



Academic skills

Editing your assignments

WHY IS EDITING NECESSARY?

University tutors expect student assignments to be of a certain standard. In terms of presentation, this means the assignment should be neatly presented, largely free of surface errors such as spelling or punctuation mistakes, include a cover sheet with the assignment title, and have a reference list at the end. Careless errors distract your tutor from the ideas you are presenting in your assignment. They can also cost you marks. In a survey on lecturers' perceptions of students' literacy nearly half of the responding lecturers stated that they deducted marks if the meaning was obscured by errors, and over a third of respondents replied that they definitely took writing errors into account when allocating marks.

While editing is mainly a form of 'quality control': it can also be used to make sure you have eliminated any errors of logic or reasoning in your work. Ideally you will have ironed out any major problems in the redrafting stage of writing, and made sure that you have answered the question. However, it is still worth checking in the editing stage that your argument is logically structured. Sometimes, minor adjustments or changes to expression can greatly improve the flow of your argument, or make your ideas clearer. Attention to content as well as surface errors in the editing stage is an integral part of editing your work, just as editing is an integral part of the assignment writing process (Figure 1).

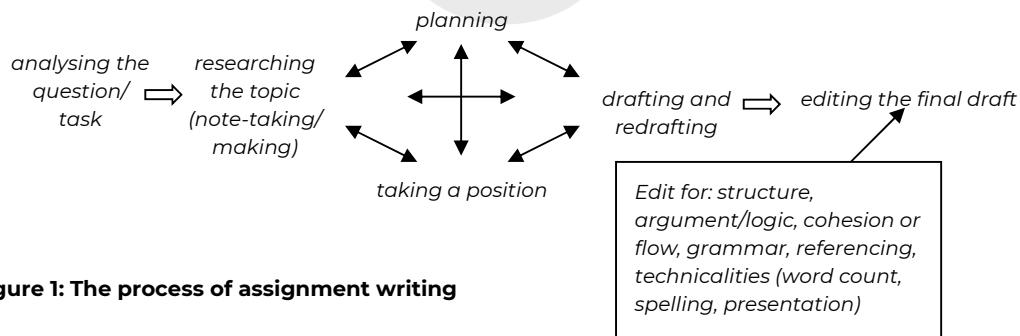


Figure 1: The process of assignment writing

A 'PLAN OF ATTACK'

For new students unfamiliar with the requirements of assignment writing at university, it is worthwhile adopting a 'plan of attack' to ensure thorough and effective editing. As some features of assignment writing may be unfamiliar, such as the need to include a reference list, it is always advisable to seek out any faculty or departmental guidelines. If these are available, check that your assignment is written in accordance with the criteria specified in the guidelines. If no guidelines are available, one method is to check thoroughly for a particular aspect, then check thoroughly for another aspect. This means in your haste to complete your assignment, you won't neglect editing for different features! For example:

1. check for structural aspects
2. check for grammar aspects and punctuation
3. check technical aspects (reference list, spelling, presentation, title page).

ACADEMIC LITERACY

EDITING FOR STRUCTURAL FEATURES

Text types, or genres, such as essays, reports, or literature reviews have specific stages or sections that need to be included in your assignment. If your assignment is written in the form of an essay, you need to make sure that your essay includes an introductory section, a middle section with your arguments, and a conclusion.

Checking essay structure	
INTRODUCTION	<i>Check the assessment requirements, including the marking criteria</i>
Have you addressed the question fully? Does the introduction contain a thesis statement and an outline of the sub-topics to be covered in your essay?	
BODY	<i>Sketch out the structure of your approach</i>
Is each paragraph dealing with just one main idea or sub-topic? Does each paragraph have a topic sentence? Is the transition from one paragraph to the next smooth and logical?	
CONCLUSION	<i>Consider putting new information in the body of your essay, or leave it out</i>
Have you restated your main thesis point? Have you reminded the reader of the strengths of your argument? Have you avoided including any new information in your conclusion?	

