Akilah Media
Making Words Work

Quick-Edit Your Writing
Help Your Document Work for You
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As he was sorting through some old letters, Andy came across a paragraph that shocked him. It said, "We will be glad to disgust these issues with you. Please give us a call." Three thoughts struck him right away:

1. The letter used *<**disgust**>* (revulsion) instead of *<**discuss**>* (talk about).
2. Andy himself had written the letter, to a potential client, several years ago.
3. The potential client had never called.

Did Andy lose a client because of a writing mistake? There is no way to know for sure, but two things are certain:

1. Writing makes an impression on readers.
2. Bad writing makes a bad impression.

You want your document to deliver a clear message to your reader; editing prepares your document to do its job.

Every document you write has a job to do. It must deliver your message to the reader. Spelling errors, bad sentences, and wrong words distract from your message. At best, they cause the reader to pause and think, "What?" Sometimes mistakes introduce unwanted sub-messages or cause the reader to speculate about your education or work habits. At worst, writing errors can actually change your message.

Editing is the process of refining a piece of writing so that it suits a particular purpose. Editing gets your document ready to do its job.

No matter how pressed you are for time, be sure that everything you write for someone else to read is edited. "Everything" includes memos, letters, notes, and e-mails. If time and budget (and logistics and common sense) do not permit you to hire an editor for every word you type, then you must edit your own work. If you do not have time to do a thorough job of editing, then you must do something quick. Even a quick self-edit can avert a disaster.

Even if you are in a hurry, you must edit your work. A quick self-edit can avert a disaster.

The Quick-Edit Technique

The quick-edit technique is more than just "reading through the memo to see if it is okay." The technique focuses your attention on a small set of common (but very noticeable) mistakes and uses technology tools to speed and simplify your work.

The steps below are in priority order. The most important step is first. Do it no matter how big your hurry. If you have time, go on to the second step, and so on.

When you have finished writing your document, follow these steps:

1. Run spell check.
2. Let it rest; then read for sense and tone.
3. Reread "backward" for these common mistakes:
   - Invalid sentences
   - Non-parallel constructions
   - Bad apostrophes
   - Wrong words
4. Run spell check again.

1. Run spell check.

Make technology work for you. Set your spelling checker to work automatically and painlessly.

Every document that leaves your desktop—even to get saved in your own folder—should pass through a spelling check program. This software tool is available in all word processing programs and most e-mail packages. If your e-mail program does not have a spelling checker, consider getting a new e-mail program. Otherwise, get in the habit of highlighting each newly composed e-mail, pasting it into a word processing document, checking the spelling, and then pasting the corrected message back into e-mail.

The best way to get consistent benefits from spell check is to make it routine. See Help Boxes 1-A and 1-B for ways to make spell check automatic and painless.

Many word processing programs also offer a grammar check tool that can run at the same time as spell check. These software tools highlight or underline suspect items that might be mistakes.

These tools are not perfect. They do not understand what you are writing about; they miss some kinds of mistakes; and they sometimes flag perfectly correct usages as possible mistakes.

Despite their faults, spelling check and grammar check do catch many mistakes, and they help to focus your attention on potential problems. They give you a chance to reread a sentence to be sure that it says what you want it to say.

As the spell check program steps through your document, read the highlighted word carefully. Is it really a mistake? Read the suggested changes carefully. Do not accidentally introduce the

Help Box 1-A
Automatic Spelling Check in Word Processing

Set your word processing program to check spelling as you type. Questionable words will be underlined right away. You can correct them as you write or catch them all at the end when you run the spell check tool for the whole document.

In Microsoft Word: Select Tools>Options>Spelling & Grammar; check the boxes "Check spelling as you type," and "Always suggest corrections." You can also set AutoCorrect to correct the some common typing mistakes as soon as you type them. For example, if you type <**definately**> and then type a space or other punctuation, AutoCorrect replaces it with <**definitely**.>

In WordPerfect select Tools>Spell Checker>Options; check "Autostart" and "Show phonetic suggestions." To underline misspelled words as you type, select Tools>Proofread>Spell As-You-Go. A bullet will appear next to Spell-As-You-Go when it is enabled. To set the QuickCorrect feature to automatically correct frequently mistyped words, select Tools>QuickCorrect and check "Replace words as you type."

wrong word by accepting changes blindly. Be sure that you move the cursor to accept the suggestion that corrects the spelling of the word you want to use, not another word. (If spell check finds <theer> in your document, it will suggest <there>, <their>, <three>, and <thee>. Be sure to select the word you really want.)

Take a break before you reread. You see the document with new eyes when you return to it after a rest.

