Chapter 11. Editing in Context

In this Chapter

This chapter will prepare you to:

- Identify ways that editing is a rhetorical act
- Explore strategies to edit for conventions (grammar and usage)
- Explore strategies to edit for style
- Reflect to identify and act on your own editing plan

If there is no such thing as one kind of good writing, then it follows that there is no such thing as one kind of "good sentence." You know that some kinds of good writing don't even use sentences: readers and writers of text messages, movie posters, and reggae lyrics often prefer ideas presented in short, vivid phrases. That doesn't mean that "anything goes" when it comes to sentences, though: advanced writers need to take care with our sentences, because they directly affect what readers understand and what they assume about our message.

Since editing is also a kind of writing, you may want to consider how your editing work connects to several threshold concepts.

Good writing adapts dynamically to readers and contexts

Writing—like dancing or judo—is more about evolving actions and interactions than it is about producing a single object.

There is no single definition of a "good writer"

Writers use different techniques or styles to produce "good writing" depending on the writer's goals and the audience's needs.

Writing is a social rather than an individual act

Writing is always connected to a community, and so your choices always do and always should reflect your interactions with other writers and readers.

Writing involves strategies more than talent

Writing is usually not a revelation from an invisible muse or a demonstration of innate talent, but is a skill that requires practice, strategic thinking, and flexibility.

Even though editing is the writing task that feels the most rule-bound, writers who edit are always participating in a dynamic, social, strategic set of tasks—and the most successful editors are the ones who balance the expectations of our readers with our own goals, opportunities, and values.

11.1 Good Sentences are Rhetorical and Evolving

Good sentences are rhetorical. Your sentences will be "good" when they match your goals, the expectations of your audience, and the genre and presentation modality you select. You might even use different kinds of sentences in different parts of your document, such as short sentences to catch readers' attention at the start and longer sentences to convey complex information in the middle. Advanced writers often face rhetorical challenges composing our sentences: we need to balance between writing sentences that feel comfortable, beautiful, or

powerful in our own minds or communities, and writing sentences that our readers will find familiar, accessible, or accurate. As with arguments and evidence, your choices about sentences will depend as much on your rhetorical decisions as on your knowledge of exact rules.

Good sentences are evolving. Just as genres evolve over time, sentences evolve two ways. First, readers' expectations about words and sentences evolve over time: you can see by looking at an original copy of the US Constitution that writers in the 1700s used different spelling and punctuation. Second, writers' use of sentences evolves within each document we compose: until we complete a whole document draft and understand exactly where we want to build speed, connection, or directness for readers, writers cannot make accurate decisions about our sentences.

Thus editing is not simply "correcting": editing requires rhetorical awareness and reflective practice. Because sentences, words, and style are important to conveying our meaning and connecting with readers, advanced writers should schedule time to review a complete or nearly complete draft while considering specific sentence-level choices and strategies within the context of our goals, audience expectations, and genre patterns.

11.2 Why—And When—All Writers Edit

Editing is not something that only "bad writers" do. Since writing has so many challenges—from predicting a rhetorical context and learning new information to incorporating secondary sources, organizing our thoughts, and designing our documents—all writers struggle with sentences as we compose, and so we need good editing skills. (I have edited the previous sentence—which is important because it states my thesis for this section—nine times as I composed and revised this chapter!)

Writers edit to cope with cognitive overload

Even writers who have high fluency in the language we are using to compose can struggle with sentences, in part due to cognitive overload. Like jugglers who can toss three balls but not four, writers can sometimes manage three separate tasks fairly well at one time—such as thinking about what readers need to know, planning powerful paragraphs, and integrating external sources—but perform less well at additional tasks like handling commas or selecting vivid verbs. Because writers can't do everything perfectly at once, we sometimes struggle with sentences:

- **Writers struggle to write acceptable sentences.** When advanced writers are working with complex analyses, writing in new genres or styles, or

writing in emotionally stressful situations, they can experience cognitive overload. That is, the writers focus so much on managing ideas, structures, and dispositions that they find it difficult to pay equal attention to all the grammar and usage expectations that readers have for our sentences. In addition to making simple errors, we may write sentences that are tedious to read or that state an argument too bluntly for some readers.

- **Writers struggle to write meaningful sentences.** Since writers create knowledge as we write, we discover or clarify our meaning as we go forward. The sentences in an early draft of a document thus often don't convey writers' most powerful or accurate messages, and writers may struggle with sentences that try to express the overall conclusions or complex results of a writing project. Language is slippery; writers who edit help ensure that crucial sentences articulate our complex ideas.
- **Writers struggle to write harmonious sentences.** Although individual sentences can convey some meaning, most documents represent knowledge through collections of sentences. In order to present a cohesive document using a consistent style, writers need to adjust some sentences to better fit with the surrounding text. (For example, this book was edited to ensure that whenever "writers" were mentioned, first-person pronouns were used so that you see that "we"—you as the readers and I as the author—are all writers together.)

That is, beyond fixing common errors, writers need to adapt sentences to our new knowledge and to the other sentences in a document. A short sentence will have more impact if the sentences around it are longer; a sentence that uses vivid verbs may not fit well into a paragraph of sentences that use more straightforward language to describe the methods of an experiment. Writers may even need to delete sentences that no longer fit the overall goals or approach of a document.

