The art of editing

This Study Guide addresses the process of editing an extended document such as a dissertation or a thesis.

Related study guides from Learning Development are: *Writing a dissertation; Using paragraphs; and Writing for science.*

Introduction

When you start to produce a piece of written work, you are likely to be aware of various targets and standards that you need to work to, such as:

- the stipulated word limit;
- the required level of academic writing;
- the need to present material in a clear and logical order; and
- the necessary high standards in spelling, referencing, and grammar.

However, if you become too concerned at this stage about the required standard of the end product, you may feel reluctant to begin writing at all.

This is why making a clear separation between the processes of 'writing' and 'editing' can be helpful. Brookes and Marshall (2004 p213) suggest it is usually more helpful to produce something imperfect, then revise it, than to waste time trying to produce something that is perfect first time round. The following table describes how writing can be a relatively free and expansive process; while editing can take care of the critical attention and refinement that will ensure your writing reaches the required standard.

writing may involve	editing may involve
creating	critiquing
including	adding and removing
presenting	improving
recording	reviewing
feeling closely involved	feeling fairly objective
an immediate, but naïve product	a subsequent, refined product
making a mess	tidying it up later

What is editing?

This Study Guide uses the term 'editing' to refer to the broad intellectual task of raising the overall academic standard of a piece of writing, via an iterative process of critique and revision. It uses the term 'proof reading' to refer to the narrower job of checking such elements as spelling, grammar, and page numbering. Detailed proof reading is usually best done as the last stage in the editing process.

This table shows some typical aspects of writing that you can critique within the editing process.

the overall logical structure and balance of the thesis	the coherence of the line of argument
adherence to your stated title / research question / plans	use of active / passive voice, and of past / present tense
signposting and linking of content	clarity of explanation
appropriate content under appropriate headings	length of sentences, and economy of word use

The examiner will be able to tell how much attention you have paid to the editing process. He or she will not appreciate reading material that has clearly not been thoroughly edited. If the reader's main response is irritation at a poorly edited thesis, this will make it less likely that he or she will develop a positive impression of the content of your writing.

It is better that *you* spot and make the improvements necessary, than that the examiner is the first to spot them.

Positive and negative feelings about editing

Students can experience a range of feelings as they approach the task of editing their thesis. For some, editing can feel like a negative experience, after the relatively creative and positive process of writing:

- Perhaps you have already spent such a lot of effort writing, that it feels impossible to improve on what you've done, even though you know it probably does need improving.
- Perhaps you face the task of reducing the total number of words by 30%, and can't see how you can do this without losing crucial material.
- Perhaps you are tired of looking at your writing, and the thought of studying it again closely for the editing process makes you want to run away.

For others, editing can feel more positive than writing, because they know that this is a stage where they can really raise the standard of their work. Some positive points about editing are:

- If you are thinking about editing your work, it means that you must already have written something reasonably substantial.
- Editing tends to be a highly constructive process. Every single useful change you make is a guaranteed step towards improving the quality of your thesis.
- It tends to be much easier to criticise and improve on your writing, than it was to produce the writing in the first place.
- It can therefore be relatively quick to produce significant improvements within the editing stage.

Where to work?

One way of separating the processes of writing and editing is to do them in different places. Print out your writing, so that you can do the editing work on hard copy, away from the computer e.g.: on the train or bus; in a café; on a park seat; somewhere else well away from the work environment; or at your desk if you prefer.

Printing the work out and working on hard copy can help you feel as if you are reviewing someone else's writing. This is useful, as it is important not to get too attached to any particular parts of your writing: "Until a manuscript is in print, not a word you have written is sacrosanct." (Wolcott 2001 p112).

Some people do choose to edit while sitting at a computer, but it is still important to print the work out at some point in the editing process, as only then will you see the reality of "the density of the ink, the sharpness of the printing … Fonts, size of type, headings, spaces and blocks of text all may look different when you are holding a piece of paper in your hands rather than staring at a screen" (Brookes and Marshall 2004 p219).

