

Proofreading and editing your work

Checking and **revising** your work before you submit it to a tutor is almost guaranteed to improve its quality and hence improve your mark.

Proofreading involves meticulously checking through a piece of writing in search of actual errors (e.g. spelling mistakes, repetition of words.) **Editing** is generally a more extensive process of reading through the draft of an essay and improving it in terms of style, conciseness, paragraphing and focus.

Suggested ideas

- **Create “distance” between you and your text.** Allow some time to pass between writing the draft and checking it. That way you are likely to be more *detached* and *objective* in your approach to errors and improvements.
- **Choose your preferred medium.** Some people prefer to work with a pen and a paper copy of the essay, others opt for the computer. It depends on what works best for you in terms of spotting things to correct or improve.
- **Choose a suitable place to work.** Editing and proofreading require a particular kind of concentration which is different from the frame of mind required for reading or writing. You’ll need to avoid distractions if you are to do the best possible job of revising your work.
- **Avoid long stretches of work.** It’s generally advisable to do your proofreading and editing in reasonably short bursts. That way your concentration won’t flag and you’ll avoid the danger of missing errors.
- **Ask a friend or colleague to read your work.** This is not a substitute for doing the job yourself, but can be an additional aid. Sometimes they will spot something you have missed.

Aspects to consider when editing

- **Is the content (subject matter) ok?** Check that you have answered the question as set, used argument effectively and backed up your views with references to sources. Have you used the Harvard referencing system correctly?

- **Is the structure clear?** Make sure you have an introduction, well-sustained main section and a satisfactory conclusion. Check for sentence and paragraph connections that supply cohesion and signposting. Does it all *flow*?
- **Is the style accessible?** The tone needs to be right (normally a fairly formal academic tone is needed, without sounding pompous). Ensure you replace words and phrases that are inadequate or too informal. Is there a balance of passive and active verbs? Have you *defined* important terms used in the essay?
- **Is there a pattern to what I do?** It is important to develop self-correction techniques as part of the process of becoming an independent learner. As you edit, take note of repeated features (repetition, over-long sentences, poor paragraphing, for example) and look out for these as you go through.

Points to consider when proofreading

- **Proofreading is not an identical process to editing.** Though they overlap in some respects it is a good idea to keep them separate. (Checking for spelling errors requires a different approach to that required for refining *content*.)
- **Don't rely on spelling checkers.** Most of us know these are not completely reliable and will often miss an error if the word is the correct spelling of an existing word, however incorrectly used in the context. The same thing applies to grammar checkers.
- **Focus on one kind of error at a time.** It is very difficult to proofread for a range of different mistakes. Search *separately* for spelling, punctuation and grammar errors, for example.
- **Accept the fact that it is a slow process.** There is no alternative to a thoroughgoing, methodical approach to proofreading. It really should be done *word for word*. (See the accompanying handout, *Proofreading Techniques*.) However, with practice and experience your technique should improve.
- **The results of not proofreading can be serious!** There is at least one example on record of a student receiving a zero mark for a disastrous, error-strewn essay that had clearly not been checked in any way before it was submitted.