Writers edit separately to reduce stress and improve cohesion

In a short, familiar document for an audience you trust, you may be able to edit as you draft. However, for longer or more challenging writing tasks, it is not only difficult but sometimes impossible to get all the sentences right on the first try. Writers benefit two ways if we set a time to edit *after* a section or even a full draft is completed:

- **The first draft happens faster**: tinkering with sentences one at a time disrupts writers' thinking without producing consistent benefits; editing separately allows writers to compose with less interference.
- **The final draft is more cohesive**: a one-sentence view doesn't help writers judge how all sentences function together; editing separately helps writers create sentences that balance each other and present a consistent style.

When we know we have planned time to edit later, we can actually improve our results in other areas of our writing.

Writers keep an open mind about editing

Depending on your school and work experiences, you may be holding onto some assumptions about editing that reduce your ability to grow as a writer. Have you heard or told yourself any of these explanations? To improve as an editor, you may need to shift your mindset.

- **"I don't have time to proofread/edit."** Managing time is a disposition and thus a decision: if you believe that having powerful and accurate sentences will strongly improve your success, you can *make* time to edit carefully. The story you tell yourself about editing is important.
- "**My instructor doesn't care about my sentences**." Even if your instructor for chemistry or sociology hasn't stated that they value appropriate sentences, they most likely do have expectations about your writing—including expectations about sentences. Always inquire about what your readers value rather than assuming you know.
- "**All writing needs to be edited for Standard Edited American English correctness**." Even in academic and professional settings, some genres and situations carry fewer expectations about correctness than others: a job application may be carefully scrutinized for errors, but an emailed response to a colleague's question might even seem more congenial if presented in informal or even incorrect phrases.
- "**You have to know the rules before you can break them**." Most native-speaker writers learn to follow usage conventions by reading and hearing examples rather than studying rules for *pluperfect tense* or *non-count nouns*, so they bend and break unknown rules all the time. More importantly, *all* writers can *always* choose to use language in ways that connect with and engage readers, whether that usage follows or breaks a known convention.
- "**Editing is just about correct words and punctuation**." Even if your sentences have no errors, they can lack consistency, rhythm, or power to affect your readers. As writers edit, we think about the whole document: Is the level of formality or elaboration consistent? Do the verbs provide an appropriate level of accuracy and energy for the audience and goals? Do short sentences balance out long ones?

When writers keep an open mind about editing—it's not "just" for one kind of document or "just" focused on one kind of error—we can better adapt key editing skills to our current contexts and writing tasks.

Focus on equity: Stay skeptical about "correct English"

You may have heard or read research recently that addresses the ways that Standard Edited American English, or what most academic and professional readers think of as "correct English," can be used to unfairly punish or exclude writers from diverse backgrounds. Languages and language patterns by themselves aren't necessarily racist, homophobic, or sexist—and it makes sense for a discourse community to establish expectations for writing in order to help connect readers and writers. But when individuals, communities, or institutions focus on using *only one standard for correctness in English*, they can exclude, obstruct, or devalue another group of people based on their language background. These policies often reinforce social patterns which grant more power to people from one gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, ability, religion, or nationality—and those actions or policies, however they were intended, are discriminatory.

- **Excluding**: Sometimes words themselves exclude or erase people, the way that "fireman" erases women fire fighters. Sometimes a usage convention excludes people, such as the way the typical "correct" pronoun pattern in "Give a student the respect due to *him or her*" erases people who don't identify with either gender. Also, if a workplace won't hire anyone who has a language error on their job application, even for jobs that can be successfully performed without 100% written language correctness, that policy uses SEAE to unfairly exclude people—and often such policies disproportionately exclude people from minoritized groups.
- **Obstructing**: When institutions like schools or workplaces use "correct English" not just as one expectation among many but as a significant requirement for advancement or success, they create obstacles for people whose home communities use other language conventions and people with language processing disabilities. If it were true that SEAE was universal, or was always better than the alternative (the way that "Being kind" is nearly always a better way to act than the alternatives), this would not be discriminatory. However, since "good writing" includes many features, and since there are many other English convention patterns that are viable and powerful, a policy that bases grades, promotion, or other rewards strongly on SEAE can create unfair obstacles for writers who are learning English or whose communities use another version of English.
- **Devaluing**: At any point that a person or organization declares that "correct English" is inherently better than other language convention patterns, they imply and sometimes directly signal that any writers who do not always use these conventions are also less valued. "Correctness" is rhetorical: In some writing situations it is valuable, while in others it is unnecessary or even counterproductive. (If you received a text message that

"properly" used several semi-colons, you might roll your eyes.) Practices and policies based on a generalization that only one kind of language use is valued will unfairly discriminate against some writers, in ways that devalue them simply based on their words.

Of course, you may face policies that discriminate based on language use and have no option to challenge the policy. But you can always look for opportunities to raise questions about the value of "correct English," and stay alert for ways to use your own actions to reinforce the complex, rhetorical ways that writing succeeds with readers. (For one way of pushing back against the expectations of SEAE, see the notes about code-switching and code-meshing later in this chapter.)

