

Editing at the Sentence Level

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the editing process and several areas to focus on when editing your sentences to be as clear and effective as possible. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Editing for Language in Sentences

1a. Wordiness

1b. Vague Language

2. Editing for Sentence Completeness

3. Editing for Sentence Variation

4. Editing for Syntax

1. Editing for Language in Sentences

Remember that **editing** is improving the sentences, word choices, and overall style of an essay or other piece of writing. **Style** refers to the way a person writes, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure. As you may remember from an earlier lesson, **tone** is a writer's attitude toward the subject of a piece of writing.

Considering all of these areas together means that editing is about making the writing itself better, not necessarily focusing on the big ideas that the content covers. You're looking at words and sentences—the building blocks of the essay.



TERMS TO KNOW

Editing

The act of improving the sentence construction, word choice, and the overall style of an essay or other piece of writing.

Style

The way a person writes, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure.

Tone

A writer's attitude toward a subject, as demonstrated through a piece of writing.

1a. Wordiness

One common issue is **wordiness**, which is using too many words to make a point. This is the opposite of the precise, concise language that you're aiming for.

Wordy writing often includes redundancies, which occur when you use two or even more words or phrases to express the same idea or make the same point. In other words, this is when you're saying the same thing in multiple ways.

↪ EXAMPLE *The two senators should collaborate together on a shared project.*

"Collaborate" means work together, so it's redundant to say "collaborate together." You can't collaborate alone. And this sentence goes one step further, adding more redundancy with "a shared project." Can you collaborate on a project you're not sharing? This kind of phrasing dilutes your writing unnecessarily, so why not just say: *The two senators should collaborate.*

↪ EXAMPLE *The family is in the process of moving.*

The word "moving" implies that there's a process. Saying that you're in the process of being in the process of moving is redundant. You could just say: *The family is moving.*

↪ EXAMPLE *In spite of the fact that I don't like orange juice...*

This is a dependent clause that seems to be operating as the opening phrase for a sentence. This is a prime example of wordiness, and could be put more concisely: *Although I don't like orange juice...*



TERM TO KNOW

Wordiness

The use of too many words to make a point.

1b. Vague Language

Another common pitfall for writers is **vague language**, which is overly-general and nonspecific language. Again, this is the opposite of the precise and specific language that you're hoping to use.

↪ EXAMPLE It is much more interesting for a reader to see the sentence "Watching fireworks engages every sense as you hear the pops of the explosions, are dazzled by the colors, and smell the acrid tang of the explosive powder" than the sentence "Watching fireworks is interesting."

The first sentence is specific and expressive, while the second sentence is vague and kind of dull.



TRY IT

Consider this sentence: *Study skills are helpful for students.*

What makes this next sentence vague?



The word "helpful," for one, could be much more specific. How helpful are study skills, and in what way are they helpful? Will these skills help the students' grades, fashion sense, or ability to fly? The sentence doesn't say which, so it's too vague.

How could you change the vague language in this sentence to make it more specific and clear? +

You could make the adjective itself stronger, and also make the whole context clearer: *Study skills are beneficial for student grades.*



TERM TO KNOW

Vague Language

Language that is overly-general and nonspecific.

2. Editing for Sentence Completeness

When editing, it is important for writers to review their work to find and correct incomplete and run-on sentences. Although this task may seem like proofreading for grammar and mechanics, which you'll learn more about later, it's important to perform while editing.



HINT

Proofreading focuses on correcting typos and similar mistakes. The purpose of editing is to improve clarity and style. This is the difference between the two even though, while editing, you sometimes correct problems in word use, punctuation, and areas addressed during other steps in the writing process.

Read the following passage from a sample essay:

I didn't like Beloved much I didn't get what was going with the girl Beloved. She was a ghost, but Sethe didn't know that, it seems. Odd to think about. Still, I thought the book would have been better if Toni Morrison kept it more realistic.

