How to Edit Your Own Essay: A Checklist for ESL Students

1. Ask yourself, “What mistakes do I make most often?” If you are not sure, start to keep an error log. An error log is a written record that helps you keep track of the errors you repeatedly make in your essays.
   a. Errors that interfere with meaning include: Incorrect use or formation of a verb, a modal, a conditional sentence, or passive voice; incorrect or awkward sentence structure or word order; and incorrect or missing connector.
   b. Errors that do not interfere with meaning include: Subject-verb agreement; incorrect or missing article; incorrect singular or plural form of a noun; incorrect word choice or word form; and non-idiomatic usage.

2. List the three most frequent errors you make. Pay closest attention to any errors that interfere with meaning.

3. Read through your paper looking only for the most common error that interferes with meaning. Using a ruler or piece of paper to cover everything but one line at a time can help focus your attention. Circle all suspected errors of that type. By only focusing on one type of error at a time, the editing process will seem less overwhelming.

4. Next, repeat step three looking only for your second most common error that interferes with meaning. Using a different color ink for each error type can help you visually distinguish between the error types.

5. Repeat step three once again for your third most common error that interferes with meaning, if necessary.

6. If you have not already looked for verb problems, highlight or underline all the verbs in your paper. Check all your verbs for:
   a. Subject-verb agreement: Is the subject singular or plural? Does the verb form agree?
   b. Modals (can, should, would, must, may): Did you use the base form of the main verb after the modal?
   c. “Be” verbs: Check the tense. Have you changed the tense? If so, why? Is the tense appropriate for the meaning? Is the verb in passive voice? If so, should it be?

7. After you have followed these steps, you may ask a knowledgeable friend (or tutor in the Writing Center) to read over your paper to look for problem areas.

Note: ESL students may find it helpful to use the Longman Dictionary of American English during the self-editing process. This dictionary is designed specifically for non-native English speakers and provides valuable grammatical and syntactical information which dictionaries for native speakers lack.


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