Explore 11.1

What kind of editor are you, and what kind of editor would you like to become? Write 3-4 sentences in which you identify your current practices and explain any strategies you wish to develop further as you improve your editing. You might consider questions like the following: Do you usually enjoy tinkering with sentences and words, or do you prefer to just focus on your overall ideas? Are you generally confident or stressed-out when you work on your sentence- and word-level writing? Do you prefer to edit as you compose, or do you save time for editing at the end? What kinds of documents are you most likely to use specific time to edit, and what writing tasks do you generally just complete without paying much attention to sentences and words?

Learn

- To learn more about how **dispositions** affect a writer's work, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about how **discourse communities** might create standards of correctness that are exclusive or discriminatory, see Chapter 3, Responding to Readers' Needs.
- To learn more about how your **design and modality** may influence your editing, see Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities.

11.3 Writers Edit to Meet Conventions

You may have been told, or believe, that your writing is good because you have "good grammar" or that it isn't good because you have "bad grammar." That kind of phrasing suggests that there is one kind of "good grammar" that everyone everywhere agrees on and can easily achieve. However, rhetorical sentences are more complicated than just "good grammar," and so advanced writers find it is helpful to use some more precise terms to guide our practice.

Understand sentence conventions for grammar, usage, and style

Writing scholars use the term "conventions" as a way to refer to many of the choices that writers make about our language and sentences. "Convention" comes from a word root meaning "to meet" or "to agree": in writing, language conventions arise when many people—especially many people with the power to tell other people what to do—agree on the language patterns they prefer to read.

- If you and your friends agree that exclamation points in text messages signal a cheerful attitude, then a message without exclamation points will seem sad or even angry, even if the actual words don't have a sad meaning.
- When the supervisors in your workplace agree that misspelled words or punctuation errors interfere with clients' ability to access accurate information, then they may dismiss a report with those errors as inadequate, even if the writer is highly qualified and the ideas are innovative.
- When epidemiology scholars agree that writers should use "carrier" to mean *an apparently healthy but infected person or animal* and "vehicle" to mean *an intermediary in disease transmission*, rather than the more common layperson meanings, then a report that misuses or avoids those terms will seem unprofessional, even if the author is a respected scholar.

Since conventions depend on agreement, they are rhetorical. Even Standard Edited American English (SEAE)—a group of conventions you may have learned as absolute rules for writing—is rhetorical and constantly evolving. It is rhetorical because people in power in the US, most often White native-speakers with advanced education, have agreed that they prefer these conventions. It is evolving in part because people from those and other communities continue to use language powerfully in other patterns that influence the "standard."

Since Standard Edited American English is addressed in so many college courses, it may be helpful to consider how SEAE conventions include some agreed-upon standards in several categories:

- **Grammar,** according to linguists and other specialists, has a narrow meaning: it designates how writers organize the basic building blocks of sentences, such as subjects, verbs, objects, descriptors, articles, and others. These grammatical expectations don't change much within a language: most English speakers across continents and centuries recognize the grammatical disorder and missing elements of sentences such as *They home their went* or *The brown dog child the bark*.
- **Usage** (which many people include as part of "grammar") is how writers select and organize sentence elements that go beyond basic grammar. Although large complicated books are written every year to explain these "rules," they truly are *expectations* that may change or evolve from one

time period, location, discourse community, or genre to another. Common usage categories include the following:

- **Agreement**: How writers match subjects to verbs (US English prefers "the choir *is*" while UK English prefers "the choir *are*"), verb tense to verb tense (using past or present tense consistently), subjects to adjectives ("*this dog* likes *these toys*") and subjects to pronouns. You are witnessing an agreement evolution whenever you see people match the plural pronoun *they* with a single subject—*Eli drove their car to their house*—to create gender-neutral writing.
- **Punctuation**: How writers use signals to group or separate words. Expectations about punctuation for sentence boundaries (using a period when a sentence ends) don't vary much, but expectations about punctuation used to group words within a sentence (e.g., commas, semi-colons, and dashes) can vary a lot. You are noticing a punctuation evolution if you can spot how apostrophes have disappeared from new naming protocols like URLs (*kimsgreatpies.com*) or if you've seen the phrase "red, white, and blue" written with both one comma and two commas.
- **Mechanics**: How writers use other written signals—such as capital letters, spaces, hyphens, italics, and accepted definitions and spelling—to transform spoken language into consistent written forms. You are participating in a mechanics evolution if you put one space rather than the previous convention of two spaces after a period when you type sentences.
- **Idiom**: How writers use figurative or abstract expressions, local references, or slang to convey meaning. Idioms vary and evolve frequently: since prepositions are often idiomatic, in different parts of the US, people can stand *on line* or stand *in line* when they're waiting for a train. You are participating in an idiom evolution if you find that it no longer makes sense to say that you "*hang up* the phone" when you end a voice call on your mobile, headset, tablet, or watch.

- **Style:** How writers choose a pattern of words, sentence structures, and emphasis to represent their own perspective or change the impact a document has on a reader: helping the reader speed up or slow down, focus on straightforward data or on complex emotional experiences. Although style can be highly personal, communities or genres often adopt a style as part of their conventions: documents written in SEAE typically include a formal, complex, correct style of words and sentences.

