




# Editing and Proofreading 26

Your ability to produce clear, error-free writing shows something about your ability as a writer and also leads readers to make assumptions about your intellect, work habits, even your character. Readers of job-application letters and résumés, for example, may reject applications if they contain a single error if only because that's an easy way to narrow the field of potential candidates. In addition, they may well assume that applicants who present themselves sloppily in an application will do sloppy work on the job. This is all to say that you should edit and proofread your work carefully.

## Editing

Editing is the stage when you work on the details of your paragraphs, sentences, words, and punctuation to make your writing as clear, precise, correct—and effective—as possible. Your goal is not to achieve “perfection” (whatever that may be) so much as to make your writing as effective as possible for your particular purpose and audience. Check the **HANDBOOK** for detailed advice, but the following guidelines can help you check your drafts systematically for some common errors with paragraphs, sentences, and words.

 **HB-1-87**

## Editing paragraphs

- Does each paragraph focus on one point? Does it have a **TOPIC SENTENCE** that announces that point, and if so, where is it located? If it's not the first sentence, should it be? If there's no clear topic sentence, should there be one?

 **252-53**



- Does every sentence in the paragraph relate to the main point of that paragraph? If any sentences do not, consider whether they should be deleted, moved, or revised.
- Is there enough detail to develop the main point of the paragraph? How is the point developed—as a narrative? a definition? some other

237–328

**STRATEGY?**

- Where have you placed the most important information—at the beginning? the end? in the middle? The most emphatic spot is at the end, so in general that's where to put information you want readers to remember. The second most emphatic spot is at the beginning.
- Are any paragraphs especially long or short? Consider breaking long paragraphs if there's a logical place to do so—maybe an extended example should be in its own paragraph, for instance. If you have paragraphs of only a sentence or two, see if you can add to them or combine them with another paragraph.

254

- Check the way your paragraphs fit together. Does each one follow smoothly from the one before? Do you need to add any **TRANSITIONS** or other links?

239–45

- Does the **BEGINNING** paragraph catch readers' attention? In what other ways might you begin your text?

245–48

- Does the final paragraph provide a satisfactory **ENDING?** How else might you conclude your text?

**Editing sentences**

HB-4-7

- Is each **SENTENCE COMPLETE?** Does it have someone or something (the subject) performing some sort of action or expressing a state of being (the verb)? Does each sentence begin with a **CAPITAL LETTER** and end with a **PERIOD, QUESTION MARK, or EXCLAMATION POINT?**

HB-80-82

HB-65-66

HB-18-19






- Check your use of the active **VOICE** (“The choir sang ‘Amazing Grace.’”) and the passive (“‘Amazing Grace’ was sung by the choir.”) Some kinds of writing call for the passive voice, and sometimes it is more appropriate than the active voice, but in general, you'll do well to edit out any use of the passive voice that's not required.



- Check for parallelism. Items in a list or series should be parallel in form—all nouns (lions, tigers, bears), all verbs (hopped, skipped, jumped), all clauses (he came, he saw, he conquered), and so on.
- Do many of your sentences begin with *it* or *there*? Sometimes these words help introduce a topic, but too often they make your text vague or even conceal needed information. Why write “There are reasons we voted for him.” when you can say “We had reasons to vote for him.”?
- Are your sentences varied? If they all start with a subject or are all the same length, your writing might be dull and maybe even hard to read. Try varying your sentence openings by adding transitions, introductory phrases, or dependent clauses. Vary sentence lengths by adding detail to some or combining some sentences.

### Editing words

- Are you sure of the meaning of every word? Use a dictionary; be sure to look up words whose meanings you’re not sure about. And remember your audience—do you use any terms they’ll need to have **DEFINED**?
- Is any of your language too **GENERAL** or vague? Why write that you competed in a race, for example, if you could say you ran the 4 × 200 relay?
- What about the tone? If your stance is serious (or humorous, or critical, or something else), make sure that your words all convey that tone.
- Do all **PRONOUNS** have clear antecedents? If you write “he” or “they” or “it” or “these,” will readers know whom or what the words refer to?
- Have you used any **CLICHÉS**—expressions that are used so frequently that they are no longer fresh? “Live and let live,” avoiding something “like the plague,” and similar expressions are so predictable that your writing will almost always be better off without them.
- Be careful with language that refers to others. Make sure that your words do not stereotype any individual or group. Mention gender, race, religion, and so on only if they are relevant to your subject. When referring to an ethnic group, make every effort to use the terms members of the group prefer. Use words that build **COMMON GROUND**.

 275–84 HB-39 HB-24–28 HB-38 HB-53–55



HB-54-55

- Edit out language that might be considered **SEXIST**. Do you say “he” when you mean “he and she”? Have you used words like *manpower* or *policeman* to refer to people who may be female? If so, substitute less gendered words such as *personnel* or *police officer*. Do your words reflect any gender stereotypes—for example, that all engineers are male, or all schoolteachers female? If you mention someone’s gender, is it even necessary? If not, eliminate the unneeded words.
- How many of your verbs are forms of *be* and *do*? If you rely too much on these words, try replacing them with more specific verbs. Why write “She did a story” when you could say “She wrote a story”?
- Do you ever confuse **ITS AND IT’S**? Use *it’s* when you mean *it is* or *it has*. Use *its* when you mean *belonging* to it.

HB-74

## Proofreading


Proofreading is the final stage of the writing process, the point where you clean up your work to present it to your readers. Proofreading is like checking your appearance in a mirror before going into a job interview: being neat and well groomed looms large in creating a good first impression, and the same principle applies to writing. Misspelled words, missing pages, mixed-up fonts, and other lapses send a negative message about your work—and about you. Most readers excuse an occasional error, but by and large readers are an intolerant bunch: too many errors will lead them to declare your writing—and maybe your thinking—flawed. There goes your credibility. So proofread your final draft with care to ensure that your message is taken as seriously as you want it to be.


Up to this point, you’ve been told *not* to read individual words on the page and instead to read for meaning. Proofreading demands the opposite: you must slow down your reading so that you can see every word, every punctuation mark.


- Use your computer’s grammar checker and spelling checker, but only as a first step, and know that they’re not very reliable. Computer pro-


 rhetorical  
situations


 genres


 processes


 strategies


 research  
mla/apa


 media/  
design



grams don't read writing; instead, they rely on formulas and banks of words, so what they flag (or don't flag) as mistakes may or may not be accurate. If you were to write, "Sea you soon," *sea* would not be flagged as misspelled because it is a word and it's spelled correctly even though it's the wrong word in that sentence.

- To keep your eyes from jumping ahead, place a ruler or piece of paper under each line as you read it. Use your finger or pen or pencil as a pointer.
- Some writers find it helpful to read the text one sentence at a time, beginning with the last sentence and working backward.
- Read your text out loud to yourself—or better, to others, who may *hear* problems you can't see. Alternatively, have someone else read your text aloud to you while you follow along on the page or screen.
- Ask someone else to read your text. The more important the writing is, the more important this step.
- If you find a mistake after you've printed out your text and are unable to print out a corrected version, make the change as neatly as possible in pencil or pen.