Recording your critique

When you are editing away from the computer, it is important to make full notes of any improvements that occur to you. They may seem obvious at the time, but it is disappointing when you come to make the alterations later on, to find you have forgotten the seemingly perfect re-phrasing you had thought of earlier; or that you can't read the scrawl you made in the margin. So, make sure you record your suggested modifications very clearly, so you can follow them easily when you type in the alterations at a later time.

Overall editing plan

Effective editing will invariably require a number of sweeps through the work, and a series of drafts. An example of an editing plan is provided below.

It may be tempting to work paragraph by paragraph, trying to perfect each one before attending to the next. This is, however, neither an efficient nor an effective method for editing a large document. Several of the processes, e.g.: maintaining a logical thread throughout; and identifying duplication; require more of an overview to be taken, involving review at a chapter or thesis level, rather than at a sentence or paragraph level.

Draft	Aims	Techniques
Draft 1	Editing for academic rigour	i. check that you have explicitly written down what you intended to do, and what you did in your research, rather than just having it in your head ii. ensure you have a clear, logical thread running throughout iii. back up all claims and interpretations
Draft 2	Reducing redundancy	Identify and remove unnecessary duplication, explanation and interesting but irrelevant material. Un-clutter the language used
Draft 3	Editing for consistency	Check consistent use of tenses, voice, style
Draft 4	Signposting and linking	Let the reader know what to expect, and summarise what has just been read. It is then easier for the reader to establish a structure into which your research can be understood
Draft 5	Proof reading	Check details for spelling, grammar, numbering

Draft 1: Editing for academic rigour

This relates to the essence of academic writing. It needs to be your main editing focus. And will take the most time. Academic journals publish the criteria they use to evaluate articles, and these can be useful in guiding the process. There may also be detailed guidance available within your own department. This section describes three aspects to 'editing for academic rigour', which should help you to work through this process using a structured approach.

Firstly, on a broad level, it can be very helpful to ask these two deceptively simple questions:

- *'What did I try to do and did I do it?'*
- *'What am I trying to say, and do I say it?'*

Each of these questions is in two parts. The first part asks what you are trying to do, and the second asks whether you consider you did it. Both parts of each question are essential.

> *What did I try to do and did I do it?*
>
> You may not need to prove that you did everything that you intended to, but you *do* need to show that you are clear about what you intended to do, and that you are fully aware of how your eventual research related to your initial plans, and why there may be some discrepancies. Addressing this question closely and thoroughly will take you through a review of the rationale for your research; the methods chosen; how they were employed; and a critique of how things went.
>
> *What am I trying to say, and do I say it?*
>
> When you are deeply involved in your research, and know about it in great detail, it can be very easy to think that you have explained something, only to find that important, and basic, elements of the explanation are missing. So, while it is important to ask *What am I trying to say?* It is essential to add *Do I say it?* and to be highly critical when reading through your writing to check that you do actually state clearly what you are trying to say, rather than leaving the reader to fill in gaps.

Secondly, you need to ensure that you have provided **a well-supported and clear thread of logical reasoning throughout your thesis**. You need to check that your sections are arranged in an order that will present your reasoning most effectively. Take a step back from your detailed writing, and create an outline of a straightforward, logical structure you could use for your thesis. An effective way to do this is to explain aloud, to a friend, or alone but using a tape recorder, in as logical and clear a way as possible:

- the overall reason for your research;
- what you did; and
- what you found.

If your friend takes notes, or if you tape-record the explanation, you can use the record to produce a coherent outline for your structure. Then read through your writing thus far, and produce an outline of the structure that you have *actually* used. By comparing the two structures you can identify: where the ordering is confusing; where you have written too much or too little; where new sections are needed; and where others can be swapped around.