Does the software confess that it has no suggestions for a correct spelling? It may be that your misspelling is very unusual. Or you may have used a word that simply is not in the vocabulary of your spell check program. In either case, you may need to open a web browser and make a quick visit to an on-line dictionary. (See Help Box 2 for suggested dictionaries.)

Highlight the word in question, copy it, and paste it in the search box on the dictionary page. On-line dictionaries have much larger vocabularies than your spell check program. If dictionary cannot find your word, it will suggest a list of similar words. Once you find the correct word and correct spelling, you can paste the word back into the spell check dialog box, both to correct the current document and to add the word permanently to your spell check program's word list.

2. Let it Rest; Then Read for Sense and Tone

Even if you are in a hurry, take a break from what you have just written before you reread it. Work on something else for half a day or half an hour. Go down the hall for coffee. At the very least, look away from the screen, stretch, and take a sip of the cold coffee you already have.

Putting time between writing and self-editing is always important. The more time you spend away from the document, the better. You see the document with new eyes when you return to it after a rest.

If you have written something with emotional content, this step is even more important. Always take a break and reread after writing something that makes you irritated, tense, or angry (for example, a response to a rude or demanding e-mail). Take a long break. Being too quick with the send button can be a mistake that goes far beyond grammar.

Help Box 1-B
Painless Spell Check in E-mail

Set your e-mail program to check spelling as you type or to run spell check automatically before sending:

In Outlook, select Tools>Options>Spelling. Check the boxes, "Always suggest replacements for misspelled words," "Always check spelling before sending," and "Ignore original message text in reply or forward" Then select OK.

In Eudora, select Tools>Options; scroll down to Spell Checking. Check the boxes "Suggest words" and "Automatically as you type."

Help Box 2
On-line Dictionaries

Add these two dictionaries to your Internet favorites list right away so that you will have them when you need them.

Merriam-Webster Online
http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary.htm

Dictionary.com
http://dictionary.reference.com/

In addition to defining a correctly spelled word, both these sites will suggest possible words you might mean when you type or paste a misspelled word in the search box. The Merriam-Webster does a better job of listing suggested words that both look like and sound like the misspelled word.

Be careful with your tone. Sarcasm does not work well in e-mail. Say what you mean.

When you are ready to reread and edit your document, try changing its look. Instead of reading from the screen, make a printout and read it from the paper. If printing is not a good idea, try changing the look of the document on the screen. If you wrote it with the zoom on 80 percent, change it to 100 percent for reading. If you normally use a white computer screen with black type, change to a blue screen with white type for editing. This is easy to do (see Help Box 3). Changing the look of the document puts more distance between you-the-writer and you-the-editor. It helps you see with fresher eyes.

Start at the beginning of the document and read through to the end. As you read, think about the sense and tone of your document. Does it say what you want it to say? Are all your ideas included? Are your points made in a logical order? Is it addressed to the right person?

Check the tone. Is it appropriate for your message, or is it too angry, demanding, subservient, silly, or cute? Remember that irony and sarcasm often do not come across well in e-mail. People tend to take your words literally. Say what you mean. Also remember that no e-mail (or letter) is truly private. Anything you write could be in the front page of the newspaper tomorrow! How would it sound there?

Check for inflammatory language. Have you said anything that will offend one of the readers (for example, have you used a phrase that is sexist or racist—or just plain mean)?

Rewrite as necessary to correct any problems you find in the sense and tone of your writing.

Help Box 3
Change the Look of Your Screen

Changing the color of your screen is a great way to change the look of your document before you begin editing. It is not difficult, but it does require a willingness to "fiddle" with the computer.

To change screen colors in Windows, select Start>Settings>Control Panel>Display> Appearance (in Windows XP, then select Advanced). Click directly on the illustration on "Window Text." Then use the drop-down menus to select window color and print color. Select Apply. Leave the window open. After you have finished editing your document, you can quickly go back to the Appearance window and change back to your regular colors. Select Apply and OK.

3. Reread "Backward" for Common Mistakes

For this step, begin with the last section of your document.

Your next rereading will be to find and eliminate some common mistakes that make your writing look bad. Do not start at the beginning. If your document is divided into chapters or sections, start with the last one. Read it, sentence by sentence, to look for the mistakes discussed below. Then do the same thing in the second-to-last chapter or section, and so on. If the document is only a few paragraphs long, start with the last paragraph and work your way back to the beginning. In each paragraph, you are going to be looking for

- Invalid sentences
- Non-parallel constructions
- Bad apostrophes
- Wrong words

Invalid Sentences

Invalid sentences include sentence fragments, run-on sentences, and dangling constructions.

