Campus Academic Resource Program
Editing and Proofreading Strategies

This handout will:

- Describe the difference between editing and proofreading.
- Offer strategies to edit your paper's content.
- Offer strategies to edit your paper's style by understanding verb choice, sentence structure and phrasing, and overall clarity.
- Demonstrate how to proofread for grammar.
- Provide space to practice editing and proofreading.

Editing vs. Proofreading

- Editing*:* The step where you adjust formatting, writing structure, and writing style to achieve the best development of your ideas.
  - o Edit before you proofread. The goal is to create the strongest paper possible. In the editing step, you can do this by maximizing the flow of the paper, as well as the logic between and within paragraphs.
  - o You may find yourself moving around sentences or entire paragraphs. You may even find yourself re-writing your thesis, topic sentences, and transition sentences. This all perfectly okay and normal. Do not be afraid to shift huge swaths of writing; you can always put this back into the original order.

  Tip: Have two documents for your paper. One of them will be the completed paper, but the other one will be a space for you to keep sentences, paragraphs, and ideas while you decide what to do with them. This way you will not lose valuable work due to accidents with copy and paste.

- Proofreading*:* The step where you correct the "surface errors," i.e. grammar and spelling.
  - o Proofreading should be the final step in your writing process. This is where you look for basic grammar mistakes or typos.
  - o If you have time, proofread a day or so after you have finished writing. This gives your mind a chance to forget what you have written and it will make it easier to catch mistakes and gaps in logic.

  Tip: Read your entire paper out-loud. This will help you catch those little mistakes (especially typos) and will reassure you of your paper's flow and structure. Be sure to read your thesis again at the end and ask yourself: did I prove this?

Editing for Content

- Using Adequate Source Material:
  - Make sure you have met minimum source requirements.
  - If there are no source requirements, make sure you develop your ideas using specific examples and supporting details.
    - o Try not to re-phrase the same thought repeatedly throughout the body of a paragraph—explain in depth while adding new layers of complexity to the idea.

- Balance your major points.
  - Every point you make should include adequate citation, based on your professor's expectations. A point which has significantly less citation than other points is a weak spot in your paper which must be strengthened by doing more research and/or elaborating on the idea.
  - Each major point should be of roughly equal length.
    - Keep in mind that a major point is generally made up of several paragraphs—don't write page long paragraphs in order to keep a point restricted to one paragraph.
    - If a point is too long, consider trimming repetitive sections, or finding a place to break the point in two.

  Tip: If a paragraph is longer than one typed page, it probably needs to be cut down. If a paragraph starts halfway down one page, it should finish roughly halfway down the following one.

- Working at the Sentence Level:
  - Every paragraph requires a strong topic sentence which accurately summarizes the content of the paragraph and relates to the thesis or purpose of the paper.
    - Sentences which don't add to the paragraph's content should be moved to another point in the paper, relegated to a footnote, or removed entirely.
  - Make sure you are confident that every statement made is either true or arguable.
    - A true statement is a fact which cannot be disputed such as "Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980."
    - An arguable statement is one which is open to debate, but can be supported using true statements. For each arguable statement, you should have a fact or two as support.
    - Example:
      - **Arguable statement:** "Ronald Reagan's election marked the beginning of both the end of organized labor's political power."
      - **True Fact:** "Whereas in 1980 nearly 35% of the private sector workforce was unionized, by 1984 the figure was closer to 25%."
        - Arguable statements which are not supported by using facts need to be developed further, and you may need more research.
    - Underline or highlight all statements that are neither factual nor arguable, and decide how to adjust or replace them.
      - If more than half a paragraph is marked, cut it entirely and re-write.

