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

Plural subjects take plural verbs and singular subjects take singular verbs. Another way to state this rule using grammatical terms is “Subjects and verbs must agree in number.”

The key to avoiding most problems in subject-verb agreement is to identify the subject of a sentence, determine whether it’s singular or plural, and then choose a verb in the same number and keep it near its subject.

Generally subjects that end in *s* are plural, while verbs that end in *s* are singular. (There are exceptions to this rule—for example, the word *ballistics* is singular.)

a. **Phrases between the subject and verb** do not change the requirement that the verb must agree in number with its subject.

An inspection *team* consisting of 36 people *is* investigating that problem.

A *general*, accompanied by 3 colonels and 15 majors, *is* attending the conference.

b. A **linking verb** agrees with its subject, not with its complement.

The commander’s main *problem is* untrained Airmen.

Untrained *airmen are* the commander’s main problem.

c. A **compound subject** consists of two or more nouns or pronouns joined by one of these conjunctions: *and*, *but*, *or*, *for* or *nor*. Some compound subjects are plural; others are not. Here are guidelines for subject-verb agreement when dealing with compound subjects:

- **If two nouns are joined by *and*, they typically take a plural verb.**

The *Air Force* and the *Army are* two components of the nation’s defense forces.

- **If two nouns are joined by *or*, *nor*, or *but*, the verb should agree in number with the subject nearest it.**

Either the *President* or his *cabinet members are* planning to attend.

Either the *cabinet members* or the *President is* planning to attend.

- **Use a singular verb for a compound subject that is preceded by *each* or *every*.**

Every fighter pilot and his aircraft *is* ready for the mission.

Each boy and girl *brings* a snack to school.

- **Use a singular verb for a compound subject whose parts are considered a single unit.**

The *Stars and Stripes* was flown at half-mast at the Headquarters building.

Ham and *eggs is* a delicious breakfast.

d. Use a singular verb with **collective nouns** (and noun phrases showing quantity) **treated as a unit**, but a plural verb when treated as individuals.

The *thousand wounded is* expected to arrive soon. [A quantity or unit]

A *thousand wounded were* evacuated by air. [Individuals]

e. Use singular verbs with **most indefinite pronouns**: *another, anybody, anything, each, everyone, everybody, everything, neither, nobody, nothing, one, no one, someone, somebody* and *something*.

Everyone eats at the cafeteria.

The *President* said *everybody* was welcome to join.

Everyone in the squadron *takes* a turn leading a service project.

f. With ***all, any, none* and *some***, use a singular or plural verb, depending on the content.

All of the money *is* reserved for emergencies. [singular-equivalent to “The money is reserved for emergencies.”]

When the men arrive, *all go* straight to work. [plural—equivalent to “The men go straight to work”]

All are expected to have a tour of duty overseas.

3. ERRORS IN PRONOUN REFERENCE (“Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement”)

A common error in pronoun use involves agreement in number. If the noun is singular, the pronoun is singular. If the noun is plural, the pronoun should be plural, too.

Let’s look at an example of an incorrect pronoun reference:

Incorrect: *Everyone* should bring *their* books to class. [*Everyone* is singular, while *their* is plural.]

When correcting such a sentence, **try for gender inclusive language**. Often the best approach is to make the subject plural and keep the pronoun unchanged:

Correct: *All students* should bring *their* books to class.

Of course, using *his* or *her* is also acceptable, but it gets cumbersome when overused:

Also correct: *Everyone* should bring *his* or *her* books to class.

With a compound subject joined by *and*, use a plural pronoun:

My *advisor and I* can’t coordinate *our* schedules. [*our* is a plural pronoun]

When parts of an antecedent are joined by “or” or “nor,” make the pronoun agree with the nearest part:

John *or* Steve should have raised *his* hand.

Neither the student *nor* his roommates will have *their* deposit returned.

Grammar Review: Pronouns

Pronouns are words that replace nouns and refer to a specific noun. The noun being referred to or replaced by the pronoun is called the **antecedent**. Some examples:

SSgt Smith is our nominee for the award and he has a good chance of winning.

[*SSgt Smith* is the antecedent; *he* is a pronoun replacing the noun later in the sentence.]

Three lieutenants arrived late to the meeting. Their boss was not happy with them.

[*Three lieutenants* is the antecedent; *Their* and *them* are pronouns replacing the antecedent in the next sentence.]

Avoid awkward phrasing by placing the plural part second if one part of the antecedent is singular and one part is plural.

Awkward: Neither my parents *nor* my sister has stayed on *her* diet.

Better: Neither my sister *nor* my parents have stayed on *their* diet.

Remember that embedded descriptive phrases can be tricky:

Incorrect: He is one of those ambitious *people* who *values* promotion over personal ethics. [*Values* should be *value* because the pronoun *who* refers to *people*, not *one*. Clarification: he is one, but not the only one, of many ambitious people.]

Here are some other examples of incorrect pronoun reference:

- The Air Force maintains different *types* of numbered forces, but the organization of *its* headquarters is similar. [*Its* should be *their* to refer correctly to *types*.]
- The *committee* plans to submit *their* report by the end of the month. [*Their* should be *its* because *committee* functions as a single unit in this sentence.]