Finally, any time you write, remember that you can choose to challenge or break with conventions. Although you should always consider the consequences of making readers uncomfortable, you don't have to wait until you are powerful or famous to experiment with writing that bends or contradicts "the rules." If you

have a message to communicate that you think will be more powerful using different conventions, you should consider your readers and your goals, and then take time to explore your options.

Explore 11.2

Write down 3-4 "rules" you have learned about Standard Edited American English sentences; these can be anything from words you must or must not use, to strategies for building good sentences, to expectations for quoting and citing sources; they can be rules you nearly always follow or ones you struggle with. Then think of any *other* communication situation that has "rules," and write down 3-4 of those. You could consider the "rules" for writing sentences in another language, for writing lyrics to love songs, for "talking trash" with teammates or online gamers, for texting a romantic partner, for writing an email to your boss, or some other set of rules or conventions. Add a final note: what happens when someone bends or breaks one of those other rules?

Review 20 Common SEAE Errors

Writing scholars Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford (2008) reviewed and catalogued hundreds of college student essays in the early 2000s, looking for the errors that were marked most often by college instructors. This study provides a *rhetorical* look at errors, since it considers how a specific discourse community (college instructors) responded to a specific kind of writing task (formal college essays). When you are writing in this particular context, you may want to use their results to help you focus your editing on the errors that your readers are likely to find distracting.

The 20 most common errors Lunsford and Lunsford identified, in order of most marked to least marked, are the following:

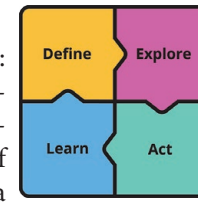
1. **Wrong word**, such as "cousin words" (*concur* vs. *conclude*), inaccurate prepositions or idioms, incorrect terms, and typos or autocorrect errors.
2. **Missing comma after an introductory element** such as *When you write you should leave time to edit* (which needs a comma after "write").
3. **Incomplete or missing documentation of sources** according to the expectations of the field or genre.
4. **Vague pronoun reference** such as "this" in the sentences *Breana was bored on some days and happy on others. This limited her success.* (Did boredom, happiness, or *both* limit her success?)
5. **Spelling**, especially proper names, technical terms, and homonyms (*their* vs. *there*).

6. **Mechanical error with a quotation** such as forgetting a comma after the verb "writes" in *Lockett writes "I love Mama."*
7. **Unnecessary comma** such as between a subject and verb (*The blue birds, sang sweetly*) or after a conjunction (*The train was fast and, it was loud).*
8. **Unnecessary or missing capitalization**: Reserve capital letters for starts of sentences and proper nouns (*Jim studies biology in the Department of Biology).*
9. **Missing word**, often due to writing quickly and not editing carefully.
10. **Faulty sentence structure**, often due to an attempt to combine complex ideas (*From all their efforts created a winning project).*
11. **Missing comma with a nonrestrictive element**, often seen as a missing second comma to set off a descriptive phrase that's not strictly necessary to the meaning of a sentence. This sentence needs a comma after "dachshund": *Monisha's dog, a dachshund won the race.*
12. **Unnecessary shift in verb tense** such as shifts that occur in a complex thought or sentence identifying several steps: *Anderson and Porfirenko designed the robot and choose rechargeable batteries to power it (*"designed" is past tense and "choose" is present tense).
13. **Missing comma in a compound sentence**, often especially needed in longer sentences joined by a conjunction such as *and, but,* and *so.* Be sure to add a comma before the conjunction to avoid confusion: *Ala had planned to go to the store on the corner and then she would drive over to campus for her class but her car was stolen from the store parking lot*.
14. **Unnecessary or missing apostrophe**, which is easy to leave out of missing from possessives or to add incorrectly to plurals: *My favorite restaurant is called Mariyas Taco's.*
15. **Fused or run-on sentence** which occurs when two complete sentences are placed side by side; they should be separated or fixed with a conjunction, a colon, or a semicolon: *Tom calculated the rate of increase he also graphed his results.*
16. **Comma splices** occur when two complete sentences are joined by a comma instead of separated by a period or joined with a semicolon or conjunction: *Kelly and Mona designed a survey, they sent it to 100 people.*
17. **Lack of pronoun/antecedent agreement** is usually a problem in longer sentences; in short sentences it is usually obvious that

pronouns need to match the subject in number and gender: *Miller and Yoho presented her project to the class.*

18. **Poorly integrated quotation**: In addition to providing a signal phrase such as "Fede argues," edit so that a sentence with a quotation is grammatically correct, such as including only one verb: *Debasmita's experiment shows "demonstrates 85% compliance."*
19. **Missing or unnecessary hyphen**: Use hyphens to avoid confusion so that readers know if *Darlene's little used beach house* is just small and old or often vacant (little-used).
20. **Sentence fragments** often occur when writers add a final idea but don't join it to an earlier sentence: *Kreitzer and Schell's theory about structural bonds was intriguing. But not accurate.*

Improve your sentences with reflective practice



Most college-level writers are already capable communicators: when we are motivated and the communication task is straightforward, we can inform and persuade others. In spoken communication and informal writing—which adds up to most of our daily interactions—our listeners and readers will tolerate a wide range of usage patterns and accents, even if we step outside their expectations a bit. Because formal written communication leaves a more permanent trace, however, writers are often expected to meet readers' expectations exactly.

