

How to Edit Your Own Writing

The following checklist¹ is one tool that you can use to self-edit your work. This list is designed to help you in the final stages of writing, after you have already worked on content, organization, coherence, and flow. Following these steps will help make you aware of sentence-level issues in your essay, prioritize the issues that you need to address, and focus your attention on those issues so that you can effectively manage your time. Through this process, you can become a more independent writer.

STEP ONE: Ask yourself, “What mistakes do I make most often?” If you are not sure, start to keep a grammar log.

STEP TWO: List at the top of your paper the three most frequent errors you make that deserve priority.

STEP THREE: Read through your paper looking only for the first, most common error. You may want to use a ruler or piece of paper to cover everything but one line at a time to help focus your attention. Circle all suspected errors of that type.

STEP FOUR: Next, repeat step three looking only for your second most common (or more serious) error.

STEP FIVE: Repeat step three once again for your third most common error, if necessary.

STEP SIX: If you have not already looked for verb problems, underline all the verbs in your paper.

STEP SEVEN: Check all your verbs for:

- subject-verb agreement:
 - Is the subject singular or plural?
 - Does the verb form agree?
- modals (can, should, would, must, may):
 - Did you use the base form of the main verb after the modal?
 - Examples:
 - I can *sing* the national anthem.
 - I would *fly* home for the holidays, but I have too much work to do.
- “be” verbs: Check the tense.
 - Have you changed the tense? If so, why?
 - Is the tense appropriate for the meaning?
 - Is the verb in passive voice? If so, should it be?

STEP EIGHT: *After* you have followed these steps, ask another person to read over your paper to look for problem areas.

¹ Cogie, Jane, Kim Strain, and Sharon Lorinskas. “Avoiding the Proofreading Trap: The Value of the Error Correction Process.” *The Writing Center Journal*. 19:2 (1999): 7-31.