Academic writing is assessed for content (ideas, theories, concepts), for structure (the logical development of your ideas), and for style (the way you express those ideas). The final grade for your work will, in part, be determined by how well your assignment meets standards of academic literacy in your discipline. These standards help supervisors and examiners to form an overall impression of your work. Although the Statement of Assessment Methods may detail the nature of your assignments, it may not define ‘style’ and ‘literacy’.

Style and literacy include:

- basic layout and presentation
- expression: grammar and syntax
- spelling and punctuation
- referencing conventions.

Careful editing and proofreading of your work will help you to meet the standards of academic literacy in your discipline.

**WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN EDITING AND PROOFREADING?**

People think that editing and proofreading are two names for the same thing. Editing has a different function to proofreading, and occurs at a different stage in the writing process. Writing is a process, and you should aim to produce several drafts. You will edit the second-to-last version.

*Editing* involves a close reading and re-writing of this version. For example, you may improve expression by eliminating redundancies, tautologies, or repetition, or you may improve the structure of your argument by inserting linking sentences between paragraphs, transitional phrases, or sentences that conclude your main point. When you edit your work, you are aiming to improve the sense and logic of your material.

*Proofreading* takes place after the editing process, using the last version of your text. When you proofread, you are looking for mistakes that may have escaped the editing process such as spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, and noun-verb agreement errors. You are not reading for sense, but for *mechanics*. Once you have corrected these errors, you should have a clean, final copy ready for submission.

**TIPS FOR EDITING AND PROOFREADING**

1. **Writing is a process: allow enough time**
   - Don’t start to edit and proofread your work immediately, even if you have finished writing. Put your work away for a week or so (the longer the better) before you start the checking process. It is important to return to your work with a ‘fresh’ and critical eye. It’s a good idea to *allow at least 4 weeks* to complete an essay.
   - Week 1: research and writing the first draft
   - Week 2: structuring time (work on the research and the development of ideas during this time)
   - Week 3: revising and correcting the first draft; second and third drafts
   - Week 4: correcting and polishing the second-to-last version - editing and proofreading.

2. **Vary your editing activities**
   - If you are pressed for time, you might try drafting one section/chapter of an essay/thesis while you are editing or proofreading another. This keeps you interested in what you are doing, and keeps the whole project moving along.

3. **Develop editing skills**
   - Spend some time looking at the relevant style manuals before you begin so that you know what you are looking for when you are editing and proofreading. There are many good manuals such as:
     - *MLA Style Manual*
     - Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*
     - Turabian’s *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*.
   - All of these are in the library. Taking time to read them now might save you a lot of time later.

4. **Familiarise yourself with the University requirements** (for theses)
   - Find out how the University requires your thesis to be formatted. How do they want tables and charts to be presented? What margins are required? What spacing is needed? How should you present the bibliography? How should you order and arrange the chapters and sections of your work? Make a template for these to guide you.
5. **Familiarise yourself with departmental requirements** (for essays and reports)
   Find out about your discipline’s requirements for essays and reports. How do they want references to be cited? Do they want footnotes or endnotes? How much can you quote from a given text? Are bullet points permissible or do they prefer a prose format? Do they require the third person, or can you use ‘I’ statements? What tense use is required? For example, English Literature students need to write about novels using the present tense, while sciences use a combination of simple and past tenses in different sections. Are headers and footers required? Make templates to guide your writing.

6. **Recruit help**
   Everyone needs help in editing and proofreading their written work—even professional writers. We are usually ‘too close’ and too familiar with our own writing to see any mistakes or to see better ways of making a point. Getting help is not ‘cheating’—it makes good sense.

   You might:
   • ask a family member or friend to read your material
   • swap your work with colleagues
   • pay a professional editor (@$18-$45 per hour).

   Get help from as many sources as possible. The more people you involve in this process, the less chance you have of making errors. Several people reading the same work will find different errors of sense or logic.

   **Note for thesis writers:** It is not usually the role of supervisors to edit and proofread your work. Try to involve independent readers who are unfamiliar with the project. It is not essential that your readers work in your topic area, but it is helpful if they have written a thesis themselves. Some faculties provide a limited amount of funding for higher degree students to have their final draft edited.

7. **Edit**
   There are three stages in editing:
   • Checking layout and design conventions
   • Structural editing: checking your argument for structure, logic, sense
   • Copy-editing: checking your written expression.

   To edit your own material effectively, it’s best to be methodical and to work in stages.

   **TIP:** Print your drafts for editing on different coloured paper to help you edit in stages and to see the most recent and correct version.