So where do errors come from? It's not that writers set out to create a document that has usage errors, any more than a baseball player plans to drop a fly ball during a game or a singer plans to belt out the wrong word during a concert. Identifying why and how you make errors can help you DEAL with them: Define common errors that you make, explore why you make them and strategies to improve your sentences, act to fix a specific problem, and learn how to more consistently use conventions your readers expect.

Sometimes writers make usage errors because we don't know what a usage convention is or how it works. You might have seen complex sentences using semi-colons and multiple commas, but not be aware of all of the guidelines for how to use these punctuation marks in Standard Edited American English. If you see that writers in your field or community often write sentences with complex punctuation, you may benefit from reading a guidebook or a writing center website to help you define what the SEAE conventions are, and explore some sample sentences in a worksheet or quiz.

> **NOTE:** One problem with guidebooks is that you have to know what a convention is—both its name and its function—to look up how to use

> it. If you've never heard of a *nonrestrictive clause* and you have no idea that *semi-colons can be used as "supercommas" in a list that includes internal commas*, how would you even know you had a problem, much less know how to look them up in a guide? To define and practice a truly new usage in a way that applies to your own writing, you will often need guidance from your instructor.

More commonly, though, writers make errors even when we are aware of the "rules" or conventions. For example, most college-level writers understand that subjects and verbs should agree: we have learned that in SEAE, *Professor Rivera analyze the data* should be corrected to *Professor Rivera analyzes the data*. So what happens?

- Writers face a high cognitive load: we are wrestling with new concepts or struggling with more intense workloads (or our phone keep beeping while we write), and we lose track of which subject goes with which verb.
- Writers default to a more familiar approach: when our home language doesn't use the same agreement pattern as SEAE, it's hard and exhausting for writers to remember to switch 100% of the time.
- Writers experiment: we try a more difficult sentence structure while stretching to meet advanced readers' expectations. In the sentence Professor Rivera of Howard University, after a seven-year collaboration with a team of twenty other scientists, analyze the data, it may seem natural to write scientists analyze even though the noun that actually connects to the verb is Professor Rivera. Writers need to experiment to learn to write interesting sentences, but that means we will often fail and need to try again.

As you look at the list of 20 Most Common Errors in SEAE, probably several of them fit into the category of a "rule" you *mostly know* but sometimes *still make mistakes* about. When you know a convention but are struggling to apply it consistently, you probably don't need to check a guidebook or do exercises. In fact, research shows that you can learn more about writing sentences by practicing on your own writing than by studying worksheets (just like you learn better swimming techniques when you're in the pool rather than watching a video about swimming). In the cases above, you would benefit most from one or more of the following resources as you act:

- Better strategies for defining where you have made usage errors in your own writing
- More practice exploring ways to improve your own sentences
- More time spent editing to meet conventions

Explore 11.3

Think of three kinds of usage "rules" or conventions that you have recently made errors in. You might look the list of 20 Most Common Errors or at a recent writing assignment for ideas. For each one, check the chart below, and write a note: "I make errors with _____ [convention] mostly because _____ [reason]." (You can write your own reason if none of those listed below seem to fit exactly.) Also give yourself a recommendation: to improve, should you refer to a guidebook, practice spotting and fixing the errors more consistently in your writing, or give yourself more time to edit your own work carefully?

Error Reasons	Benefit of using a guide or worksheets to learn and practice the convention	Benefit of learning strategies to diagnose and fix a problem in a draft	Benefit of planning more time and strategies for editing a draft
I know the convention completely, but I get distracted or overloaded while writing	Little to none	Low	High
I know the convention well or partially, but I don't use it regularly in my speaking or writing	Low	Medium	High
I know the convention partially, and I get distracted or overloaded while writing	Medium	Medium	High
I know the convention partially, but I was trying a new variation in order to meet my goals or expectations	Medium	High	High
I have seen or heard the convention used, but don't fully understand it	High	High	High

Practice

- To practice diagnosing and improving sentence errors, see Final Four Proofreading Moves, Power Sentences, or Sentence Doctor.

Learn

- To learn more about how writers can **fail productively**, see Chapter 2, Adopting Productive Writers' Habits.
- To learn more about **reflective practice**, see Chapter 4, Reflecting Throughout Your Writing Practice.

11.4 Writers Edit to Create an Appropriate and Consistent Style

Writers and readers talk frequently about a writer's "style" or "tone," often in ways that imply that it's a fixed but undefinable quality, as if writers are either born with style or have none. You may find it more helpful instead to think of style as a repeated pattern of sentences, words, and images that writers and readers agree on to help make communication more efficient, effective, and enjoyable—like the sentence-level version of a genre.

Your writing style is rhetorical, matching your goals and your readers' expectations. Part of your writing style is personal: you select words and create sentences that match your own goals as a writer. Part of your style depends on your audience: you will choose overall sentence-level patterns in part because they match what your readers in your discourse community or readers of the genre you are using expect. Like other writing patterns, an appropriate style is both stable enough to enable readers and writers to predict key elements, and flexible enough that writers can adapt it to different readers and situations.

