

Useful tips for editing your own writing

We all tend to see the errors in other people's writing without a problem. But it's much harder to edit our own work. This is partly because, as we read our own writing, we are actually rewriting it in our minds as we read. We focus more on meaning than on the words, themselves. We're too close to our own writing to be as objective as we need to be, so common errors slip past us.

For important documents intended for critical audiences, you should make every effort to get someone else to edit your work. However, for writing that falls into a less formal category, you can edit your own work if you follow a few tips. For less important documents, like routine emails or typical business writing for an internal audience, while you certainly want to make your meaning clear and use proper spelling and grammar, it's not mission critical that your writing be perfect.

For any project, write for meaning first. Pay as little attention to spelling, grammar or punctuation as you can during actual writing. Once your text says what you want it to say, then take the time to polish and shine it.

To begin editing, first, run your spelling and grammar checker. Any other errors will be harder for you, as the writer, to find than for someone else. Have someone else edit the document, if possible. Also, if you can leave your document overnight and begin editing it the following morning, you'll have more distance from it than if you try to edit immediately.

When reading what you've written, you will tend to focus more on the meaning of your document than on the placement of the words and punctuation. To counteract this tendency, edit your own work more slowly and deliberately than you might edit someone else's. The following techniques will help you spot errors.

- Read through, at least once, in a very small font
- Read through very slowly, one word at a time
- Read the text backwards, one word at a time
- Read the text—on paper, obviously—upside down

Each of these methods will force you to see only the text, instead of the meaning of the words. Finally, make one pass for each type of mistake you're prone to making. Make one pass for punctuation only, then one pass for awkward phrases that you could simplify or eliminate.

Check each word that you might easily confuse with another word. For instance, the following group of words are homophones; that is, they sound just like each other, but they have different meanings: right, wright, rite and write. No spell checker will tell you if you used the wrong word, as long as it's spelled correctly. Be sure whether the correct word is to, too, or two.

These are just a few suggestions to help you when editing your own writing. Conduct a web search for "proofreading and editing tips," to discover web pages with much more in-depth advice.