

# Fundamentals of Editing

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“There is no great writing,  
only great rewriting.”

— Justice Brandeis



# The General Process



- The editing process involves several stages:

- A. The big-scale picture
- B. The small-scale picture
- C. The fine-tuning

At each level, there are **substantive (content)** and **non-substantive (formatting, etc.)** matters to check.

*This presentation will be limited to editing tips that apply to your two client-advice writing assignments in this seminar.*

# A. The Big-Scale Picture



- I. Focus on the writing's **overall content**.
  - Have you limited your analysis to those issues that are relevant to your client's request/issue?
  - Are there any logical or substantive gaps?
  - Have you explained any concepts that you introduce by name?
  - Is the content presented in a logical order that flows?
  - Is the overall conclusion (and conclusion for each issue's discussion) clearly stated?
  - Does any part of the text contradict any other part?
  - Does the supporting text in any section or subsection duplicate unnecessarily the content of that in any other section?
  - Is the tone decisive and confident?
  - Have you included a "roadmap" before multiple issues or sub-issues?

# A. The Big-Scale Picture



2. Check the **content of each discrete issue or sub-issue**.
  - Have you started your entire discussion with your conclusion or recommendation on the issue or sub-issue?
  - Have you set out the law or paradigm that applies to that particular discussion before starting your analysis?
  - In your analysis,
    - Have you generally organized each part or sub-part in the following manner?: **Pro-thesis → Con-thesis → Pro-thesis (why pros outweigh cons)**
    - Have you truly been objective (yet not neutral, answering the client's question)?

# A. The Big-Scale Picture

3. Focus on the writing's **overall organization and appearance**.
- For headings and subheadings (when document is long enough to merit their use),
    - Does each section and subsection have its own heading?
    - Do those headings and subheadings accurately describe the content that follows?
    - Are the headings and subheadings of the same level in parallel form and format?
    - Have you used an appropriate number/letter and indentation scheme?
  - Have you incorporated transitional text at the start of new sections or sub-sections to ensure a smooth flow?
  - Have you been consistent in using defined terms and acronyms throughout the writing?
  - Is your writing visually appealing?



## B. The Small-Scale Picture



### I. Focus on **paragraph content**.

- Does each paragraph contain only one idea (or perhaps at most only two very closely related ideas)?
- Do you have a thesis (or topic) sentence for each paragraph?
- Have you used thesis sentences, rather than topic sentences, to introduce paragraphs whenever appropriate?
- Does the thesis (or topic) sentence accurately describe the paragraph's content?
- Does each sentence within the paragraph relate to, prove, etc. the thesis (or topic) sentence?
- Do the sentences within the paragraph flow together?
- Does the paragraph cover all logical steps or content for which the thesis (or topic) sentence calls?

## B. The Small-Scale Picture

### 2. Focus on **paragraph organization**.

- Have you used appropriate transitions between paragraphs whenever applicable?
- Is any paragraph overly long?





## B. The Small-Scale Picture

### 3. Focus on **sentence content**.

- Does each sentence actually convey what you intended?
- Does any repetitiousness, both in word choice and in overall sentence content, have a purpose (emphasis or clarity or rhetorical device, for example)?



### 4. Focus on **sentence structure**.

- Are there any sentences that you should condense (or divide into multiple sentences) because they are too long or contain too many ideas (*i.e.*, run-on sentences)?
- Can any phrases or clauses be excised from the sentence without altering the sentence's meaning?
- Is the sentence clear?



# B. The Small-Scale Picture



5. Tips for creating a strong subject-verb unit in your sentences:\*
- Avoid nominalization, i.e., the burying of the action in a noun phrase.
    - Example: “reached an agreement” instead of “agreed”
    - Example: “performing a review” instead of “reviewing”
  - Avoid or substitute a single (or fewer) word(s) for “throat-clearing” expressions.
    - Example: “It is essential that . . . .”
    - Example: “It should be noted that . . . .”
    - Example: “It can be presumed that . . .” becomes “Presumably, . . .”
  - Consider substituting shorter words or phrases for longer ones.
    - Example: “because” for “because of the fact that”
    - Example: “without” for “in the absence of”

\* Adapted from Laurel Currie Oates & Anne Enquist, *The Legal Writing Handbook: Analysis, Research, & Writing* 553-68 (5th ed. 2010) (used for educational purposes only).

# C. The Fine-Tuning



1. **Strengthen any wording** that is not effective.
  - Exercise caution with passive voice.
  - Eliminate any confusing terms.
  - Avoid “legalese.”
2. Check for errors in **spelling, punctuation, grammar, and syntax**.
  - Have a style and grammar reference book of your choosing handy whenever you write.
  - Refer to my handout on common mistakes in these areas.

# Additional Suggestions



1. Put aside your writing overnight before you begin editing.
2. Review your writing multiple times: do not expect to finish the editing process in one fell swoop.
3. When you've completed the editing process, think once again about whether your recommendation or conclusion makes good sense.