A sentence fragment is a word or group of words that is being treated as a sentence when it is not.

Wrong: Luggage was scattered all around where he was. Waiting for the train.
Rewrite: Luggage was scattered all around where he was waiting for the train.

Be careful! Some phrases are meant to stand alone and are not sentence fragments:

Good news! We have won a new contract!
("Good news!" is an expression meaning "Here is good news!" It is not a sentence fragment.)

Be careful with <however>. People often misuse <however> and end up with a run-on sentence!

Run-on sentences arise when a comma is used where a stronger punctuation mark is needed.

Wrong: Call me by Thursday, I must make the reservations on Friday.
Rewrite: Call me by Thursday; I must make the reservations on Friday.
Rewrite: Call me by Thursday. I must make the reservations on Friday.

Many people write run-on sentences when they use <**however**>.

Wrong: He was at the meeting, however he was not prepared to speak.
Rewrite: He was at the meeting, but he was not prepared to speak.
Rewrite: He was at the meeting; however, he was not prepared to speak.
Rewrite: He was at the meeting; he was not prepared to speak, however.

Dangling constructions are formed when a phrase does not logically agree with the apparent subject of the sentence. This may happen because the true subject is left out or because it is too far removed from the verb.

Wrong: While waiting at the bus stop, two skateboarders ran into me.
Rewrite: While I was waiting at the bus stop, two skateboarders ran into me.
Rewrite: While waiting at the bus stop, I was hit by two skateboarders.

Wrong: As the landlord, we believe that you are responsible for the repairs.
Rewrite: We believe that you, as the landlord, are responsible for the repairs.
Rewrite: We believe that the landlord is responsible for the repairs.

Non-parallelisms

Parallel construction means that items that you list are in similar form. Usually this means you need to decide whether to make a list of nouns, adjectives, infinitives, or clauses. Mixing them together makes a confusing non-parallelism.

Wrong: The workers have started installing the junction boxes and to string the wires.
Rewrite: The workers have started installing the junction boxes and stringing the wires.

Wrong: Topics will include:

• Whether or not to replace old appliances

- Selecting new appliances
- How to understand the warranty system

Rewrite: Topics will include:

- Deciding to replace old appliances
- Selecting new appliances
- Understanding the warranty system

Bad Apostrophes

*You can avoid pesky problems with <**it's**> and <**its**> by always spelling out <**it is**>.*

Use apostrophe and s <**'s** > to make a singular possessive

> These are Mary's books.
> Find James's wallet.
> We approve of the IRS's action.

To make a plural noun possessive, use the apostrophe alone<**'>.**

> Here is the Smiths' home.
> The three organizations' common goal is to help the poor.

Apostrophes are NEVER used to form plurals.

> He ordered two BLTs.
> We lived through the 1960s.

Be careful with <**its**> and <**it's**>. <**Its**> is a possessive pronoun like <**his**> and <**hers**>. The possessive pronouns NEVER use apostrophes.

> The lion opened its mouth.
> Fred unlocked his car.
> Give me your pen.

<**It's**> is a contraction of <**it is**>. A quick editing tool to avoid problems with **it's** is to simply remove contractions in writing. <**It's**>, <**who's**>, <**you're**>, and <**they're**> are fine in speech, but you can avert many writing disasters by simply spelling out the words <**it is**>, <**who is**>, <**you are>,** and <**they are**> when you write.

> It is cayenne pepper that gives jambalaya its zing!
> You are very skilled with your paintbrush.
> Who is the actor that asked, "Whose line is it?"
> They are taking their new car over there.

Removing contractions helps to avoid using the wrong word—the subject of the next section.

Help Box 4
The Thesaurus

Put your cursor on a word in your document. Then bring up the thesaurus feature of your word processor to get a list of words with a similar meaning. It is a quick way to be sure you are using the right word. For example, if your document says, "We need to appraise the value of his work," but you are now not 100 percent sure whether you meant **appraise** or **apprise,** use the thesaurus. The synonym list will include "assess, evaluate, judge." These are all words that make sense in your sentence, so "appraise" is the right word.

In Word, select Tools>Language>Thesaurus.

In WordPerfect, select Tools>Thesaurus.

Wrong words

The English language has plenty of true homonyms (sound-alike words) like <**led/lead**>, <**principle/ principal**>, and <**to/too/two**>. There are other word pairs that are just devilishly similar, like <**dominant/dominate**>, <**accept/except**>, and <**collaborate/corroborate**>. To make matters worse, there are words that do not look or sound alike, but get confused anyway, like <**that/which**> and <**i.e./e.g.**>.

