

Editing Paragraphs

Use the following guidelines to help you check your writing systematically for some common errors with paragraphs.

- Does each paragraph focus on one point?** Does it have a topic sentence that announces that point, and if so, where is it located? If it's not the first sentence, should it be? If there's no clear topic sentence, should there be one?

- Does every sentence relate to the main point of the paragraph?** If any sentences do not, should they be deleted, moved, or revised?

- Is there enough detail to develop the paragraph's main point?** How is the point developed—with narrative? definition? some other strategy?

- Where have you placed the most important information**—at the beginning? the end? in the middle? The most emphatic spot is at the end, so in general that's where to put information you want readers to remember. The second most emphatic spot is at the beginning.

- Are any paragraphs especially long or short?** Consider breaking long paragraphs if there's a logical place to do so—maybe an extended example should be in its own paragraph, for instance. If you have paragraphs of only a sentence or two, see if you can add to them or combine them with another paragraph, unless you're using a brief paragraph to provide emphasis.

- Check the way your paragraphs fit together.** Does each one follow smoothly from the one before? Do you need to add any transitions?

- Do the beginning paragraphs catch readers' attention?** In what other ways might you begin your text?

- Do the final paragraphs provide a satisfactory ending?** How else might you conclude your text?

Editing Sentences

Use the following guidelines to help you check your writing systematically for some common errors with sentences.

- ❑ **Is each sentence complete?** Does it have someone or something (the subject) performing some sort of action or expressing a state of being (the verb)? Does each sentence begin with a capital letter and end with a period, question mark, or exclamation point?

- ❑ **Check your use of the passive voice.** Although there are some rhetorical situations in which the passive voice (“The prince was killed by a rival”) is more appropriate than the active voice (“A rival killed the prince”) because you want to emphasize an action rather than who performed it, you’ll do well to edit it out unless you have a good reason for using it.

- ❑ **Check for parallelism.** Items in a list or series should be parallel in form—all nouns (lions, tigers, bears), all verbs (hopped, skipped, jumped), all clauses (he came, he saw, he conquered), and so on.

- ❑ **Do many of your sentences begin with it or there?** Too often these words make your writing wordy and vague or even conceal needed information. Why write “There are reasons we voted for him” when you can say “We had reasons to vote for him”?

- ❑ **Are your sentences varied?** If they all start with the subject or are the same length, your writing might be dull and maybe even hard to read. Try varying your sentence openings by adding transitions, introductory phrases or clauses. Vary sentence lengths by adding detail to some or combining some sentences.

- ❑ **Make sure you’ve used commas correctly.** Is there a comma after each introductory element? (“After the lead singer quit, the group nearly disbanded. However, they then produced a string of hits.”) Do commas set off nonrestrictive elements—parts that aren’t needed to understand the sentence? (“The books I read in middle school, like the Harry Potter series, became longer and more challenging.”) Are compound sentences connected with a comma? (“I’ll eat broccoli steamed, but I prefer it roasted.”)

Editing Words

Use the following guidelines to help you check your writing systematically for some common errors with words.

- ❑ **Are you sure of the meaning of every word?** Use a dictionary; be sure to look up words whose meanings you're not sure about. And remember your audience—do you use any terms they'll need to have defined?
- ❑ **Is any of your language too general or vague?** Why write that you competed in a race, for example, if you could say you ran the 4 × 200 relay?
- ❑ **What about the tone?** If your stance is serious (or humorous or critical or something else), make sure that your words all convey that attitude.
- ❑ **Do any pronouns have vague or unclear antecedents?** If you use “he” or “they” or “it” or “these,” will readers know whom or what the words refer to?
- ❑ **Have you used any clichés**—expressions that are used so frequently that they are no longer fresh? “Live and let live,” avoiding something “like the plague,” and similar expressions are so predictable that your writing will almost always be better off without them.
- ❑ **Be careful with language that refers to others.** Make sure that your words do not stereotype any individual or group. Mention age, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, and so on only if they are relevant to your subject. When referring to an ethnic group, make every effort to use the terms members of the group prefer.
- ❑ **Edit out language that might be considered sexist.** Have you used words like *manpower* or *policemen* to refer to people who may be female? If so, substitute less gendered words such as *personnel* or *police officers*. Do your words reflect any gender stereotypes—for example, that all engineers are male, or all nurses female? If you mention someone's gender, is it even necessary? If not, eliminate the unneeded words.
- ❑ **How many of your verbs are forms of *be* and *do*?** If you rely too much on these words, try replacing them with more specific verbs. Why write “She did a proposal for” when you could say “She proposed”?
- ❑ **Do you ever confuse *its* and *it's*?** Use *it's* when you mean *it is* or *it has*. Use *its* when you mean *belonging* to it.