Editing for Style

- Verb Choice:
  - Use strong verbs and avoid passive voice.
  - Wherever possible, replace weak verbs like: make, to be verbs (is, are, were, was, be, been, being), do, go (goes, went, going), etc. These verbs often do not convey as much meaning as they ought to, and when used too frequently lead to mundane prose.
    - o "Mistakes were made," a statement often repeated in press conferences and public relations statements, is vague as a result of the presence of the passive voice and two weak verbs.
      - ▪ "The American diplomat made a mistake" is in the active voice and conveys more meaning but is still vague over what exactly that mistake was.
      - ▪ "The American diplomat mistook the Bolivian foreign minister for a smuggler" uses a stronger verb (mistook instead of made) and as a result clearly conveys both the nature of the mistake and who committed that mistake.
    - o Use the search function (ctrl+f) to catch weak verbs. This is particularly helpful for is/are/were/was since the passive voice often coincides with these verbs. For more information about passive voice, see Active Voice and Passive Voice handout at carp.sfsu.edu.
- Sentence Structure and Phrasing
  - Vary the structure and length of sentences.
    - o Be particularly careful about starting multiple sentences in a row with the same subject.
      - ▪ For example, if a section of a paper deals with another author's ideas at length, we often fall into the trap of starting several sentences in a row with that author's name, as in "Schirmer argues… Schirmer contends…Schirmer's findings suggest…"
      - ▪ To avoid this, consider using transitional phrases and nouns which clearly describe the subject of the last sentence. A series of sentences might start "Schirmer argues…As a result, the author finds that…This particular conclusion has generated considerable controversy since…"
  - Read the paper out loud and make note of sentences which are awkwardly phrased.
    - o Awkward sentences may be run-on sentences. (for more information see Run-Ons and Fragments handout at carp.sfsu.edu)
    - o Awkward sentences might also be the result of word choice. Ensure that your word choice is appropriate by consulting a dictionary and thesaurus.

- Do not just use the thesaurus blindly to vary your vocabulary; make sure that you know the specific connotations of a given word before you use it by looking up its dictionary definition.
  - Sentences with inappropriate voice or tone will sound out of place in an academic essay. If a sentence sounds like something you would say in conversation, you should find a way to re-phrase it in a more academic tone.
    - "Schirmer mostly talks about the Guatemalan military" is less academic than "Schirmer's book centers on the culture and policies of the Guatemalan military."

- Clarity:
  - Make sure your ideas are clearly articulated.
    - When you use pronouns (it, they, he, she, etc.), the reader should understand to what or to whom you are referring.
    - Draw connections from one idea to the next by ensuring the transitions between paragraphs are done as smoothly as possible.
      - Transition words and phrases include: since, as a result, as such, similarly, unlike, in contrast, despite, given, this, that, for example, etc.
    - Do not be afraid to move sections around if it makes for a more logical flow of ideas.
      - Consider drafting your major points separately in different word documents or sheets of paper before combining them into a new document so that this process is easier.
      - Revise your transitions if you do decide to move around your points, since the order in which you present the ideas will naturally change how you move in between them.
  - Cut down on wordiness. If something can be said as clearly with fewer words, change the sentence.
    - For example, do not say "due to the fact that" when you could just as easily say "since" or "because."
    - Below is an example of a wordy sentence that has been rephrased concisely:
      - Original sentence: "American policymakers would be ill-advised to consider yet another intervention without a clear timetable and achievable goals, due to the fact that the invasion of Iraq contributed to a rising tide of anti-Americanism around the globe."
      - Revised sentence: "Future American military interventions are ill-advised without a clear timetable and achievable goals, since the invasion of Iraq heightened anti-American sentiment around the globe."

Proofreading Grammar

Before you begin proofreading for grammar, take a break from the paper. Depending on how much time you have before the deadline, this could be as short as ten minutes or as long as a week.

Keep the pace of proofreading as deliberate and consistent as possible. When you have become very familiar with your essay, there is a tendency to read through sections too quickly to see the mistakes.

- Proofreading strategies for grammar:
    - Read out loud again and let your ear catch the issues your eyes cannot.
    - If you have printed out a copy, use a blank piece of paper to cover up all of the writing below a given line. Read each sentence line by line, uncovering the next sentence as you read. This will allow you to isolate sentences to see and work on them independently of the rest of the paragraph.
- Grammar and Spelling:
    - Identify your weaknesses so that you know which issues to focus on most. If you have a great deal of grammar issues, take them one at a time, even though this means reading your paper several times.
        - Some of the most frequent grammar errors are article choice, subject/verb agreement, preposition choice, punctuation (especially semi-colons, colons, and commas), and tense choice.
        - Create a checklist of all the issues which you need to address while proofreading.
        - Use the search key (ctrl+f) if doing this can help you identify points of difficulty.
            - Use this if you know you mix up homonyms like there/their/they're, its/it's, affect/effect or to/too/two.
            - This is also especially helpful for punctuation and prepositions.
                - ❖ For example, if you know you tend to misuse semicolons, search for semi-colons, and ensure that each one was used properly.
                - ❖ Similarly, if there are certain prepositions which you mix up, you can search for each time you used those prepositions and double check that you used them properly.

