

Self-editing Guide

From the Potsdam College Writing Center

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LEVEL 1: BASELINE

PLANNING YOUR PAPER
GIVE CREDIT TO YOUR SOURCES
RE-READ YOUR WORK

Planning Your Paper

Some writers can write some papers well without planning them out. However, taking the time to strategize and map your paper will help you create a better paper. That extra care will show. Here are some steps to try.

➤ **Don't procrastinate.**

- Know your deadlines and start early. You need time to think and revise!
- If you do choose to procrastinate, the following tips may still help. You'll just have to do them much faster.

➤ **Plan and Draft.**

- **Outline.** Organizing your ideas on paper will help you understand how they relate to each other and what your main points and their support are, which will help you write a strong paper.
- **Free write.** If you don't know where to start, free write for a few minutes without any restrictions. Get all of your ideas on paper, and then go back to pull the best ideas out and organize them.
- **Refine your ideas by talking with friends, tutors, teachers, and even yourself.**
 - My main point is...(Will become thesis statement)
 - What I want to convey is that...
 - The reasons my claim is valid...
 - I'm backing up my claim with this evidence...
- **Conduct research, if necessary.** Know your topic well by conducting research to support your claims. Meet with a librarian for help finding sources.

PLANNING YOUR PAPER

➤ **Create a thesis statement.**

Teachers will use your thesis to create their own mental sketch of where you're headed. Then they read carefully to see how you get there. With this in mind:

- Write a strong thesis statement that reflects the content of your paper. Let it guide your draft.
 - A thesis statement can sometimes be short and sweet. Other times, it takes two to three good, clear sentences to plainly make your point.
- Don't necessarily limit your paper to the thesis statement that you start with. As you keep writing, you might outgrow it and even contradict it. That's one reason for writing, to think something different than you did when you started.
 - Update your thesis statement and introduction after you finish your paper, so that it previews your paper accurately, even boldly.

➤ **Revise.**

- **Read your work.** (See “Re-read Your Work”)
- **Rewrite to carefully explain each idea.** Back up your points with sufficient reasons and evidence.
- **Mini summaries.** Read one paragraph at a time, and then write four or five words that summarize each paragraph in the margin.
- **Self-assess.** Reflect on your weak and strong points.
 - My main point is...
 - Things that are working well...
 - Things I'm having trouble with...
 - Things I can do to fix the problem(s) are...

See The Purdue OWL for more ideas on [planning, drafting, and revising your paper](#).

See [Potsdam College Libraries](#) to research your topic.

LEVEL 1: BASELINE

PLANNING YOUR PAPER
GIVE CREDIT TO YOUR SOURCES
RE-READ YOUR WORK

Give Credit to Your Sources

Give credit as you draft, so you don't lose track. Then polish your citations as you finish. See the Purdue OWL, Diana Hacker's online guide, or College Writing Center tutors to learn more about citing. When in doubt, cite it!

- **Cite every source, every time you use it.** Cite as you write; don't wait until after you've written the paper, or you may end up with mistakes or a big headache.

You have two choices:

1. **Quote** from a source exactly, using quotation marks around ALL words (three or more in a row) taken from the source, and cite it.
- Or
2. **Paraphrase** the source completely, *totally*, into your own words, and cite it.

Whether you quote or paraphrase/summarize, cite the author and page number in parentheses. Pop those citations in before you move on to your own ideas or to another source.

- **Include every source in your bibliography**, where you give your reader all the information they need to find each source. Create your bibliography as you research and write.

The College Academic Honor Code requires that you cite accurately when writing, to avoid plagiarism, which is a form of cheating. Also, showing how you used sources is essential to your teacher, as part of evaluating your learning.

See the CWC [citation handouts](#).

LEVEL 1: BASELINE

PLANNING YOUR PAPER
GIVE CREDIT TO YOUR SOURCES
RE-READ YOUR WORK

Re-read Your Work

While you're writing, you know what you want to say, and what you write makes sense to you. The effort of communicating your ideas can hide errors from you. Leave those errors in, and readers will get confused. Here are some strategies to help you find mistakes and communicate better.

- **Take a break between writing and reading.** When you come back fresh, you can see your writing more objectively and catch more errors.
- **Print your paper.** You will be able to identify errors on the printed page that you skipped over on the screen. Circle spots that you want to come back to work on.
- **Read one paragraph at a time, and then write four or five words that summarize each paragraph in the margin (this is called “glossing”).** Do this throughout your entire paper. Seeing the words in the margin will help you identify problems in organization and transition. (See “Make Your Paper Flow.”)

After you've done this for your entire paper, go back to rewrite transitions and rearrange paragraphs as needed.

- **Read aloud.** You will hear the mistakes that you didn't find with your eyes. Stumbling over what you're saying is a sign that something may be wrong with grammar. (See “Make Your Paper Flow.”)
- **Read several times.** It's easy to miss mistakes. Catch all of them by reading your paper until you're confident that you've found and fixed all of your errors. (See “Level 3: Polish.”)