Thirdly, you need to attend to the reader's ever-present question: **"Why should I believe this?"**. Ideally, you will be able to adopt the role of an awkward reader of your own writing. The aim is to make sure that all the claims you make are either supported or removed. If you can read your own work with a provocative and questioning attitude, it will help you to identify the places where you need to provide more evidence for your statements and interpretations.

Draft 2: Reducing redundancy; simplifying and shortening

Some parts of your writing may be true, interesting, and well-written but, if they do not strictly form part of the main thread or 'story' of the writing, it is better to remove them. You may have spent time describing an aspect of context, theory, practice, or experience that you now decide is not directly relevant to your main argument or research study. However attached you feel to that bit of writing, you do need to be ruthless in removing it.

This is good practice in all academic writing, but is particularly useful when you need to reduce your number of words. Initially it is best not to think too much about word limits. Later however, as you edit, you will see many examples of redundancy where you can remove words, phrases, paragraphs, and even whole sections, to improve the coherence and logical flow of your writing. If you worry about losing material that you might want to bring back, you can keep it temporarily in a reserve file, rather than delete it completely.

You can also reduce the number of words by simplifying the language used, as in this table from Barrass (1978 pp 61 & 70-72).

long version		shorter version
on a regular basis		regularly
if at all possible		if possible
during the month of April		in April
an increased appetite was manifested by all the rats		all the rats ate more
during the time that		while
conduct an investigation into		investigate
has an ability to		can
on two separate occasions		twice
which goes under the name of		is called
it may well be that		perhaps
take into consideration		consider
it was observed in the course of the demonstration that		we observed that

Another way to reduce redundancy, and to increase clarity, is to write in the active rather than the passive tense e.g.:

> *the box was opened by the experimenter* becomes

> *the experimenter opened the box*

a reduction from 7 to 5 words; and an increase in clarity.

Similarly:

> *It was decided that the order in which the questions were asked should be changed* could become

> *I decided to change the order of the questions*

a reduction from 15 to 9; and an increase in clarity.

This second example introduces the question of whether it is acceptable to use the voice of the researcher in the first person i.e.: how acceptable is it to say "I did …"?. It is essential to seek advice within your academic field about this. It may even be possible to ascertain the views of your particular thesis examiner. It is becoming more acceptable to write in the first person, particularly in the social sciences. A general guide is to use the third person routinely but, where there is a decision to explain, it is acceptable to take clear responsibility for that decision by using the first person at that point.

This can be demonstrated with the example of giving details of a methodology. It would read awkwardly if every element were to be described in the first person e.g.:

> *I set up the apparatus, then I prepared the recording sheet. I added the first element then I waited for it … etc etc.*

However, it is more acceptable to write about specific decisions in the first person e.g.:

> *the weather was colder than anticipated, so I decided to focus the data collection on the hours around mid-day.*

Styles are changing in this area, and they currently vary across disciplines, so it is important to check preferences in your own field regarding the balance between use of the first and third person.

Draft 3: Editing for consistency

A thesis is a large document, written over time, so it is almost inevitable that problems may occur with consistency. The kinds of elements to review for consistency are:

- consistent use of the third person rather than the first person, except in places where you have specifically decided to use a different voice;
- consistent use of one tense throughout a section, unless there is a specific reason to change;
- consistent use and formatting of headings and sub-headings;
- a reasonable (not necessarily equal) balance in the lengths of sections;
- consistent use of either bullet points or numbering for lists;
- consistency in referencing style;
- consistency in labelling and numbering appendices, tables, diagrams, figures, photos, and other items.

Draft 4: Signposting and linking

Signposting and linking are particularly important in a long document such as a thesis. The reader has a lot of information to take in, and is unlikely to read the whole document in one go. It is in your own interest to help the reader construct and maintain a coherent picture of the research you are describing.