You already know how to shift your fashion style as you move from a corporate job interview to a dance club, or from an afternoon at a sunny beach with friends to a holiday dinner at your grandparents' house. In these cases, you may keep a few elements of your personal style (a haircut, a favorite color, a pair of earrings or shoes) but you shift other elements to be appropriate for your goals and your audience. Likewise, you should choose elements of a writing style—formal or casual, concise or eloquent, energetic or objective—that match your goals as well as the expectations of the community you're writing for or the genre you're writing in.

As you compose and edit to adopt an appropriate style—or you make decisions about how to stretch the boundaries of what is "appropriate"—you might consider the following common elements.

Adjust the complexity of sentences and words

Writers use longer, more complex sentences to explore ideas in depth and show how those ideas are connected. Sentences also affect reading speed. Short sentences are faster by themselves. But if you use too many short sentences, readers stop and start a lot. This pattern eventually slows them down. Words affect speed and comprehension as well: writers who need to connect with readers who are inexperienced or unfamiliar with a topic often use simpler, more concrete words and examples, while writers who compose for advanced readers can use a pattern of more abstract words or concepts. For instance, consider the difference between describing a tree's *branches* and *leaves* to second-graders or explaining broader concepts of *photosynthesis* and *transpiration* to high school students.

Adjust the variety of sentence structures

Writers use repeated sentence structures to help readers get into a rhythm and know what to expect. (What sentence structures are repeated in this list of style components?) You can repeatedly start with a subject and verb, or you can often start with transitional phrases like "Additionally" or "However" to create a predictable, cohesive pattern. On the other hand, writers can vary sentence structures to catch readers' attention or change the energy level: a single short sentence, or a single transitional phrase, will stand out.

Adjust your active and passive verbs

No particular kind of word affects style more than verbs do. Writers can use energetic, active verbs such as *escape*, *celebrate*, or *establish* to emphasize how people decide, interact, and affect the world around them. Active verbs provide variety, engage readers, and indicate who is responsible. Writers also use more passive verbs like *is* and *are* to explain a steady state; these verbs create an evenhanded but not very exciting reading experience. (Consider the slight differences between "They *depart* tomorrow," "They *are* traveling this week," and "Their flight *is* tomorrow.") Passive verbs sometimes imply that events happened without any other person's involvement or responsibility, which is sometimes accurate ("It *was* raining") and sometimes not ("They *were* robbed"). You may encounter readers who assert that you should *always* or *never* use passive verbs, but you know that you should question rules like those and make your choices rhetorically: what verb pattern will serve your current project?

Adjust the formality of diction and tone

Writers frequently adapt the level of formality—sometimes called the *tone* or *register*—of phrases and sentences to connect with different readers. When you

write to friends or just need to check in with a team member for a quick question, you might use more slang, abbreviations, humor, idioms, or personal insights. When you write to your instructor or supervisor, or to someone you've never met, you will often use more objective descriptions, field-specific terminology, and straightforward, thorough explanations. In some fields, first- and second-person pronouns (I, we, you) give an informal impression, so writers prefer third-person references (he, she, they, it). Like most elements of an appropriate writing style, registers don't have absolute boundaries: writing that feels "casual" in one writing situation could be "professional" in another.

Adjust the elaboration of ideas and images

Writers can use a "just the facts" style or choose a sentence pattern that involves more elaboration. To increase your elaboration, you might select less-common terms that catch readers' attention ("enervated" instead of "tired"), use more metaphorical descriptions ("They felt like a puppy lost in a blizzard" instead of "They were scared"), and/or provide more specific details and examples ("The folder was full of tamale recipes, marriage certificates, and love letters" instead of "The folder included family papers"). Writers who elaborate often choose words or examples based on their connotations—the emotional connections and memories that readers have with words like "puppy" and "tamale"—rather than only their basic meaning. (Note that in most professional and public documents, a little elaboration can go a long way; you don't need a thesaurus for every sentence!)

Adjust your grammar and usage

Writers who compose documents for school assignments may think of "using correct writing" as a fundamental rule rather than a style choice. But you know that "correct grammar" is not expected in all of your writing: your friends will know which restaurant to meet you at even if your text message doesn't use complete sentences. You also know that correctness itself doesn't have a single definition: for instance, even college instructors disagree about comma usage and citation formats. Finally, correctness involves more than punctuation, and continues to evolve: words that your grandparents used frequently may now be commonly seen as biased or hurtful and thus incorrect, and you have probably seen examples recently of people using pronouns such as *they* or *ze* that would not have been seen as "correct" even a decade ago. As a writer, you will always need to choose the level and type of correctness that is appropriate for your readers.

Adjust elements of a multimodal style

Writers today need to consider how style includes more than words. Since the design, arrangement, sound, and visual components of a document are rhetorical,

you will need to consider all of the previous elements as you select pictures, graphs, fonts, layouts, music, and colors for your project. Movie posters may use simple fonts with very active photos; museum guidebooks may use repeated page layouts but more elaborate descriptions of the artwork; instruction manuals may use informal language but require clear, correct diagrams. Likewise, if your video travelogue has background music or voices, you will need to decide how much variety or elaboration you want to build into the soundtrack.

