Editing Your Own Writing

First, remember the distinction between revising and editing. If you are still thinking about and re-working major aspects of the project (focus, organization, argument, theoretical framework, etc.), then your focus is still what we would call “global revision” rather than editing. The strategies described here are much more relevant when you are working with writing that is much nearer to “done.”

Writing Myths
Be aware of the following myths that confuse and frustrate writers:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Myth</th>
<th>Reality</th>
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<tr>
<td>Good writers never make mistakes</td>
<td>Few writers ever write a finished piece in one sitting or without multiple revising and editing sessions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good writing is all about knowing</td>
<td>There are fewer rules than most people think, and good writers often play with or break rules</td>
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<tr>
<td>the rules</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Never start a sentence with and</td>
<td>There is no such rule. Sentences that start this way are often perfectly fine. But you should use these sentence beginnings sparingly</td>
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<td>or but</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Keep sentences short and simple</td>
<td>Sentences should vary in length and complexity, especially when discussing complex ideas or processes; make choices about sentence length based on how clearly they convey your thoughts</td>
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<tr>
<td>Never use passive sentences/passive voice</td>
<td>Passive voice can be appropriate for certain purposes and audiences—like lab reports and business writing</td>
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Disrupting the Writer’s Voice
While you may be adept at catching errors in someone else’s writing, it will likely take years before you are as adept at catching even the same errors in your own work. As you write, you do so through an internal “writer’s voice” which constructs words and sentences. When you re-read your own writing, that same voice kicks in, making it hard to notice errors or oddities. When you shift into editing, you need to disrupt this voice. Here are some ways to do so:

- **Take some time away from your writing.** A few hours, a day, or a few days are needed so that the writing is not so fresh in your mind as to get in the way of the editing process.
- **Have someone else read your writing to you.** This lets you hear how someone else reads your words and you can pay attention to where they get stuck. A Miller Writing Center Consultant can be your reader.
- **Slow WAY down when you edit.** If you read as you normally would, your “writer’s voice” will kick in.
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- **Edit from the end of a piece (the last paragraph or page) to the start.** This takes the paragraphs out of the order in which you wrote them.
- **Read sentences backwards.** Look at the last word first and work your way to the first word.
- **Edit paragraphs in random order.** This will let you focus on what is going on in that specific paragraph. Note: this will not be effective if you’re editing for transitions.

General Editing Strategies

- **Make a list of your “common errors.”** Build this list over time and keep it handy when you are editing. The list should include words you commonly misspell as well as types of errors—commas, subject-verb agreement, etc. Look FIRST for these things (and use the Find/Replace feature in your word processor to help you).
- **Get help identifying your errors.** If you are not sure what kinds of errors you make, have a Miller Writing Center consultant work with you to identify (and explain) these patterns in a piece of your writing.
- **Re-read your work slowly and meticulously.** Pay attention to each word and mark of punctuation. Ask yourself how the word or punctuation functions in the sentence. If you are not sure, it is a sign to focus on that word or punctuation mark.
- **Mark places where there might be an error or issue.** If editing a print copy, underline or circle with a pen or pencil. With an electronic file, use the highlighter or add comments features. You don’t need to correct the errors on your first pass, just mark them.
- **Fix the obvious errors first.** Look up others in a writing handbook like Lunsford’s *Easy Writer*—available for you to use in all Writing Center locations.
- **Don’t worry about rules or terminology.** You do not need to know the technical name for a grammatical or mechanical error in order to fix it. Think carefully about why you identify it as an error, and then think of two other ways you could write that sentence or that part of the sentence. More than likely one of these other ways will eliminate the issue.

Let Go

- **At a certain point you have to stop editing.** Send the piece where it needs to go. Put it in an envelope, put a stamp on it, and drop it in the mail. Attach it to an email and click Send. If you’ve had several passes at it and have had a reader or two read it as well, then let it go.

You may never, especially with longer or more important projects, feel like a piece is done. The people you are sending your writing to—teacher, journal editor, book publisher, thesis/dissertation advisor—understand that some errors may remain. They may point them out, but even they might miss them and at the end of the day, the errors you and they miss may amount to nothing.