Technology tools, including your on-line thesaurus and a few useful web sites, help you use the right word.

As you read your document, think about the meaning of the words that you are using. If you have even a twinge of uncertainty about a meaning, use software tools to be sure.

Your first tool is the thesaurus tool built into your word processing system. With three mouse clicks your can correct the problem of using <**forward**> instead of <**foreword**>, simply by seeing the synonyms for one of those words. See Help Box 4 for more on how to use the thesaurus.

There are wonderful on-line tools devoted to commonly misused words. Highlight and copy the word you are questioning and navigate to one of the Web sites listed in Help Box 5. Paste your word in the search box on the Web site (or in your browser's search window). You will find a brief example of proper use of that word and a discussion of how it is different from its evil twin. ("Evil" in the context of your current document, of course. In some future document you may need the other word!)

> **Help Box 5**
> ## Quick Help with Word Usage
>
> Add these sites to your Internet favorites list now so that you can find them fast when you need them.
>
> Paul Brian's Common Errors in English
> http://www.wsu.edu:8080/~brians/errors/errors.htm
>
> Notorious Confusables
> http://ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/notorious.htm
>
> These excellent and easy-to-use references help you correct commonly confused or misused words.

For purposes of quick-editing, most problems with **which** and **that** can be solved with a simple rule: <**which**> (usually) needs commas and <**that**> does not. This is true because <**that**> is used in a restrictive clause that defines a noun. On the other hand, <**which**> is used in a non-restrictive clause, which is set off by commas, giving extra information about a noun.

Use <**that**> without a comma when the clause defines the subject:

> The car that was damaged was a sedan.
> This is the sister that moved to New York.

Use <**which**> (or <**who**>) and commas when giving additional information about the subject:

> The car, which was damaged, was a sedan.
> My sister, who moved to New York last year, is an actress.

The clause beginning with <**which**> can also be set off by parentheses or dashes instead of commas.

> His play (which critics hailed as the best of its kind) opened in 1945.

The Latin abbreviations <**e.g.**> and <**i.e.**> are commonly misused and confused. The Latin *exempli gratia* or <**e.g.**> means "for example" and is properly used to introduce a short list of examples in parentheses.

> On the floor were dozens of household objects (e.g., coffee cups, books, trash cans) covered with thick green syrup.

The Latin *id est* or **<i.e.>** means "that is" or "namely." It introduces whatever is being named.

His two greatest possessions—i.e., his father's violin and his mother's ring—had been stolen.

Consider using the common English expressions **<for example>**, **<that is>**, and **<namely>.** They are perfectly clear, correct, and easy to use.

Now that it is edited, your document is ready to go out and do its job.

4. Run Spell Check again

Now you should run the spelling check program again. Yes, you already did it. Do it again. Running spell check at this point will catch new misspellings and cut-and-paste errors (**<the the subject>** or **<thesubject>**) that you may have introduced while editing.

Conclusion

This is the end of the quick-edit process. Your document is ready to go. Is it perfect? No, probably not. The quick-edit technique is designed to address a limited set of very common problems in a very short time. If you have more time, you should do a more thorough self-editing. You can learn more about self-editing in one of the excellent references in Help Box 6.

The simple four-step process described in this paper does not make your writing perfect, but it does make your writing a lot better. The quick-edit technique focuses your attention and the power of technology on eliminating certain glaring and obvious mistakes in a short time. Without those mistakes, your document is better written and better able to do its job. Feel free to send your document out; it is not likely to embarrass you.

> **Help Box 6**
> ### Books to Help Self-Editors
>
> The books listed here have excellent advice that will make you a better self-editor and a better writer.
>
> *Edit Yourself: A Manual for Everyone Who Works with Words,* Bruce Ross-Larson (New York: WW Norton, 1996).
>
> *The Elements of Style,* Fourth Edition, William Strunk Jr. and E.B. White (Reading, MA: Longman, 2000).
>
> *Line by Line : How to Edit Your Own Writing* by Claire Kehrwald Cook (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1985).

About the Author

Karen G. Bandy has been helping people make their documents work in business, science, technology, and education for over 20 years. A skilled editor and desktop publisher, Karen owns Akilah Media, a Maryland-based editing and publishing services firm (http://akilahmedia.com). Her list of clients/employers includes the National Science Foundation, Constella Health Strategies, American Medical Women's Association, EDUCAUSE, Palladian Partners, and the Office of Technology Assessment. Karen's B.A. (Portuguese Language) is from the University of Wisconsin and her M.S. (Telecommunication Policy) is from George Washington University. Brainbench, the online testing service, rates Karen a master in editing and in medical terminology.