Self-editing tips for academic writers:
A skill that every student and academic writer can develop

1. About editing

Professional copyediting focuses on grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, flow, clarity of meaning and consistency.

If you can raise your own awareness and knowledge of these aspects of writing at every stage of your writing, you will become a much more effective academic writer and your work will require less editing down the track.

2. The editing framework

For dissertations

If you are writing up a dissertation – Honours, Masters or PhD – remember that, to maintain the academic integrity of your research throughout, the overall content and structure of the thesis are decided strictly by you and your supervisors. Professional editing of a dissertation therefore focuses on copyediting: as listed above, grammar, punctuation, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, flow, clarity of meaning and consistency (see the IPEd guidelines for editing research theses: www.iped-editors.org/about-editing/editing-research-theses).

For journal articles, research reports and other documents

If you are writing for academic journals, an editor can play a role in the structure of your article, though subject to and guided by the journal you are writing for, as well as the usual copyediting services listed above. Editing skills can be applied equally effectively to other documents, including grant applications and résumés.

3. Write first, edit later

In the early stages of writing up your research, the most important part is to get your thoughts, ideas, research and data down in words. There will be plenty of time for editing later.

4. Give your writing a rest

Once you have finished a draft, put it aside for at least a week to give you some mental and emotional distance from the work before you start editing it yourself.

5. Read aloud

When you look at your draft again, read it as if you've never seen it before – aloud. Reading aloud is a fantastic tool that will show you all sorts of things: where you need a comma, where your sentences have become too long or involved, where you may have repeated yourself or have an illogical break in the flow of your explanation.

6. Grammar matters

Grammar is a set of conventions that enable people speaking the same language to understand each other. Every time you break the rules, you risk someone not understanding your writing at a time when clarity of meaning is essential.

7. Vocabulary matters

The same applies to vocabulary. English is an extraordinarily rich and nuanced language, so check, check and check again that the words you have chosen really mean what you think they mean.

8. Cut words

Many of us are verbose in our first drafts. But lean writing gets the message to your readers more quickly. Examine each word. Do you need it? How much can you leave out and still have your readers understand? Tightening up your writing is surprisingly easy once you get into the habit, and works wonders with your text.

9. Keep versions

Protect yourself from heartache by keeping versions of your work. Computers crash, houses burn down, lightning strikes. Play it safe with two clearly labelled electronic copies and a print-out, at least one stored off-site. That way you never really lose anything.

10. Check your facts, check for consistency

Of course you will check the facts in your figures, graphs and tables, but make sure they align with the facts you have in your text. Check also for consistency in spelling styles (Australian vs US), capitalisation and referencing.

Beyond self-editing

Once your research is finished, you've written up your last version and your supervisor is happy to sign off on your work as complete, it's time to seek a pair of professional, objective eyes that will help make your dissertation or journal article reflect your research effectively and accurately.

Simply search the IPEd Editors Directory at www.iped-editors.org/find-an-editor.