    Tip: Don't rely exclusively on spellcheck for spelling and grammar! Consult a dictionary for the spelling and follow the below process to double-check your grammar.

- Grammar and Sentences:
    - Make sure there are no sentence fragments. Every sentence needs a subject and a verb.

- o Be aware that in some instances even the presence of a noun and a verb is not enough to create a complete sentence. When starting a sentence with a conjunction, take extra care to make sure that you are not writing a fragment.
- o Below are examples of how to make a sentence fragment beginning with a preposition into a complete sentence:
  - Fragment: "That the general population disagreed with government policy."
  - Sentence: "That the general population disagreed with government policy was of no concern to the dictator."
  - Fragment: "Whether or not this was the case."
  - Sentence: "Whether or not this was the case, people generally acted as though it was."

Practice:

Directions: Read the following paragraph out loud. There will be one topic sentence, one run-on sentence, one sentence that is a fragment, one sentence with poor word choice, and one sentence that needs to be moved. Identify each type of sentence in the paragraph and re-write it to be more concise and clear on the lines provided.

Grimm's Fairytales was a compilation of stories gathered by the Grimm brothers, which were allegedly meant to represent the *Volk,* the medieval German people. The stories are often misconstrued to be stories the brothers wrote, but this is not all at true. In fact, many of the stories were not even German and so could not even begin to represent the *Volk*. "The Little Mermaid" was written by the Danish author, Hans Christian Anderson and the version of "Cinderella" in the Grimm brothers' book was translated from French. The German title was "*Grimms Märchen*" which is best translated as "small tales." This mistranslation leads to the assumption that the stories are all about fairies. The stories are in actuality much more gruesome than the sanitized, commercial versions Disney produces today and often involve child abuse and exploitation and women physically disfiguring themselves in order to be fit to marry a man who they do not even know and to enter a life they will only be alienated in because they were not born into the proper social class and thus do not know the proper social etiquette. In this way the stories might. Content assuaged, the format of the stories do not represent the *Volk* since the *Volk* would have transmitted these stories orally. Oral traditions are special because they depend on the storyteller just as much as they depend on the content. The written fairytales will never properly help us represent the *Volk* because they are only half of the story and we will never be able to understand the rest of the tradition. Thus, *Grimm's Fairytales* is a gross misrepresentation of medieval German people. Even the title of the book is a poor translation and creates an inaccurate portrayal of medieval German people.

Topic Sentence:

Sentence #:

_____
_____
_____
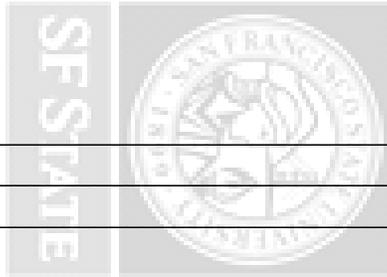
Run-on Sentence:

Sentence #:

_____
_____
_____

Fragment:

Sentence #:

_____
_____
_____

Poor Word Choice:

Sentence #:

_____
_____
_____

Sentence that needs to be moved:

Sentence #:

_____
_____
_____

Useful Links

http://www.mhhe.com/mayfieldpub/tsw/esl-link.htm#choice

http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/CommonErrors.html

Answer Key:

Answers will vary.

<u>Topic Sentence</u>: #1. Keep as is.

<u>Run-On Sentence</u>: #7. The stories are in actuality much more gruesome than the sanitized, commercial versions Disney produces today and often involve child abuse and exploitation**. The stories often portray** women physically disfiguring themselves in order **to enter a life they will only be alienated in because they were not born and educated in the proper social class.**

<u>Fragment Sentence</u>: #8. In this way the stories might **represent medieval German women's anxieties.**

<u>Poor Word Choice</u>: #9. "Assuaged" means "to satisfy," a better word would be "aside." Content **aside**, the format of the stories do not represent the *Volk* since the *Volk* would have transmitted these stories orally.

<u>Sentence that Needs to be Moved</u>: #13. Even the title of the book is a poor translation and creates an inaccurate portrayal of medieval German people. **This sentence should go before the sentence with "***Märchen***" because it presents the problem of mistranslation and the next sentence provides the specific example of that mistranslation.**

Work Cited

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