If your assignment is written in a report format, make sure that the sections of your report contain the necessary headings, and that you have included suitable information for each section. Reports often include an abstract, or executive summary, which precedes the introduction. For other genres such as book reviews or reflective journals, make sure that your assignment has achieved the *purpose* of that genre. For example, a book review should include your assessment of the value/relevance of the particular book.

EDITING FOR GRAMMATICAL ASPECTS AND PUNCTUATION

Why is it that when we write essays at university we make grammatical errors we probably wouldn't make in other contexts? One reason is that these 'errors' wouldn't be considered errors in other contexts, such as in spoken English between friends. Another reason is certainly a combination of haste, carelessness, lack of proofreading, and perhaps lack of knowledge of the grammar of written English. Furthermore, when students discuss or explain new and difficult concepts, their language is put under considerable strain. This can result in clumsy expressions, incomplete sentences and faulty logic. Some common grammatical problems in student writing are:

- problems with sentences (sentence fragments, run-on sentences)
- problems with noun-verb agreement
- use of apostrophes.

If some of the grammatical explanations below are unfamiliar, you may need to consult a grammar guide; however, the sample sentences with corrections should help you to identify the problem. Be on the look out for problems such as these in your own work. One way to do this is to read your assignment aloud (very useful for identifying problems with sentences), or ask a friend to help you check your sentence structure and punctuation.



PROBLEMS WITH SENTENCES

Sentence Fragments

Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences which are punctuated like sentences but which lack a vital component! This vital component is generally a *finite verb*, or an *independent clause*. For example, (the sentence fragment is underlined).

There are two options which would alleviate the problem. Raising the dam wall or increasing the size of the spillway.

This sentence fragment could be repaired by starting the sentence fragment with *These options are ...* In other words the sentences would read:

There are two options which would alleviate the problem. These options are raising the dam wall or increasing the size of the spillway.

Another possibility would be to change the punctuation and just have one sentence. In other words, the full stop after *problem* could be replaced with a colon (:), as one function of colons is to introduce nouns or phrases expressed in a ‘list’ form:

There are two options which would alleviate the problem: raising the dam wall or increasing the size of the spillway.

Here is another example of a sentence fragment:

It might be useful for Julia to have someone outside the executive team chair the meetings.
Because the present chairperson, who is the manager, monopolises the meetings.

In this example, the sentence fragment is subordinated by *Because* with the result that the clause becomes a **dependent clause**. In other words, it needs to be attached to an **independent clause**. One option for repair would be to join the dependent clause to the independent clause in front of it:

It might be useful for Julia to have someone outside the executive team chair the meetings because the present chairperson, who is the manager, monopolises the meetings.

Alternatively, the sentence fragment could be turned into an independent clause by adding a subject and a finite verb:

It might be useful for Julia to have someone outside the executive team chair the meetings.
This is because the present chairperson, who is the manager, monopolises the meetings.

Run-on Sentences

Run-on sentences are sentences which are generally incorrectly punctuated. The result is a series of sentences ‘run’ together mostly with commas. For example (run-on sentences are underlined):

After water is released from the dam it is important that it is able to travel easily downstream. Thus channel improvements sometimes must be made, this can involve straightening bends, removing brush, debris, or hazards from the channel.

In this example, the underlined sentence should be punctuated as a separate sentence: that is, preceded by a full stop and with an initial capital letter. That is:

After water is released from the dam it is important that it is able to travel easily downstream. Thus channel improvements sometimes must be made. This can involve straightening bends, removing brush, debris, or hazards from the channel.



Run-on sentences can also be avoided by using co-ordinating conjunctions preceded by commas. For example:

Thus channel improvements sometimes must be made, and this can involve straightening bends, removing brush, debris, or hazards from the channel.

Alternatively, it would also have been possible to make the run-on sentence a relative clause by introducing *which*:

Thus channel improvements sometimes must be made, which involves straightening bends, removing brush, debris, or hazards from the channel.

PROBLEMS WITH NOUN-VERB AGREEMENT

The subject and verb in a sentence should agree in number: that is, singular subjects require a singular verb, and plural subjects require plural verbs. For example:

In the sedimentation tank some grease rises to the surface as scum, (*singular subject and singular form of the verb*) which is scraped off.

