

EDITING AN ACADEMIC PAPER

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Once you have written a complete draft of your academic paper, you need to review the draft yourself. It can be very difficult to assess what you've written because you've spent so much time working with your text. However, this is a vital step in the creation of an effective piece of writing.

THE BIG PICTURE

Many people believe that they only need to edit their work for spelling mistakes and grammar. However, if the basic structure of the paper doesn't work, verifying the spelling and making sure that commas are in the right place won't help.

So, in order to make sure that you are communicating what you intended to and that your ideas are presented in a logical way, use the following checklist.

- What I have written fits the assignment, both in terms of content and format.
- My thesis is written in one clear sentence.
- I have provided adequate background information for the topic of my paper.
- Each of my chunks links back to my thesis in the same way.
- Within each chunk, I introduce, state, support, and discuss.
- I use a variety of reliable, academic resources to support my ideas.
- I paraphrase my resources more often than I quote them directly.
- I have used APA consistently and correctly (both in terms of in-text citations and the references).
- My conclusion briefly summarizes the information in my paper and implies that there is still more to talk about.
- I use a straightforward, professional tone in my paper.

THE DETAILS

Once you're sure that you've covered all of these points, you can start examining sentence structure, grammar, and spelling.

Here are some tips that can help you edit your own work:

- Read your paper aloud. If you find yourself gasping to finish a sentence, that sentence is probably too long. Break it up into several shorter sentences.

- Use strong verbs in your sentences that propel the reader forward.

WEAK: The primary focus of Steinberg’s work is racism in the American school system.
STRONG: Steinberg’s work focuses on racism in the American school system.

WEAK: There is disagreement among educational theorists about the best way to deal with standardized tests.
STRONG: Educational theorists disagree about how to deal with standardized tests.

- Use the active voice as often as possible in your sentences.

PASSIVE: It has been determined that black and Latino students are more severely punished than white students. (Who determined this?)
ACTIVE: According to several researchers (Beckwith, 2007; Goddard, 2003, 2006; Smith & Adams, 2009), black and Latino students are more severely punished than white students.

- Eliminate redundant adverbs and adjectives.

major breakthrough	→	breakthrough
serious danger	→	danger
few in number	→	few
a large proportion of	→	many
at this point in time	→	now
in this day and age	→	today

- Check for common mistakes.

its vs. it’s
 there vs. their
 complement vs. compliment
 parameters vs. perimeters
 respectively vs. respectfully

- Turn on the spell check and grammar check functions in Word

Many people rely on the spell check and grammar check functions of Word to correct their writing. The problem is that these functions are not reliable (sometimes correct words or phrasing are flagged as incorrect, and sometimes incorrect spelling or phrasing is missed).

I recommend that you turn off the spell check and grammar check functions while you are writing and editing your paper. Turn it on as you do your last read-through and review whatever is flagged carefully.

Once you have edited your work, you can ask someone else to look at it for you. You might decide to do peer editing (where you and a classmate trade papers so you can give one another feedback) or you might decide to hire a copy editor to read your work.

PEER EDITING

One effective method of peer editing is to ask your peer to create a reader’s skeleton of what they believe is the overall structure of your paper. Once this reader’s skeleton is complete, you can check to see whether or not it matches the original structure that you mapped out (with your page budget). This is a way of ensuring that you have expressed what you intended to and that your paper is strong. A peer can also help with spelling, grammar, and punctuation.

HIRING AN EDITOR

If you feel that your work could be improved by the help of an editor, then you should look into hiring one. You can post an ad on a free service like Craigslist or in your university department building. You can also ask your professor for a referral.

In the case of editing academic writing, an editor is normally responsible for correcting any mistakes or inconsistencies in your spelling, grammar, or punctuation and correcting any mistakes or inconsistencies you’ve made in using APA-style citations.

An editor can also flag parts of your academic paper that could use additional research or rewriting and provide a reader’s skeleton of your work, but this work is “above and beyond” what is normally expected of an editor.

An editor is not responsible for telling you what information is missing or wrong, or for rewriting your paper. This kind of “big picture” editing is your responsibility because writing and researching your paper is part of your learning process. If an editor rewrites your paper for you and you submit that paper with your name on it, this is plagiarism. You are responsible for the structure and content of your work, which is the foundation of your paper. An editor ensures that you’ve used proper English to express those ideas.

So, before you hire an editor, you need to clearly establish what you want the editor to do to your paper and how much the editor will charge you for that work.

FEEDBACK FROM YOUR PROFESSOR

Finally, you might be in a situation where you can submit your paper to your professor, who will then give you feedback and the opportunity to resubmit your work. If this is the case, be sure that you follow every single piece of advice that your professor has offered. If it helps, create a checklist of all of your professor’s feedback to ensure that you address every suggestion. If some of your professor’s feedback doesn’t make sense, ask for clarification.

KEEP FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT (AND WRITING GREAT PAPERS)

Not one writer get a first draft published—this includes bell hooks, Noam Chomsky, and your professor. Don’t be discouraged if you are given (constructive) feedback about your writing. You can learn from that feedback and keep working on your writing skills, even after the assignment is over. Now go out there and get ‘em, tiger!

See also: “Planning an Academic Paper” “Using APA Style in an Academic Paper”
 “Writing an Academic Paper”