

Editing and Revising

Editing and revising are the most important factors in creating well-written documents. Few writers can get something on paper the first time perfectly. Most documents require at least some editing. This section discusses some methods for editing, and particular items to check for when editing.

If possible, the final edit should be done by someone other than the writer. If the writer also edits the work, he or she should wait a week or two before editing. This allows the writer to get a fresh perspective on the material.

The information in this chapter is not a conclusive list of possible edits. You should modify this list to fit your own applications.

When editing, there are standard symbols that are used to indicate errors. The figure below shows some of them. Be aware that these are different than proofreading symbols. For full discussion of editing and proofreading symbols, see *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

TABLE 4. Editor's Marks

This Mark	Means	Mark	Means
<i>follows each</i> looks at every	Delete text and replace with text above.	<u>no underlining</u>	Remove underlining.
omitted	Delete one or a few letters.	<i>italic</i>	Change to italics.
brother ^s -in-law ^s	Insert letter above caret. Delete letter with slash through it.	boldface	Wavy line means to bold text.
it's	Delete apostrophe. Close up space.	gray old / cat	Switch words or letters.
<i>between two</i> A caret words	Insert words above the line at the point of the caret.	proof reading	Join words (delete space).
The creature which ^	Insert comma.	abraham L ⁿ coln	Three lines under letter mean change to upper case. Line through letter means change to lower case.
∨ its	Caret above line to insert apostrophe.	②	Circle around a number, symbol or abbreviation means to spell it out.

TABLE 4. Editor's Marks

This Mark	Means	Mark	Means
<p>two words</p> <p># two words</p>	<p>Use these methods to add a space.</p> <p>Use # when it isn't clear that a space is needed. You can also use a caret under the #.</p>	<p>two</p>	<p>Circle around word means use number, symbol or abbreviation.</p>
<p>⊖⊖⊖⊖</p> <p><i>stet</i></p> <p>⊖⊖⊖⊖</p>	<p>These two methods indicate that a change does not need to be made (the markup was made in error).</p>	<p>⊖</p> <p>⊗</p>	<p>These two symbols mean add a period.</p>
<p>¶</p>	<p>Insert paragraph break.</p>	<p>⑨</p>	<p>Change the comma to a period.</p>

Editing Steps

One of the best ways to edit is to do it in steps. Depending on the document, its final format, and its purpose, the steps can involve checking grammar and spelling, content, word choice, and formatting.

The purpose of doing editing in steps is to concentrate on one editing “topic” at a time. This improves the overall consistency of a document, and prevents missing items. While you are performing one step of the edit, you might see something that fits in another step. Mark it quickly, and continue with the check you started with. The purpose of editing in steps is keep you focused on one task, so try to avoid getting distracted by, for instance, content errors when you are doing the grammar and spelling edit.

Before editing the document, put it in its final format, or as close to it as possible. If you need them, put in your margins, chapter headings, headers, and footers. Format the text, notes, cautions, and bulleted lists. During your edit, you want to concentrate on particular tasks without being distracted by uncompleted tasks.

Step 1: Grammar and Spelling

This type of edit should be done on every document. Although it will not salvage a poorly written document, it at least removes the annoying errors that can distract readers. This edit can usually be done in one or two passes through a document.

When you are grammar- and spell-checking a document, have a dictionary and good grammar book nearby. Check any words or usages that you are not sure of. If you prepare a lot of documents, you might even prepare a list of words or usages you have particular problems with, such as the difference between “affect” and “effect.”

Use the spell check feature on your word processor. This is a simple, fast way to check for both spelling errors and typing errors. Do not just vegetate with the spell checker, however. Most word processors show a window of the text surrounding the spelling error. Watch the window for other errors, and mark them down so you can go back and correct them. Spelling checkers do not absolve you from reading the document. They will not catch words that are spelled correctly, but that are

incorrectly used. For instance, spell checkers think “it’s” used as the possessive is fine. They do not distinguish between words like “no” and “know,” or “they’re” and “their.” They simply check the spelling, not the usage.