Some solid materials fall (*plural subject and plural form of the verb*) to the bottom as sludge, which is mechanically collected.

In student writing, subject-verb agreement errors mostly occur because the subject may be a complex **nominal group**. This means the student can be confused about which word in the nominal group is the head noun, and which words are the **post modifying elements**. This confusion can result in lack of agreement between the subject and verb. For example:

The height of arch dams are usually increased by ‘laminating’. (*incorrect*)

The height (*singular head noun*) of arch dams (*post modifying elements*) is (*singular form of the verb*) usually increased by laminating.

USE OF APOSTROPHES

Apostrophes are used with singular and plural nouns to show possession: for example, *the dam's storage capacity; employees' concerns*. They are also used in contractions, such as *I'm (I am), can't (cannot)*; however as contractions are not encouraged in academic writing, we won't be focussing on this aspect of apostrophe use. Common errors with apostrophes are: confusion between singular and plural nouns; inclusion of apostrophes in possessive pronouns, for example, *the main advantage of the disc is it's ease of operation* (*incorrect*); inclusion of apostrophes in plural nouns when there is no possession, for example, *the downstream area's were prone to flooding* (*incorrect*); and even not using any apostrophes at all!

If the possessive noun is singular, the apostrophe goes before the ‘s’:

the employee’s concerns (one employee)

If the possessive noun is plural, then the apostrophe goes after the ‘s’:

the employees’ concerns (more than one employee)

If the noun’s spelling changes to form the plural, such as in *child* → *children*, then the apostrophe goes before the ‘s’:

the women’s art movement

If the possessive word is a possessive pronoun (*its, yours, hers*), then no apostrophe is used. The apostrophe in *it's* is there because *it's* is a contraction of *it is*.



EDITING FOR TECHNICAL ASPECTS

By this stage your assignment should be well structured, and have few grammatical errors. What about technical aspects which will affect the overall appearance of your work? Spelling errors can be quite easily avoided by running the spell check program on your computer. However, if you aren't a very good speller, don't just rely on the spell checker, but consult your dictionary. This can help you avoid embarrassing errors like this one:

Urine Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory ... (*Uri! problem with spell checkers!*)

Others thing to look out for are the inclusion of a cover sheet with your name, course, tutor's name, and the assignment title, particularly if you have had to develop your own assignment topic. Lecturers like assignments to be double spaced, and with a substantial margin so that there is plenty of room for comments. You also need to keep within the assignment word limit. Finally, a reference list or bibliography with details of references in alphabetical order by author is an essential feature of most assignments. It should look something like this one (with variations depending on the referencing style used by your faculty or school):

References

Bizzell, P (1982). Cognition, convention and certainty: What we need to know about writing. *Pre/text*, 3 (3), 213-243.

Candlin, C (1998). Researching writing in the academy: Participants, texts, processes and practices. In C Candlin & G Plum (Eds), *Researching academic literacies* (pp 1-30). Macquarie University, Sydney: The National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR).

Fromkin, V, Rodman, R, Hyams, N (2013). *An Introduction to Language* (10th edn). Boston: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning.

Gruba, P and Zobel, J (2017). *How to write your first thesis*, Melbourne: University of Melbourne.

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN EDITING CHECKLIST

The ideas presented in this module on editing your work cover three areas: structural features; grammatical aspects; and technical features. You can customise these suggestions by compiling your own one page checklist from these three areas, incorporating features to which you need to pay special attention. It is also advisable to add in brief your lecturers' comments on your assignments as a special reminder of the things you should pay attention to when submitting future assignments.

REFERENCES

Woodward-Kron, R & Van der Wal, A (1997), Lecturers' perceptions of student literacy: a survey conducted at the University of Newcastle, in Z Golebiowski (ed), *Policy and Practice of Tertiary Literacy*, pp 282-290, Selected Proceedings of the First National Conference on Tertiary Literacy, Vol 1, Research and Practice, Victoria University of Technology, Melbourne.