Adjust by code-switching and code-meshing

Just as you change clothing styles between workplace and leisure settings to match a "dress code," you change your writing conventions and styles as you change audiences and genres. All writers **code-switch** between using sentences that feature formal diction and or a particular set of conventions (such as in a school assignment), and using more informal, slangy, or abbreviated sentences or phrasings with our friends or family.

In addition, writers in the US may code-switch away from Standard Edited American English (SEAE) to a language or dialect that reflects other deeply rooted identities:

- Black writers may code-switch to using Ebonics or African American English.
- Writers from immigrant families or cultures may code-switch to dialects that blend English words and phrasings with words and phrasings from another language, such as Spanglish, Taglish, or Singlish.
- Writers from communities with a local language tradition, such as Appalachian, Cajun, or Pennsylvania-German English in the US, may code-switch to those dialects.

Indeed, writing scholars have argued that writers have a *right* to compose in languages or dialects other than SEAE—even in school and professional settings—and to have that writing valued for its rhetorical power and correctness.

In addition, language and culture researchers suggest that beyond code-switching—in which writers may still feel unfair pressure to use SEAE in all school assignments or professional documents—writers should consider the value of **code-meshing**, in which they help challenge or change expectations by blending different language conventions together. In order for conventions of correctness, style, and genre to evolve, some writers need to be pushing the boundaries and trying new approaches. Code-meshers can help readers see new possibilities for language use, in both formal and informal genres.

So the next time you write or see someone write, "He been talking to her about college," or "She and the other *mujeres* are working on the campaign," you might

consider whether the writer made an error—or whether you are experiencing a strong example of code-meshing that helps a writer connect to their heritage, reach their goals, relate to their audience, and perhaps even help to change the convention for future writers.

Explore 11.4

Consider how your writing style would change across two writing projects about immigration:

History 101 Class Analysis Essay: Your class has read several documents about immigration laws and patterns in the US in the early 1900s, and your instructor has assigned you to write a 1500-word essay referring to those documents and explaining how one national or local immigration policy affected both immigrants and current citizens.

Blog Post about Grandparents' Experience: Your friends are collecting stories for their blog about different immigration experiences in the twentieth century. Since they know you have an unusual background, they ask you to contribute an entry about how your grandparents came to the US.

In 3-4 sentences, describe how you would use a different style pattern for each project; you should refer to at least two of the style criteria listed in this section. Give at least one example of a sentence that you would write for one of the projects using the style choices you made.

Practice

- To practice **adjusting your sentence style**, see Diction Flexer, Expert/Novice Exploration, or Stance Switch.

Learn

- To learn more about creating appropriate **document design**, see Chapter 8, Designing Across Modalities.
- To learn more about appropriate style within different **genres**, see Chapter 13, Applying and Adapting Genres.

11.5 Reflect and Plan to Increase Your Editing Success

Since writers read our own minds, we need to use deliberate strategies as we edit in order to see our document as it is, rather than as we imagine it to be. Just as you make a plan for the research, organization, or revision of your document, you should draw on strategies like the ones below to build an editing plan. Without a plan, you may be tempted to skip or skimp on editing and just "hope for the best"—or you may think you can just "look over" a document and see what needs fixing. When you edit with one goal at a time, rather than glancing at your whole

document, you can complete this final stage of your project with the attention and success your project deserves.

Know your goals: Reflect to predict a style as you plan your document

Although writers do most of our sentence-by-sentence editing after a document draft is complete, we can benefit from taking a few minutes at the start of a writing task to predict the larger pattern for the most appropriate style. Since style is a document-wide decision that affects most or all sentences, writers benefit from identifying key style elements right from the start, the way interior decorators will choose a color pattern for a whole house or office. If you decide at the start of a project that you want to use a pattern that includes complex sentences, formal terminology, and active verbs, you can aim all your writing in that general direction. Your goal is not to agonize over every sentence, but to increase the likelihood that many of your sentences will lean toward your preferred goal.

> **Tip:** Instead of "hoping for the best," pick one or two style features that are important to readers and/or challenging for you, and set some goals: write at least one complex sentence per page, use each of three new field-specific terms at least once; upgrade one verb per paragraph from "is/are/has/seems" to more active verbs: "expands/creates/rejects/disintegrates."

Know your own sentences: Edit for your common challenges or key goals

Over many years of feedback, writers come to know where our sentence challenges lie. You may know that you tend to write sentence fragments in your early drafts as bits of ideas occur to you; that you struggle to put the correct "a / an / the" articles into sentences because your home language doesn't use articles; or that you are working with new terminology in your field and sometimes get terms confused. (My readers tell me that my sentences are too long and winding, especially in my early drafts.)

> **Tip:** Instead of "looking over" your document, pick one challenge and scan for instances of that, and then pick another to focus on. You could check every short sentence to see if it is complete, look at each noun to see if it needs an article, or search for every instance of "hydrophilic/hydrophobic" to be sure you're using the right term. To edit for style, you could check each paragraph for a feature (does it have at least one vivid-verb sentence?) or use a "find" command to check how many sentences use contractions or use "I" or "you" pronouns.