Grammar checking programs can be helpful for spotting the word choice errors that spell checkers do not catch. They are also useful for catching correctly spelled typing errors, such as double entries like “the the” or “it’s” and “its.” They can also flag long sentences, comma splices, incomplete sentences, and a host of other grammar ills. As with spell checkers, however, they are not cure-alls. Many confusing documents are grammatically correct!

Step 2: Content

The content edit can include several steps. The most important purpose of a content check, however, is to make sure that the overall content of the document is correct. Before beginning the content check, make a mental or written list of the most important things a reader should get out of the document. This step should be done for every document.

When checking content, verify that everything that the reader will need is included. This is normally information you have found or procedures you need to document, but also might include the fact that you didn't find information on a topic. For instance, if you had interviewed the next-door neighbor of a crime victim, and they said they did not see or hear anything, you should document it, so a later investigator knows that you have already talked to that person. In a report, you might document things you checked for but could not find information on, if you think the reader is likely to want to know.

Step 3: Word Choice

If you have the time, you can also read the document for word choice. This includes consistent use of terms, peculiar words, jargon, consistent person (first, second, or third), and consistent tense (past, present or future). In this check, you might also watch for other specifics, such as wordiness or passive voice overuse.

Consistent Use of Terms: Make sure one word or phrase is used for items that have several synonyms. For instance, in a document that uses the phrases “internal shrinkage” and “employee theft” synonymously, pick one term and stick with it. Synonyms are nice to break up monotony, but can be confusing to readers if it is not clear that the synonym means the same thing as the first word. In technical documents, try to be precise about the terms. If necessary, define the terms when they are first used, or explain that the synonym will also be used. It can be as simple as this sentence:

Internal shrinkage, or employee theft, includes money and merchandise stolen by an organization’s employees.

Peculiar Words: Watch for uses of words that “look weird” — words like chassis, media, and data that are plural — and can distract the reader. When these words are used as a subject, they must take a plural verb:

The data are presented in chronological order.

The media were at the scene of the crime.

These types of contractions cause grief no matter how you choose to handle them. Some people believe “is” and “was” should be used to make these “sound” better; others are purists who believe that because these words have a singular form (datum and medium), the plural form should be used. The best way to avoid the issue is rewording the sentences (usually by putting the word in a prepositional phrase), or using other terms:

The list of data is presented in chronological order.

The news people were at the scene of the crime.

Jargon: Avoid occupation-specific jargon and buzzwords. Every occupation, and often individual organizations, has words that have a special meaning within that occupation or organization. For instance, “latents” mean partial fingerprints to the law enforcement field, but has little meaning to people outside the field. “Bug” means error in the computer field. “Kill,” as in “kill the switch” means remove power. Be aware of what words are occupation-specific, and try to avoid them in your writing.

Consistent Person: When editing a document, make sure the person is consistent. Some documents will require shifts from first, second, or third person. Make sure the shifts were done with good reason.

Most technical writing stays away from the first person (I, we). Because the topics are often impersonal, they tend to be in the third person (he, she, it, they).

In many reports, first person is necessary because the writer performed some action. However, try to minimize the use of the word “I” as much as possible. When it used too much, it can make you lose credibility and give readers the impression that you do not take criticism well, especially in documents like a controversial report. A third person, detached outlook gives you the appearance of objectivity.

Many documents are shifting to the second person (you). This makes documents seem less forbidding and more relevant. It is generally not acceptable in formal reports, however.

Consistent Tense: Edit the document for tense. Many documents shift from future to present to past tense seemingly at will. If writing is about a product, this often occurs because the writer is working off a specification, which is projecting the features a product will have. Remember that by the time the reader sees the document, the product will do what the documentation says (or so we hope!)

Future: Pressing the ENTER button will log the data.

Present: Press the ENTER button to log the data.

Accident reports should be done in past tense, because by the time the report is written the action is in the past. The discussion of most other reports should be written in present tense, because they are reporting current information. Recommendations should be written in the future tense, because they are suggesting future action. Résumés should have the present job description in present tense, and previous job descriptions in past tense.

Step 4: Format

If you have a long document, or even a short one that uses special formatting, such as bulleted lists, headers and footers, and headings, you might need to do a format edit.

