Editing your work: strategies for improving your grade on your final paper
(Adapted from a handout by Prof. Klassen, written for BIG102Y, 2013)

You've already handed in your assignment, but the course offers an optional re-submission. Why should you be bothered to work on it some more? In class, we will use a peer-review exercise, so you can earn a better grade on the paper and learn editing practices that you can take with you in the rest of your university classes, and beyond.

Editing… *"Do I have to?"* you ask. *"Can't I just get my mom to read it, and fix all my mistakes?".* Fixing spelling and grammar is only one component of editing. Editing is about far more than proofreading or correcting errors. **Editing is about:**
- actively reading what you have written
- revising your content, and
- improving your writing.

If you were writing under time constraints or pressure, as we often do, you need to take time after the writing process to carefully read and improve your draft.

Overall strategies for editing
You've just finished writing the essay, it's 2:30 AM, and you're dead tired. Now is not the time to edit it. A **key strategy** for editing your work is to leave yourself some time between the initial writing before you start editing it—this is why we have our editing exercise AFTER you've submitted your assignment. Letting a bit of time go by before editing will allow you to see your writing more clearly and objectively.

Other overall strategies:
- **Read your work aloud to yourself** to "hear" your errors or logical gaps.
- **Work on one or two paragraphs at a time**
- **Work on paragraphs out of order,** to make sure that the ideas still flow logically within each paragraph.
- **Keep a journal of feedback** you have received on previous writing assignments so that you know what you need to look for in your new work.
- **Page numbers and title:** be sure to use them; your title should describe your argument.
- **Introduction as road map:** use your introduction to orient your reader to 1) what you will argue, 2) what kinds of sources you will use as evidence, 3) how you are using the key concepts that you include in your title and in the body of the article.

Different types of editing
Editing involves looking for different kinds of potential problem areas in your essay. Careful editors focus on the "**Five C's**":
- Coherence
- Cohesion
- Concision
- Clarity
- Correctness

Coherence

Coherence refers to how well your content is organized within your writing overall. Do your paragraphs flow logically, one to the next, or do the topics of your paragraphs seem to jump between ideas in a jumbled kind of way? A **key strategy** for editing for coherence is the **reverse outline**—an outline written *after* you've finished the essay:

- Begin by numbering each paragraph in your work.
- Identify the main idea in each paragraph, and write this main idea down, in one or two words, beside the paragraph. While you identify these ideas, make note of whether or not each paragraph includes a recognizable topic sentence, and whether or not each paragraph is a reasonable length.
- Write an outline of these main ideas, listing them in the order they appear in your essay.
- Evaluate: is the order of ideas logical—do the ideas make sense in terms of where you have placed them in relation to one another? Is the treatment of ideas proportional—have you spent too much time on one element, or not enough time on another?
- Use this analysis to create a revised outline, to help you reorganize your essay.

Cohesion

Cohesion refers to the flow of ideas within a single paragraph. One idea should logically follow another; your reader should not have to work to make connections between your sentences. Here is a list of **key strategies** for editing for cohesion:

- *Try putting the idea you intend to develop in the next sentence at the end of the previous sentence.* The end of a sentence is a good place to emphasize an idea, and to transition an idea from one sentence to the next.
- *Look for connections within your paragraphs.* Do your sentences read as a logical sequence of ideas?
- *Limit your use of transition or connecting words.* If you are using a word like "therefore," make sure the rest of that sentence really does support what came before. If you are using a word like "however," make sure that the rest of the sentence is a contradiction or qualification of what came before.
- *Eliminate any "and" or "also" that opens a sentence.*

Concision

Concision refers to how succinctly (i.e. briefly) you have been able to discuss your points. Have you included unnecessary, redundant or tangential material? Is the writing too "wordy"? Some **key strategies** for editing for concision include:

- *Be ruthless in crossing out words that don't add anything.* These could be redundant words (something can't be "very unique" for example; either it's "unique" or it's not; "tragedy"

implies something terrible, so you don't need to write "terrible tragedy") or meaningless modifiers such as "really" "usually" "generally" "basically" "actually".