LEVEL 2: MAKE IT FLOW

IS IT A SENTENCE YET?

MAKE YOUR PAPER FLOW: REVISE SENTENCES

Is it a Sentence Yet?

Even though you know how to write a sentence, you can overlook some key features when you're caught up in your own ideas and under pressure to complete an assignment. When you leave out those key features, you confuse your readers. Check all of your sentences.

Every sentence needs a subject (the actor) and verb (the action) in order to be complete.

- **Correct sentence fragments.** Sentence fragments are incomplete sentences (a teacher might write "frag"). An incomplete sentence may be missing a subject and/or a verb, so it does not communicate a complete thought. Without a subject or verb, your reader can't grasp your actor and action.

Incorrect: *Raymond Hall is a tall building. The second tallest building in Potsdam. [No verb present.]*

Correct: *Raymond Hall is the second tallest building in Potsdam.*

Incorrect: *She held the door open. Waiting for her friend. [No subject present.]*

Correct: *She held the door open, waiting for her friend.*

- Some sentences are fragments because they begin with subordinators or subordinating conjunctions (*because, after, when, although, if, since, until, etc.*). A subordinator begins a supporting phrase, not a sentence that can stand on its own.

Incorrect: *They walked to Ives Park. Because it was a nice day.*

Correct: *They walked to Ives Park because it was a nice day.*

Subordinators are a great way to start off an introductory phrase that supports your main sentence.

Correct: *Because it was a nice day, they walked to Ives Park.*

- **Correct run-on sentences.** A run-on sentence combines two complete sentences with only a comma between them or no punctuation at all. Readers finish the first sentence and, if they see just a comma or no punctuation at all, are not ready for another sentence. Instead, they're looking for a supporting phrase.

To correct a run-on sentence, connect the two complete sentences:

- o Break the sentence into two separate sentences. It's better to be choppy than confusing.

Incorrect: *She was looking for a cardboard box, her RA happened to have one.*

Correct: *She was looking for a cardboard box. Her RA happened to have one.*

- o Insert a comma and coordinating conjunction between the two sentences (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*).

Incorrect: *The girl was taking a hamster home for the weekend, she poked holes in a cardboard box.*

Correct: *The girl was taking a hamster home for the weekend, so she poked holes in a cardboard box.*

- o Insert a semicolon between the two sentences. Use a colon if the second sentence restates or explains the first, so they have the same meaning.

Incorrect: *The girl placed a cardboard box with air holes in the backseat of her car, she got in the driver's side.*

Correct: *The girl placed a cardboard box with air holes in the backseat of her car; she got in the driver's side.*

- o Insert a subordinating conjunction.

Incorrect: *The girl searched her car for an hour and a half, she noticed the hamster had escaped.*

Correct: *The girl searched her car for an hour and a half after she noticed the hamster had escaped.*

See "Three Easy Comma Rules" for more sentence-level help.

For more examples, see the Purdue OWL for [sentence fragments and run-on sentences](#).

LEVEL 2: MAKE IT FLOW

IS IT A SENTENCE YET?

MAKE YOUR PAPER FLOW: REVISE SENTENCES

Make Your Paper Flow: Revise Sentences

You want to make your reader do as little work as possible to understand you. Here's how to revise sentences to make them clear and direct.

- **Avoid long introductory phrases: keep them fewer than eight words.**

Confusing: Even though the weather usually does not reflect this in the North Country, spring technically begins March 20.

Clear: Spring technically begins March 20, even though the weather usually does not reflect this in the North Country.

- **Use a strong subject and verb early in the sentence.** Allow your reader to understand your main idea early on.

Confusing: My favorite place to eat lunch, at least this semester, is Dexter's.

Clear: Dexter's is my favorite place to eat lunch, at least this semester.

- **Keep the subject and verb together: don't interrupt them with long phrases or clauses.** Too many words between the subject and the verb will make your reader lose focus.

Confusing: Three friends, who always order the same salad and sandwich at Dexter's every time they go, decided to try something new.

Clear: Three friends decided to try something new instead of ordering the same salad and sandwich at Dexter's that they usually do.

- **Transition between sentences and paragraphs to connect one idea to the next.** Begin a sentence or paragraph by relating this idea to the previous one.

A strong transitional sentence shows how the paragraph the reader is about to read will relate to what the reader had already read.

A short introductory phrase can connect your new sentence to what the reader has just read.

LEVEL 3: POLISH

THREE EASY COMMA RULES

APOSTROPHES: TINY BUT CONFUSING
COMMONLY MISPELLED WORDS

Three Easy Comma Rules

Commas are one of the biggest frustrations for students. One tiny comma can change the meaning of your sentence, making it clear or confusing.

1. **Avoid comma splices.** That's when you join two sentences with a comma.

Incorrect: *The girl was taking a hamster home for the weekend, she poked holes in a cardboard box.*

One way to fix them: To join two complete sentences, use a comma followed by a coordinating conjunction (*for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so*—"FANBOYS" is an acronym that will help you remember these words). See "Correct run-on sentences," above for more ways to fix comma splices.