**LAYOUT AND DESIGN**

View each page singly. Check for typesetting:
• Are all the paragraphs indented by the same amount?
• Are paragraphs that follow conceptually from quotations not indented?
• Are the margins okay?
• Is the text justified?
• Is spacing between the words consistent?
• Is page numbering sequential and in the correct font?
• Are headers and footers consistent?
• Does the layout have ‘orphans’ or ‘widows’, i.e. do single words appear alone at the end or start of pages?

**Title page**
• Is all relevant information there in the right order?
• Check that there is no page number. Is the information centred?
• Does your name and discipline appear in the correct form?
• Essays: have you included your tutor’s name and your student number?

**Preliminary pages**
• Is your Table of Contents and List of Tables correctly numbered and referenced in the text?
Bibliography
• Are all the references there?
• Cross-check them with the text.
• Does the layout correspond to the format given in the style manual?
• Is the punctuation exact?
• Are the references listed alphabetically?

Tables and graphs
• Are these in the right place, close to the text where they are mentioned?
• Are they labelled with the correct source?
• Are they listed in the List of Tables in the preliminary pages?

Edit references in text
• Check accuracy and spelling of citations and reference details against the original; have you kept a photocopy? Check that ellipses (…) are used correctly.
• Check that the reference style is consistent throughout.
• Check that quotation marks are used consistently (either single ‘…’ or double “…”).

Edit bibliography
Make sure that the full details are given:
• full name(s),
• publisher and place of publication,
• editor(s) and translator(s),
• date of publication,
• volume numbers,
• edition and page range (for journals).

Edit fonts
• Check usage of all bold, underlined and italicised passages for consistency.
• Make sure you haven’t overused any of these formats.

STRUCTURAL EDITING
Check that your argument is sustained and coherent. Edit for purpose and logical development.

Check the introduction of your essay or chapter:
• Does your introduction provide a map for the body of your essay?
• Does the body of the essay/chapter achieve what you set out to do in the introduction?
• Does the ‘thesis’ (main argument) come through in your essay, section or chapter?

Edit for cohesion: check the links between paragraphs.
• Does the material ‘flow’ logically?
• Do you have a topic sentence for each paragraph?
• Is your signposting language adequate to guide the reader?
• Do you use subsections or numbered points?
• Are these cross-referenced throughout?

Examples of signpost language:
~ Given this point…
~ Firstly…
~ Secondly…
~ In conclusion…

Edit for repetition: check all chapters (or paragraphs) for repetition of concepts and ideas.

COPY EDITING
Edit for sense: Make sure that each sentence is clear and precise. Check for ambiguous or vague expression. Look for:

Redundancies
~ absolutely perfect...

Tautologies
~ comparative study covering both aspects of...

Empty expressions
~ in terms of… ~ in regards to… ~ reflected in…

Vague words
~ factor ~ aspect ~ significant

Empty modifiers
~ very ~ huge

Such expressions are the mark of a poor writer.
**Edit for acronyms and jargon**
These are to be explained clearly when first used.

**Edit for grammar**
The common errors include compounding nouns; missing subjects or verbs in a sentence; noun-verb agreement errors; split infinitives; plural-singular verb mistakes; tense; pronoun-noun agreement; and the use of possessive apostrophes.
- See the SLC brochures on grammar.

**PROOFREADING**

Don’t waste time proofreading a chapter or an essay before you have finished writing it. Don’t fiddle with formatting at this stage. Would you waste time re-writing messy lecture notes? No. So, apply the same rule to writing your essay or chapter. When you’ve finished writing it, you can spend time polishing it. Only proofread the last printout, as small errors can turn up between the editing process and the final check for mechanical errors.

**Read backwards**
When you edit your work, you are checking for sense and logical development. But when you proofread, you are looking for residual errors, like comma use, typing errors, or apostrophe placement errors. The eye will often read what’s meant to be there, rather than what is actually on the page. Trick your eye. Read each sentence independently, starting from the final sentence and work backwards. It’s tedious, but it slows down your eye and helps you to see the mistakes. Another way to slow down your eye is to place a ruler under each line, and check your text word for word.

**Reading aloud**
Reading aloud can also help, as you can often hear where commas should go, where verbs are incorrect, or where your expression is clumsy. If your tongue stumbles, it’s likely that your written expression has also stumbled.

**Proofread for spelling errors**
Spell checkers read the following as correct: ‘Spell Chequer Pome’

I have a spelling chequer
It came with my PC
It clearly marks for my reveu
Mistakes I cannot sea
I’ve run this pome threw it
I’m shore your please to no
Its letter perfect in its weigh
My chequer tolled me sew.

It’s not.

**Proofread for punctuation**
Know how to wield a comma, a colon, a semi-colon and a full stop. Punctuation can change meaning entirely.
- See SLC brochure ‘Punctuation’.

**Compare:**
1. Let’s eat Mum and Dad.
2. Let’s eat, Mum and Dad.

**Some useful references and style manuals** (referenced in Harvard style):