- *Replace "big words"* (these might be computer-thesaurus-generated words, for example) *with more common words* in order to make your text sharper and more direct. Using a lot of big words or fancy language doesn't make your writing seem weightier or smarter—such words can actually highlight insecurity with language or writing. However, if they are useful to your argument, do use appropriate technical terms (e.g. "synoptic meteorology")—just be sure to **define** the key terms in your essay.
- *Substituting a word in favour of a phrase.* You can compress many common phrases into a single word. For example:
  "the reason for," "considering the fact that," "this is why" can become "*because*"; "since"; "it is important that", "it is necessary that" can become "*can*" or "*must*".
- *Removing unnecessary material.* Make sure that all of your sentences stay focused on your topic; you can always write another essay to talk about that other idea later!
- *Avoiding excessive negatives.* The sentences "Don't write in the negative" and "Write in the affirmative," for example, mean the same thing, but using the affirmative is more straightforward, stating what we should do directly. Many negatives can be easily replaced ("not many" = "few", "not enough" = "insufficient", "does not have" = "lacks," "did not consider" = "ignored," "not certain" = "uncertain," etc.).

Here's an example of cutting out the wordiness:
"In terms of scholarly work, much has been written on this topic."
➔ "Many scholars have written about this."

Clarity

Clarity refers to how you organize what you want to say within a sentence in terms of the subjects, verbs and objects you use. Words are your tools; you want to make sure that your nouns and verbs support your ideas within a sentence. As George Orwell stated in *Politics and the English Language*: "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought." Here are some **key strategies** for editing for clarity:

- *Look for clearly stated subjects and verbs* in each sentence. Have you said *who* is doing *what*, and *what* that *who* is doing?
- *Avoid the passive voice*: express an action with a verb, and express the agent of that action with a subject. Compare, for example, the following sentences:
  "The tube was filled with dry air and it was noted that this caused very little change in temperature."
  ➔When Tyndall filled the tube with dry air, or oxygen, or nitrogen, he discovered there was very little change in temperature."
- *Use strong verbs to express actions.* If your writing seems fuzzy or imprecise, look at how you are expressing the important action of the sentence. If the action is appearing in a noun, rewrite the sentence so that the crucial action is in the verb.
  "The **revolution** in how we do science began with the invention of the electronic computer

in the 1940s."
→ "The invention of the electronic computer in the 1940s **unleashed a technological revolution** that would eventually transform how we do science."

- *Try to make the agent of an action the subject.* This strategy will help you eliminate the passive voice. Over-use of the passive can really slow down the pace of your writing.
- *Don't be afraid to use the first-person* in order to make your writing more direct. Using the third-person is not necessarily more "academic" or "objective." Some of the best peer-reviewed journals accept the first-person as a subject.

Correctness

Correctness comes closest to the "proofreading" approach to editing; it refers to grammar, punctuation and references within sentences. A sentence is a complex system, and you need to take care that the parts of your sentence are working together in order to achieve your precise aim. **Key strategies** for editing for correctness include:

- *Identifying errors you make frequently.* Do you get the same comment about your grammar over and over again from different TAs or professors? Keep track of these comments in an *editing log or journal*, so that you know what to watch for when you edit new work.
- *Keeping a reference manual on hand to help with common errors in punctuation.* Does the semi-colon consistently stump you? Should you use a comma here, or not? What's the appropriate use of "however"? The Purdue Owl is great online writing reference tool for everything from punctuation to thesis statements: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/679/01/.
- *Limiting your use of the "grammar check" function on your computer.* Your computer will be good at catching spelling mistakes (ALWAYS spell-check!), but the suggestions you receive concerning grammar might not be helpful.
- *Watching "this", "it", "they" and other vague references*! Make sure you are always clear about what or who you are referencing, and where. For example, if you mention several people in one sentence, and then refer to "she" in the next, the reference to "she" is unclear to your reader. Here's another example:
  "Changes in water vapour don't cause climate change, but are a *result* of it. In other words, **it creates** a feedback loop"
  → "Changes in water vapour don't cause climate change, but are a *result* of it. In other words, **water vapour creates** a feedback loop"

That's it, that's the basics of editing… good luck! Taking some time to apply these strategies to your writing is guaranteed to strengthen your writing and, as a consequence, to improve your grades on written assignments.

Inspiration for this handout came from:
Joseph M. Williams, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace* (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1981).
Rachael Cayley, "Editing Your Own Writing" (presentation, Department of Religion, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, March 7, 2013).