Correct: *The girl was taking a hamster home for the weekend, so she poked holes in a cardboard box.*

You can also make two sentences:

Correct: *The girl was taking a hamster home for the weekend. She poked holes in a cardboard box.*

Why you should fix them: If readers do not see one of those conjunctions, they're not prepared for a complete sentence to follow.

2. Use a comma after an introductory word or phrase.

Why: Show the reader where the introduction ends and the sentence begins.

Incorrect: *Even though it is April it may still snow in Potsdam.*

Correct: *Even though it is April, it may still snow in Potsdam.*

Incorrect: *As she walked by Minerva she saw a squirrel eating a bagel.*

Correct: *As she walked by Minerva, she saw a squirrel eating a bagel.*

3. Use commas to separate items in a list of three or more, but NOT between a pair of items or at the beginning of a list.

Incorrect: *SUNY Potsdam includes the School of Arts and Sciences The Crane School of Music and the School of Education and Professional Studies.*

Correct: *SUNY Potsdam includes the School of Arts and Sciences, The Crane School of Music, and the School of Education and Professional Studies.*

Incorrect: *The two fitness centers are in Maxcy, and Lehman.*

Correct: *The two fitness centers are in Maxcy and Lehman.*

Incorrect: *Bears probably eat lots of things, like, beets, berries, and honey.*

Correct: *Bears probably eat lots of things, like beets, berries, and honey.*

LEVEL 3: POLISH

THREE EASY COMMA RULES

APOSTROPHE: TINY BUT CONFUSING COMMONLY MISPELLED WORDS

Apostrophe: Tiny but Confusing

As with commas, that tiny apostrophe changes the meaning you express to your reader. Here are some of the most common uses of the apostrophe.

- **To show possession, except in the case of “it”**

Incorrect: The boys hair; the athletes moves; it's color is blue

Correct: The boy's hair; the athlete's moves; its color is blue

- **To show possession after an “s” ending a plural noun**

Incorrect: three students comments; two singers voices

Correct: three students' comments; two singers' voices

- **To show a contraction**

Incorrect: They didnt; its a great show

Correct: They didn't; it's a great show

- **When indicating a letter or number that has been purposefully excluded, such as when showing slang in speech**

Incorrect: They listened to 90s pop music.

Correct: They listened to '90s pop music.

When pluralizing letters, symbols, or words treated as words (except decades: 1990s, not 1990's)

Incorrect: *She never received fs.*

Correct: *She never received f's.*

Do NOT use an apostrophe:

- **For possessive pronouns (his, her, its, my, yours, ours)**

Incorrect: *his' book; The group made it's decision.*

Correct: *his book; The group made its decision.*

- **For plural nouns**

Incorrect: *She waited for three hours' to get her ticket.*

Correct: *She waited for three hours to get her ticket.*

Visit Jane Straus's [*Blue Book of Grammar and Punctuation*](#) to see about apostrophes.

LEVEL 3: POLISH

THREE EASY COMMA RULES
APOSTROPHES: TINY BUT CONFUSING
COMMONLY MISSPELLED WORDS

Commonly Misspelled Words

Spellchecker can't catch everything. Some words sound the same, but their meanings and spellings are different. These words are called homophones. Watch for these troublemakers!

The following is a list of common homophones adapted primarily from *Rules of Thumb: A Guide for Writers*, by Jay Silverman, Elaine Hughes, and Diana Roberts Wienbroer:

Homophones

Accept	To take, to receive
Except	Not including
Affect	To change or influence
Effect	The result, the consequence
Brake	The mechanism that stops the vehicle; to slow or stop
Break	A separation; to shatter or separate into pieces
Choose	Present tense (rhymes with <i>news</i>)
Chose	Past tense (rhymes with <i>nose</i>)
It's	It is
Its	Possessive
Lead	A metal (rhymes with <i>red</i>); to provide direction (rhymes with <i>reed</i>)
Led	Past tense of lead

COMMONLY MISSPELLED WORDS

Loose	Not tight (rhymes with goose)
Lose	To misplace (rhymes with <i>chews</i>); to be defeated
New	Not old
Knew	Refers to knowledge
Passed	A course, a car, a football; also <i>passed away</i> (died)
Past	Yesterdays (the past; past events); also, <i>beyond</i>
Principle	An accepted rule of action or conduct
Principal	First or highest in rank; the head or director of a school (princiPAL)
Quiet	Volume of sound
Quite	Emphasizing extent or exceptional quality; expressing agreement
Than	Comparison: <i>better than, rather than, more than, other than</i>
Then	Time or sequence; next

Sources:

All About Spelling. *List of Homophones*. All About Learning Press, 2010. Web. 08 February 2010.

Silverman, Jay, Elaine Hughes, and Diana Roberts Wienbroer. *Rules of Thumb: A Guide for Writers*. New York: McGraw Hill, 2010. Print. (CWC Recommended)

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See [SUNY Potsdam College Writing Center](#) for more links and handouts.