Typical wording for signposting:

> *In this chapter, the method will be described in detail. The chapter begins with a description of the physical setting in which the data were collected. It then describes the process of recruitment to the study. Each element of the experiment is described in turn, and illustrated using a typical participant journey. Copies of the letters, information sheets, and consent forms used are included in Appendix F. The chapter ends with a description of …*

Signposting is helpful in the Introduction and at the beginning of chapters. It allows the reader to prepare a structure in his or her own mind, into which can be placed the material that is then read. It reduces the chance that the reader will wonder why you seem to have missed something out, only to find it is included in an unexpected place. It also helps the reader to appreciate the logical flow of your writing.

Linking is used to guide the reader through different sections or paragraphs, so that the logical structure of your writing is highlighted. Creating and inserting appropriate links is a useful test of the logical structure of your writing. If you find it straightforward to insert links, it suggests that your writing is logically and coherently ordered. If you find it more difficult, it could be a sign that you need to re-think some of the ordering.

Typical wording for links:

- *In the previous chapter I described .... In this chapter I will ....*
- *The argument just presented is the main one used by theorists in this field. The next sections describe three other related arguments that could be used to extend it.*
- *This is the background as far as the providers were concerned. The next section explores the background from the users' perspective.*

Each of these links looks both backwards and forwards, thereby both reviewing what has just been said, and introducing what is about to be said. It is easy to feel that, by using links like these, you are wasting words. Ironically, by using these 'extra' words, you are actually employing a very efficient method of streamlining and structuring your content.

Editing to increase the number of words

In the editing process you may identify certain sections of your writing that are relatively brief and superficial, and which you consider need to be extended. Techniques you can use are:

- taking the idea contained within one sentence, and developing it into a whole paragraph;
- increasing the amount of comment as opposed to pure description;
- being more generous with the signposting, linking, and summaries;
- asking the questions 'So what?' and 'Why should I believe this?', then providing the extra rationale that is needed;
- thinking further through the implications of your research for e.g.: theory; practice; research;
- thinking further about how the research could have been done better.

It is vital that the words you add enhance the academic quality of the thesis, rather than simply fill the space. Having space to increase the number of words is an excellent and relatively rare opportunity to read your work from the examiner's viewpoint, then to be able to add in further explanation where this seems necessary.

Editing fatigue

There may come a point at which you feel that you have lost the critical eye you need to review your writing. It is important to recognise when this happens. There is little point in continuing to edit that piece of work if you are losing your sense of judgment. When this happens you can put it aside to look at it yourself a few days later. Editing is best done is a series of short, focussed efforts, rather than attempting a long, sustained effort.

Draft 5: Proof reading

Proof reading is the last stage in the editing process. It needs to be done thoroughly and systematically, otherwise it is very easy to miss details that need to be changed. Here are five suggestions to feed into a proof reading strategy.

1. Take a structured approach: focus in turn on specific potential problems, rather than trying to identify everything at one go.
2. Make your proof reading relevant to your own writing. Look through some previous writing that has been marked, and make a list of your own typical errors, then use this to form the basis of your proof reading strategy.
3. Examples of common problems are:

faulty abbreviations	duplication of words	spelling errors
too much space between two words	missing or misplaced apostrophes	inappropriate changes of tense
singular and plural mixed up	inaccurate cross-referencing of pages	leaving a reference in the list, when it has been removed from the text

4. Check referencing format in detail: it must be appropriate, accurate, and consistent.
5. Final check of tables; figures; diagrams; page numbering; contents list; appendices; and all the references to any of these within the text.

References

Barrass R. (1978) *Scientists must write*. Chapman & Hall: London.

Brookes I. and Marshall D. (2004) *Good writing guide.* Chambers: Edinburgh.

Wolcott H. (2001) *Writing up qualitative research*. 2nd Edition. Sage: Thousand Oaks.

Guidance

As well as any guidance given from your own department, the following website is recommended:

The Writing Centre. University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill at www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb

Material on websites is subject to revision or deletion, so it is always worth looking out for new and relevant guidance