Choose your battles: Edit carefully in high-impact zones

Writers don't usually need to perfect every sentence. Some of our sentences have more visibility or power than others, and those are the ones to focus on if editing time is limited. You know that beginnings and endings can leave lasting impressions; you also know that some sections of your document will be less familiar, more difficult, or more disagreeable to readers. And you know which of your arguments or examples is closest to your heart or most important to communicate to readers.

> **Tip:** Instead of "looking over" your document, focus your editing on one high-impact area at a time. For example, look extra carefully at the first or last few sentences of the document or of specific document sections—or check each quotation you include. You could also identify your thesis or argument statement, your most complex refutation, or your most important example, and edit those sentences for clarity, correctness, and appropriateness for your audience.

Clear your head: Proofread by taking a fresh approach

Proofreading is a final stage of editing: you can proofread a whole document or just a high-impact section. Once you have made all of your decisions about the style, tone, and level of correctness that are appropriate for your document, you will need to use a proofreader's eye to ensure that you can actually spot any small problem areas that remain. Since writers tend to see what we think we wrote, rather than what's actually on the page, we need specific strategies to help us slow down and focus on the actual words of the document. For instance, you could:

- Get physically involved by skimming a finger or stylus underneath each word as you read it.
- Read your draft out loud, slowly and dramatically, standing up if possible, from a hardcopy if possible so that you can quickly mark any section where you get tripped up or tangled while talking.
- Have a friend read out loud to you as you follow along on a second copy; mark anything you hear or any spot your friend gets tangled.
- Read in reverse: last sentence, next to last sentence, next-to-next-to-last sentence (or last paragraph and then the next-to-last paragraph), so that you don't get distracted by thinking ahead to the next point of the essay.
- Read just a few lines at a time: cover a hard copy with a sheet of paper so you can see just a few lines, or narrow the window on your computer screen (or increase the font size) so just a few lines are visible.

Pay yourself first and last: Design an editing plan

Although it makes sense to edit your writing during the later stages of your process, writers who use this strategy sometimes run out of time or energy, and so we decide to just turn in the document and "hope for the best." Motivation coaches often recommend a strategy of "pay yourself first": people should try to put part of each paycheck into their "Buy a new car" savings account right away, so they don't spend it on less important goals—or use the first part of the day for exercise, reading, or important projects, so they don't spend time on other tasks and end up skipping out on an important personal goal.

Writers can't start out by editing, but we can start by making an editing plan that we will commit to using later, identifying our goals and the time we need to accomplish them. An editing plan is just as important as a research plan or a document outline: after all, if you actually do know your readers' conventions for usage and style, but you don't take time to be sure you have applied them consistently, you might be undercutting much of the other work you've put into the document.

A key part of your editing plan is **time**. In your experience, "looking over" a five-page essay might only have taken you a minute or two per page—but you should know that at that speed you will not be able to have much effect on the power, cohesion, or accuracy of your writing. Writers need to be honest with ourselves about the time and effort needed to produce powerful sentences. If you are new to making an editing plan, you might start with the following guidelines:

- Planning for 3-5 minutes per page (300 words) is good for proofreading for small usage errors, or editing for just one kind of sentence strategy at a time (such as agreements or citations).
- Planning for 5-10 minutes per page is good for revising sentences to create more variety, use more active language, manage highly technical language and terminology, or create a consistent tone or voice.
- Planning for 10-15 minutes per page overall is good for working on multiple strategies (perhaps taking several separate passes through a document) or editing a document that requires a high level of correctness.

Like many writing tasks, your effective pace will increase when you are working with a fresh, unstressed brain on a familiar task; if you will be editing while tired, working on a high-stakes task, or trying out a new genre or style, you may need to slow down even more to achieve your goals. If you end up with less time for editing than you had hoped, you'll have better success focusing on a few key areas as noted earlier than you will if you try to fix everything very quickly.

Editing your writing project is not enough by itself to turn it into "good writing," but taking time for strategic editing will always improve the impact your project has on readers.

Explore 11.5

Consider a writing task that you are working on now, or that you know you will work on soon. Write an editing plan that identifies your editing goals and behaviors, drawing on some of the strategies noted in this chapter that match your needs. See the example plan below, and include at least three guidelines for your own plan.

	Personal editing strategy for Biology 102 Lab Report #4
Correctness: Does this task need high, medium, or low levels of correctness?	Medium: Avoid major text errors that could confuse readers
Style: Which style elements are most important?	No "I/you" in sentences; use technical terms from the lab guidelines
Basic strategies: What strategies are typically most helpful?	Check especially for errors I often make: apostrophe errors and inconsistent use of past-tense verbs
Special strategy: What does this course / genre / document most need?	Review the Conclusions section slowly so that all of the analysis is clearly stated; also, check a guide to find out when to use numerals and when to spell out numbers
Timing: When will editing happen and for how long? Be specific and reasonable!	Check key sections after the first draft is complete and the results are finalized: Block time next Tuesday after breakfast and before class. Allow 10 minutes per page = 30 minutes.