

Thesis Editing

Editing is an important part of thesis process—one that is often overlooked by students because it appears mundane in comparison with the other tasks of a graduate student. Quality editing adds professional polish to a thesis and can be considered part of the graduate training process. Many theses go through numerous revisions, with the supervisor providing content; structure; and possibly, style feedback. This process is challenging, but it is also very important. Each draft should be as close to free of errors as the student can make it.

Break the process into smaller, focused tasks—During the editing process, the document should be evaluated in iterative stages and at different levels of resolution:

1st stage—Editing for overall document structure

- Draw a bracket along the right hand side of each paragraph.
- Write a 5-10 word description of the paragraph beside it.
- Write a 5-10 word description of the purpose for the paragraph beside it.
- Use these descriptions as “handles” to follow the document development.

2nd stage—Editing for paragraph structure

- Make sure the 5-10 word description paragraph descriptions match well with the topic sentence for the paragraph.
- Look at relationship between the sentences and ensure that the each sentence logically flows from the previous one. Discourse markers and transitions can help make these connections explicit; however, if the content of a sentence is completely unrelated to the previous one, it is likely further writing to communicate the relationship is necessary. Lack of connection can also be the result of larger-scale organization issue.

3rd stage—Editing for sentence-level issues

- Review for ambiguity. Look for unclear statements and statements that can be interpreted in multiple ways. One strategy is to read the sentence for literal meaning.
- Review for parsing challenges. While reading, people use cues within the text to interpret the meaning of the text. It is possible that a sentence that is grammatically sound is difficult to interpret because of a lack of these cues. Parsing cues include words and punctuation. Below is an example sentence with ambiguity problems and parsing challenges.

A: In addition to naming the child after a deceased relative the child resembles and is revered the parents must also go through a rite of purification and passage to prevent “ill luck.”

B: In addition to naming the child after a deceased relative whom the child resembles and who is revered, the parents must also go through a rite of purification and a second rite of passage to prevent “ill luck” from becoming associated with the child.

Review for passive sentence structures. MS Word will identify many passive sentence structures, but it will not identify all of them.

Review for punctuation issues. The Chicago Manual of Style, the Allyn & Bacon Handbook are detailed-yet-accessible references for punctuation issues.

Suggested Tools and Activities:

Editing trades—Editing other people’s work is much easier than editing one’s own writing. Five read-throughs may result in the author/editor finding three mistakes, whereas even a cursory reading by another person can reveal numerous mistakes. Editing trades can also act as a catalyst for additional learning and writing. Many people avoid editing trades because they disagree with others’ suggestions. These disagreements help identify weaknesses that can be resolved with use of a grammar/style guide or an expert opinion. Re-editing is also challenging. Greater familiarity with a document results in less efficient editing. This phenomenon a byproduct and challenge in the revision process. Once again, editing trades can help with this process.

Clarify feedback—When given negative/constructive feedback on a document, ask for descriptive clarification of the issues and positive and negative examples. Although extremely specific feedback may not be available, narrowing the possibilities speeds up the process.

Visit a Writing Skills Tutor—A tutor can supply paragraph- and sentence-level feedback.

Visit the Writing & Study Skills Advisor—The Writing & Study Skills Advisor can provide paragraph and sentence-level feedback and help explore structural level issues.

Become familiar with the publication style guide—Many people avoid reading style guides, but each of the main style guides (i.e., CMS, APA, and MLA) contain specific guidance on phrasing, word choice, and punctuation.

Change the font and type size—Changing the font shifts the position of text away or towards a margin, which can make mistakes easier to identify by reducing the familiarity of the text.

Read out loud—Reading out loud is slower than silent reading, meaning that more time is spent on each read through. It also helps to block out ambient noise and distractions and increase focus on the task.

*A note about professional editing—Before contacting a professional editor, both the student and the supervisor should review the Editors’ Association of Canada’s document *Guidelines for Editing Theses* (<http://www.editors.ca/hire/guidelines-editing-theses>) regarding the guidelines editors must follow. In short, an ethical editor will only help edit a thesis if written approval is provided by the supervisor and will only act as a copy editor.