Each step of a format edit is done individually. For instance, if you are checking numbering consistency, you would check the page numbers, then check the table numbers, and then the figure numbers. If you have a table of contents, a list of tables, and a list of figures, you might check off each number as you confirm it.

During the format edit, the following items, if they are in your document, should be checked:

- Cover page — for complete information and correctness.
- Title page — for complete information and correctness; make sure it matches cover.
- Numbering — check page numbers, figures, tables, chapters, sections, references, appendices, footnotes, lists, and cross references.
- Order — Make sure all items are presented in the correct order (for instance, that the index follows the glossary). Check contents for an overall view of the information presented. Make sure titles in contents match titles in text.
- Format — Make sure margins, line spacing, page number placement and like items are consistent. If special formatting is used (for instance, for headings or cautions), make sure it is used consistently.

Other Things to Watch For

There is an endless array of writing pitfalls to watch out for. The remainder of this section discusses some of the more common ones.

Popular Words

Words come in and out of vogue. Beware of words that are popular; they might become dated quickly, are often pretentious, and lose preciseness. For instance, “quintessential” was popular a few years ago, but has recently been restored to its proper place as an occasionally used word. “Savvy” was also popular, and is now rarely seen. “Virtually” in place of “almost all” is still popular. People were “interfacing” a few years back; most of them have gone back to talking now. “Utilize” can often be replaced by the simpler “use.”

Editorial “We”

We are sure that we all agree on how easy it is to fall into use of the editorial we. But we think using “we” to avoid the word “I” is pompous, and assumes that we all agree on the topic. We promise to avoid using “we” in the future.

Apostrophes

Apostrophes are used in contractions to indicate missing letters. In most technical writing, they should be avoided. Many readers find contractions distracting, because they have to mentally fill in the missing letters. Common contractions, such as “don’t” for “do not” and “can’t” for “cannot” are acceptable, but avoid less common ones such as “we’d’ve” for “we would have.” Also avoid the word “’til” – use the entire word, “until.”

Beware of “its.” “Its” is the possessive of “it” (like his for he and hers for her). “It’s” is the contraction for “it is.”

Quotes

Quotes should be used to enclose direct repetition of spoken or written words. They should not be used for emphasis or for paraphrases. They can be used to set apart words that might be confusing, however.

Commas and periods go inside closing quotation marks in American publications. Semicolons and colons always go outside the closing quotation marks. The only exception is where it might be confusing for the reader. For instance:

Type in the number “12456.”

A literal reader might press the period at the end of the number. Therefore, it would be acceptable to place the period outside the quotations in this case:

Type in the number “12456”.

Parentheses

Watch the use of parentheses. Statements in parentheses should add clarity to a sentence without changing its meaning. When parentheses are used, commas or periods following them go outside the parentheses. The only exception to this is complete sentences inside parentheses, in which case the period goes inside.

Numbers

Rules on spelling out numbers are anything but consistent. Stylebooks disagree on most of the rules for numbers, except that any number used to start a sentence should be spelled out. Use the following guidelines and your judgment of your audience and purpose to determine whether to spell or not spell a number.

Spell out anything under ten, and large numbers that start with a simple number (such as one million and two billion). Typical exceptions to this rule are page numbers and units of measurement. Another common exception is when several numbers are used and some do not need to be spelled out:

The company owned 150 trucks, employed 271 people and
rented 7 warehouses.

Spell out common fractions if they are not used as part of a unit of measurement — two-thirds, one-half. Don't spell out fractions that would be difficult to understand, like 7/32.

Don't place numbers in parentheses unless they would be difficult to understand otherwise.

It is unnecessary to say two (2).

Symbols

Avoid using percent signs and ampersands. Replace them with the words “percent” and “and.” The only exception is in tight tables or other situations where space is at a premium.

Avoid using the virgule, or slash (/). One style manual lists twenty-four contradictory, accepted meanings for the virgule. Say what you mean — and, or, per, or divide.

And/Or

Beware of “and/or.” Make sure it means and/or, and if possible, find another way to say it:

Change: Press Enter and/or Exit.

To: Press Enter, Exit, or both.