Editing? Proofreading? Two separate stages in the revision process

Editing is what you begin doing as soon as you finish your first draft. You reread your draft to see, for example, whether the paper is well-organized, the transitions between paragraphs are smooth, and your evidence really backs up your argument. **You can edit on several levels:**

Content:

- Have you done everything the assignment requires?
- Are the claims you make accurate? Are all of your claims consistent?
- If it is required to do so, does your paper make an argument? Is the argument complete?
- Have you supported each point with adequate evidence?
- Is all of the information in your paper relevant to the assignment and/or your overall writing goal?

Overall structure One way to check the structure of your paper is to make a reverse outline of the paper after you have written the first draft. (See our handouts on introductions, conclusions, thesis statements, and reverse outlines).

- Does your paper have an appropriate introduction and conclusion?
- Is your thesis clearly stated in your introduction?
- Is it clear how each paragraph in the body of your paper is related to your thesis?
- Are the paragraphs arranged in a logical sequence?
- Have you made clear transitions between paragraphs? Structure within paragraphs

Clarity:

- Have you defined any important terms that might be unclear to your reader?
- Is the meaning of each sentence clear? **(One way to answer this question is to read your paper one sentence at a time, starting at the end and working backwards so that you will not unconsciously fill in content from previous sentences.)**
- Is it clear what each pronoun (he, she, it, they, which, who, this, etc.) refers to?
- Have you chosen the proper words to express your ideas? **Avoid using words you find in the thesaurus that aren't part of your normal vocabulary; you may misuse them.**

Style:

- Have you used an appropriate tone (formal, informal, persuasive, etc.)?

- Is your use of gendered language (masculine and feminine pronouns like "he" or "she," words like "fireman" that contain "man," and words that some people incorrectly assume apply to only one gender—for example, some people assume "nurse" must refer to a woman) appropriate?
- Have you varied the length and structure of your sentences?
- Do you tend to use the passive voice too often? Does your writing contain a lot of unnecessary phrases like "there is," "there are," "due to the fact that," etc.? Do you repeat a strong word (for example, a vivid main verb) unnecessarily? (For tips, see our handout on Variety in Sentence Structures.)

Citations:
- Have you appropriately cited quotes, paraphrases, and ideas you got from sources? Are your citations in the correct format?

Proofreading is the final stage of the editing process, focusing on surface errors such as misspellings and mistakes in grammar and punctuation. **You should proofread only after you have finished all of your other editing revisions.**

Remember, your final paper is not just about content. The way your paper looks also affects the way your professors will judge it.

Don't rely entirely on spelling checkers. For example, if you type "your" instead of "you're," "to" instead of "too," or "there" instead of "their," the spell checker won't catch the error.

Grammar checkers can be even more problematic and can't identify every error and often made mistakes. They also fail to give thorough explanations to help you understand why a sentence should be revised.

Proofread for only one kind of error at a time. If you try to identify and revise too many things at once, you risk losing focus, and your proofreading will be less effective. It's easier to catch grammar errors if you aren't checking punctuation and spelling at the same time.

Read slow, and read every word. Try reading out loud, which forces you to say each word and also lets you hear how the words sound together. When you read silently or too quickly, you may skip over errors or make unconscious corrections.

Separate the text into individual sentences. This is another technique to help you to read every sentence carefully. Simply press the return key after every period so that every line begins a new sentence. Then read each sentence separately, looking for grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors.

Circle every punctuation mark. This forces you to look at each one. As you circle, ask yourself if the punctuation is correct.

Read the paper backwards. This technique is helpful for checking spelling. Start with the last word on the last page and work your way back to the beginning, reading each word separately. Because content, punctuation, and grammar won't make any sense, your focus will be entirely on the spelling of each word. You can also read backwards sentence by sentence to check grammar; this will help you avoid becoming distracted by content issues.

Proofreading is a learning process. You're not just looking for errors that you recognize; you're also learning to recognize and correct new errors. This is where handbooks and dictionaries come in. Keep the ones you find helpful close at hand as you proofread.