Now read the following version, in which a couple of sentences have been edited to improve clarity, style, and mechanics:

I didn't like Beloved much, because I didn't understand what was going on with the girl, Beloved. She was a ghost, but it seems Sethe didn't know that. This is odd to think about, but I still thought the book would have been better if Toni Morrison had kept it more realistic.

Only a few changes have been made, but the passage flows better. Readers of the edited version don't need to struggle with the run-on sentence at the beginning of the original paragraph, or the sentence fragment towards the end of it. The impact of the argument is improved, even without substantial changes.

3. Editing for Sentence Variation

Repetitive sentences are a problem for some writers. Sentence variation - alternating long, short, simple, and complex sentences, and changing the beginnings of sentences - can help to maintain readers' interest.

Sentence variation also enables writers to express their ideas in a number of dynamic ways. When all or most sentences in a work are the same, the ideas they convey may be difficult to tell apart. When editing, review your sentences for variation, and re-position sentences that seem repetitive due to their structure or placement.

Read the following paragraph from a report on a survey of the opinions of women who live near the construction site of a new power plant:

The first thing we did was gather data from women in our class. The second thing we did was gather data from women walking around campus. The third thing we did was expand to the neighborhoods nearby. We did this by putting flyers on the doors of each house, with the questions from our survey and the email to send responses to. We did this because we wanted to get some information from women beyond the school. We didn't want to just have data from college students, but every woman who has to live within the range of the proposed power plant.

The structure of these sentences makes the reading a bit boring. Many of them are of similar length and complexity, and most begin in the same way. Now read this edited version:

We gathered information from three groups: first, the women in our class, followed by a sample of women surveyed on campus, and finally, women living in the surrounding neighborhood. In order to reach the surrounding areas, we put flyers on the doors, along with an invitation to complete the survey online. We did this because we wanted to get data not only from college students, but from all women who live within range of the proposed power plant.

The first, second, and third sentences were combined and modified, resulting in one longer and more complex sentence that conveys the information more effectively. The beginnings of a couple of the other sentences were also edited to reduce repetition (e.g., the over-use of "we" in the original paragraph). One sentence was removed because, when information was added to the last sentence, it was no longer needed.

4. Editing for Syntax

Syntax is the formation and ordering of words into sentences, as well as the study of how words form sentences. It is necessary to understand syntax in order to understand the relationship between structure and style. When editing, writers should evaluate syntax and its impact on the style and tone of their work.

Though you may not have realized it, you've already edited for syntax because it's impossible to change the structure of a sentence - to make it more complete, or to vary its relationship to other sentences - without thinking about (and changing) word order. Editing for syntax also involves assessment of how a sentence's syntax contributes to the style of the entire work.



HINT

When you review your work, consider whether any sentences are out of place in terms of style, or with respect to your goals, tone, or voice. If you identify any problems, you know what to do: edit!



TERM TO KNOW

Syntax

The formation and ordering of words into sentences, as well as the study of how words form sentences.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that the editing stage in the writing process involves **editing for language in sentences**. Some common issues to look for are **wordiness**, or using too many words to make a point, and **vague language**, or language that is too general and nonspecific.

You also learned that writers must make sure that each sentence effectively contributes to the style and clarity of their work. This involves the process of **editing for sentence completeness** so that incomplete and run-on sentences are corrected, and **editing for sentence variation** so that alternating sentence structures maintain readers' interest. Finally, you learned that **editing for syntax** is important because the way in which words are ordered impacts the style, tone, and voice of written work.

Best of luck in your learning!



TERMS TO KNOW

Editing

The act of improving the sentence construction, word choice, and the overall style of an essay or other piece of writing.

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The way a person writes, including word choice, tone, and sentence structure.

Syntax

The formation and ordering of words into sentences, as well as the study of how words form sentences.

Tone

A writer's attitude toward a subject, as demonstrated through a piece of writing.

Vague Language

Language that is overly-general and nonspecific.

Wordiness

The use of too many words to make a point.