4. COMMA PLACEMENT AROUND PARENTHETICAL EXPRESSIONS

There are many rules about using commas to punctuate sentences, and we recommend you check out Appendix 1 for the complete list. One class of common mistakes is nearly universal and worth covering in this chapter—placement of commas around groups of words that interrupt the sentence’s flow. Here’s the basic rule:

Enclose nonrestrictive or parenthetical expressions with commas.

What does this mean? If an expression (a group of words) can be removed from the sentence without changing its meaning, then enclose the expression with commas.

Though the rule is simple, applying the rule requires some judgment. Advocates of open punctuation would argue that if the group of words does not “significantly” interrupt the sentence, you don’t need commas. (See pages 274-275 for more about the open and closed punctuation debate). Another judgment area is deciding which expressions are restrictive and which are nonrestrictive. A *restrictive expression* limits or restricts the meaning of the words it applies to, so it can’t be removed from the sentence without changing the meaning. A *nonrestrictive* expression merely adds additional information. **Here’s the bottom line:** If you can remove the expression from the sentence without changing the meaning, it is a nonrestrictive expression that should be enclosed by commas.

Which punctuation is correct?

1. People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones.
2. People, who live in glass houses, shouldn’t throw stones.

Answer #1 is correct. The expression *who live in glass houses* is restrictive. If you eliminate it, the sentence changes meaning: *People shouldn’t throw stones*.

Which punctuation is correct?

1. My friend the architect who lives in a glass house has a party every year.
2. My friend the architect, who lives in a glass house, has a party every year.

The correct answer depends on your situation. If you are in the Air Force and have one friend who is an architect, then answer #2 is correct. The expression *who lives in a glass house* is nonrestrictive—it provides information that is not essential to the sentence’s meaning, and it can be removed without impact. On the other hand, if you work in an architecture firm and all your friends are architects, then answer #1 is correct. In this case the expression identifies which one of your architect friends has a party every year—it’s the one who lives in a glass house.

Though there’s some judgment involved in deciding if something is nonrestrictive, **once you decide to enclose an expression, don’t forget one of the commas.**

Incorrect: The new faculty, including the civilians must show up at 0600 tomorrow for physical training.

Correct: The new faculty, including the civilians, must show up at 0600 tomorrow for physical training.

Incorrect: Grammar errors including misplaced commas, inhibit writing clarity.

Correct: Grammar errors, including misplaced commas, inhibit writing clarity.

PROOFREADING MARKS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Is there a simpler way to make a point? Did I use acceptable grammar? Are all ideas clearly stated? Have I applied standard practices in sentence construction and mechanics? You have your work cut out for you! Here are some proofreading marks and abbreviations that will help you to edit your own or someone else's written work.

	Delete letter		Move to left
	Delete or delete/change		Move to right
	Delete/close up		Equalize space (margin notation)
	Delete underscore		Move up
	Retain deleted material (text symbol)		Move down
	Retain deleted material (margin symbol)		Move as indicated
	New paragraph		Ident 5 spaces
	No paragraph		Insert
	Bring together		apostrophe
	Separate		asterisk
	Transpose		brackets
	Capital (text symbol)		colon
	Capitals (margin symbol)		dash
	Lowercase		exclamation mark
	Italic type		hyphen
	Roman type		parentheses
	Boldface (text symbol)		period
	Boldface (margin symbol)		quotation mark
	Center vertically		semicolon
	Center horizontally		space
	Align vertically		virgule
	Align horizontally		Superscript (raise above line)
	Spell out; abbreviate; change word to number, change number to word		Subscript (drop below line)

ABBREVIATIONS:

agree	Pronoun and antecedent or subject and verb do not agree
amb	Ambiguous meaning
awk	Awkward construction
Cap	Faulty capitalization
clear?	Meaning unclear
CS	Comma splice
dead	Deadhead word; eliminate it
dng	Dangling modifier
EX	Examples: the writer needs to provide examples
frag	Sentence fragment
gr	Faulty grammar
imp	Too impersonal; needs personal pronouns
jarg	Jargon
lc	Use lower case (not capital) letter
mod	The writer has a misplaced or dangling modifier
PL	Construction is not parallel (symbol // can also be used)
pass	Passive voice; should be active
point	Doesn't get to the point
P	Punctuation faulty or needed
ref?	Indefinite reference; What does this pronoun refer to?
Rep	Repetitious
RO	Run-on sentence
sv	Smothered verb
source	Source of this data unclear or needed
sp	Incorrect spelling
tense	Change tense of verb
TS	Problem with topic sentence or one does not exist
trans	Transition needed for coherence
trite	Word or expression overworked, monotonous
wc	Poor word choice; use simpler word
wordy	Should be shortened

SUMMARY

Always edit! Editing is crucial to producing professional communication. Without solid editing your writing can be disjointed, your reader becomes confused, and your message may be lost. Does it take time? Absolutely! Budget time for editing—especially for time-critical assignments—and with practice the whole process will seem second nature.

Editing isn't the final step, however. Yes, someone else needs to look at your work of art. Get ready to put on your thick skin, as this is not for the meek and timid. Read on to the final step to better communication ... how to *fight for feedback*.

