TOP 10 RULES FOR EFFECTIVE EDITING

10. Leave yourself enough time

Editing a forty-page legal paper isn’t like editing the eight-page papers you wrote as an undergraduate. You can’t do it in a night or even in a week. Instead, editing usually is at least a month-long process. You’ll need time to step away from the paper, time for other readers to give you feedback, time to do additional research to fill the gaps you discover, time to rewrite significant chunks of the paper, and time to add new material.

9. Be skeptical of your own work

Most of us aren’t nearly as persuasive as we think we are. There are a few reasons for that. First, because we know what we meant to say, we struggle to discern when the words we actually used are ambiguous or muddled. Second, because, in most cases, we agree with ourselves, we may have blind spots for weaknesses in our arguments or unjustified assumptions.

A helpful way to shed those blind spots is to try to adopt the perspective of a skeptical reader. If your writing tends to be too complex, ask what a reader who knows little about law would actually understand. If you tend towards more liberal arguments, imagine you’re reading the paper directly to Justice Scalia. If you tend to be more conservative, try to imagine the reactions of a prominent liberal. But whatever you do, try to shed the assumption, which we all sometimes make, that you’re a wonderfully clear and persuasive writer.

8. Structure, structure, structure

When writing is unclear, the cause is often poor structural organization rather than poor word choice. Sentences don’t relate back to the topic sentence of their paragraph, or paragraphs are placed in the wrong section of the paper, or the factual section contains arguments... there are many ways to go wrong. So, as you edit, spend time thinking about the overall organization of the paper. Grammar and word choice are also very important, of course, but they shouldn’t be your only focus.

7. Use reverse outlining
A good way to assess the structure of your paper is to prepare something called a reverse outline. To do this, number each paragraph of your paper, and, on a second sheet of paper, write the point(s) of that paragraph next to the number. Be sure you write the point of the paragraph as written, not the point you meant to make (which means sometimes acknowledging that a paragraph has two or three points, or no point at all). This process takes time, but it’s a great way of locating paragraphs that are out of place, that need to be divided, or that need to be removed. In fact, as your draft grows longer, this can be the only effective way. It’s quite difficult to see the forest through the trees of a forty or fifty page draft.

6. Remember your topic sentences

Probably in fifth or sixth grade, we all learned that every paragraph should have a topic sentence that explains the overall point of the paragraph. Those topic sentences are wonderfully helpful for a reader, because they supply a takeaway message and provide a context for the subsidiary points made in the other sentence. But often paper drafts are filled with paragraphs without topic sentences. This can happen for a variety of reasons—you just forgot to include one, or you didn’t actually know what your point was until after you wrote the paragraph—but it invariably undermines the clarity of the paper. So, as you review your paper, make sure that every paragraph has a concise, clear sentence that explains the paragraph’s basic point.

5. Short is beautiful

Shorter, more direct phrasings are almost always clearer and more forceful. So cut words and tighten sentences whenever you can.

4. Get help

An independent set of eyes will almost always see things that you have missed. Take advantage of other editors, including your advisor and, if your advisor allows this, your peers.

3. The editor is (almost) always right
If you think highly of your own writing, as many of us do, your first instinct when you receive critical feedback may be to defend your original approach, or to argue that the editor just misunderstood you. That impulse is perfectly normal, but you need to fight it. If an editor suggests a change, she’s probably right. Even if the change she suggests makes no sense, or reflects a misunderstanding of your point, you should take the suggestion as a signal that your original phrasing was flawed or unclear and needs to be improved.

There is one general exception to this rule: don’t let your editor write your paper for you. The final paper should be your work, with your writing style and your ideas.

2. Buy a grammar guide

There are many wonderful grammar guides on the market, and they can be quite helpful for answering questions about comma placement, misplaced modifiers, and the many other grammatical questions that come up in the course of writing a paper. And if you think you do not need such a guide, you’re probably mistaken. We all have our pet mistakes, and most of us could write more clearly with a little bit of grammatical help.

1. Use good line editing techniques

A variety of line editing techniques can help you as you put the final touches on your paper. Read it out loud. Read it while running a pencil over the words you’re reading. Read the paper any way that compels you to slow down and take a careful look at every word. Your final project should be virtually free of grammatical mistakes and misspellings, and only a slow, patient series of readings will get you to that point.