

Guidelines for Ethical Editing of Graduate Student Texts



Introduction

Academia tests students' ability to communicate ideas and arguments with written words in papers, proposals, theses and dissertations. Yet students sometimes ask editors to provide professional editorial services beyond what their supervisors approve.

Editors should generally err on the side of flagging (not fixing) problems (such as sentence combining, comma splices, subject-verb agreement and other mechanics of language) for potential revision by the student. The editor should discuss the role of editing in the process of writing, which includes pre-writing (outlining and free writing), first-draft revision, and self-editing. As well, the editor should reinforce other essential knowledge, such as academic integrity, accurate citation, and plagiarism. Some graduate student supervisors, however, are more lenient when editing the writing of non-native English speakers, particularly when their research makes a significant contribution to knowledge.

The Editors' Association of Canada/Association canadienne des réviseurs (Editors Canada) developed these guidelines to aid graduate students, their supervisors, and editors in the ethical editing of English-language graduate-level texts to ensure that the work students submit is their own, only more polished. Whereas editing undergraduate student texts is restricted to flagging errors with notes and queries, editing graduate student texts is often more nuanced. The permission form is designed to help negotiate this nuance.

Editing undergraduate student texts is addressed in a companion document.

Important notes

"Text" is used throughout this document to denote graduate student work, regardless of whether the project entails a term paper, journal article, take-home examination, research proposal, or thesis.

"Guidelines" refers to the fact that this is guidance only, not prescriptive how-to instruction.

How this document is organized

We based this document on research with university faculty and administrators and with Editors Canada members who have experience working with graduate student writers. This document comprises three parts:

- guidelines to identify which editorial tasks are permitted
- practical suggestions for editors who embark on graduate student editing projects
- a generic permission form, identical for all students, to be co-signed by the editor, the graduate student, and the supervisor, stipulating what the editor may do

Part 1: Guidelines

Permission from supervisor

All graduate student and doctoral candidate clients must obtain written permission for professional editing from their supervisor that specifies what the editor is allowed to do. The editor, the supervisor and the student must clearly understand the limits of the edits permitted. The permission form may be adapted by the editor and used in lieu of a letter from the supervisor for the purpose of documenting permission.

Limits to editing

In the absence of specified limits, editors should not specify changes beyond simple correction of grammar, idiom, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics, being careful to retain content and overall structure; they should restrict work to the following tasks, as outlined in Editors Canada's *Professional Editorial Standards 2024*:

- Fundamentals of Editing A1-3, A5-A9 and A11-13, especially A1, A2.3, A3.3, A5.8, A12 and A13 (review for applicability to editing a particular text)
- Fundamentals of Editing A7, A8, and A9 and Standards for Structural Editing B2.8 (consult with student and instructor where appropriate)
- Standards for Structural Editing B2.1-2.3
- Standards for Stylistic Editing C1.1-1.4, C1.7, C2.1 and C2.2
- Standards for Copy Editing D1-4
- Standards for Proofreading E1.3, E1.4 and E2

The editor should depend on queries to the student phrased to put the onus on the student (e.g., "Please clarify this sentence," not "Do you mean X = Y?"), rather than drafting alternatives. If the editor must rewrite a sentence to illuminate a problem, the editor should retain the student's own wording as much as possible. In all cases, editors should communicate queries and suggested changes clearly and introduce no new content.

Contracts

- In addition to the permission form co-signed by the student, the supervisor, and the editor, Editors Canada recommends contracting for the editing of student texts with the student even if an editor does not usually sign a written contract with clients. Editors Canada provides an [Agreement Template for Editing Services](#) that can be used to stipulate payment terms and conditions.
- The agreed limits should be the basis of the editor's contract with the graduate student.
- The contract should stipulate acknowledgement of the editor in the finished work to ensure that readers know a professional editor was involved.

Editorial practices

- The editor should keep a copy that shows each editing iteration, either a photocopy of paper mark-up editing or a tracked-changes copy of electronic editing. (Some faculties require the student to submit such a copy as well as the original unedited and final edited versions.) The

editor should keep copies of query sheets, correspondence and correspondence notes, and other pertinent material.

- The editor should record notes following verbal interactions with graduate students in person, by phone or through a web conferencing platform.
- If the graduate student's research falls under an institution's ethics protocol (that is, if human and/or animal subjects are involved in the research and ethics approval has been obtained), the editor must be made aware of the requirements of the study's ethics protocol. The editor should be provided with a copy of the approval and of any amendments to the protocol that are subsequently requested and/or approved by the student and by any researchers working on the same project.

Part 2: Practical Suggestions

General cautions

Obtaining written permission to edit a graduate student's text may feel awkward or unnecessary, but it is the best way for the editor and the student to protect themselves from censure by the academic community. Some graduate faculties do not permit any outside editing, while others are particular about what is permitted. Since the supervisor has the final authority, the editor must determine exactly what is authorized in a particular instance. Securing permission may also be a way to get both the supervisor and the student to focus on what the editing will comprise.

Terminology

Supervisors and students may be unfamiliar with correct editorial terms or with the various types of editing; the editor should explain the various types of editorial tasks in plain language. The primary concern of supervisors and students is the content, not what they call *spelling* and *grammar* and what editors call *copy editing* and *proofreading*.

The term *stylistic editing* may be especially confusing to supervisors and students. This editorial role is well described by one graduate program director: "The editor's job is not to produce a defensible thesis; it is to produce a thesis that ... [flows] and is at least clean."

If the line between stylistic and copy editing is difficult to convey, consider using a technique suggested by an experienced Editors Canada thesis editor: "When I am doing stylistic editing, I limit myself to reorganizing sentences using the author's own words." Editors can, if so instructed, minimize the implicit rewriting by flagging spots with queries where the text could be simplified or clarified without amending it themselves. Or they can contract to edit for only what another member calls "the mechanics of writing in English," that is, the copy editing and proofreading standards of *Professional Editorial Standards 2024*, as outlined above.

Cautions specific to editing graduate student texts

Standard C6.1 provides advice for applying plain language principles relevant to editing graduate texts, including "use the intended reader's vocabulary." Members of the intended audience of academic texts are experts in a particular field of study, so the editor should become familiar with that field's specialized terminology and query this language use with special caution.

The styling of citations needs care. Most graduate students have learned to use a particular citation style, and their ability to do so is part of what is being tested. If the student has made errors, especially consistent errors, the editor should use queries to draw attention to the errors but should not correct them. The same applies in the case of failure to give citations where they would be expected; the editor should not supply them.

Standards C1.4, C1.5, D2.3 and D3.1-3.3 require checking logic and the accuracy of facts, including mathematics. When working on a student text, the editor should not, of course, question statements of fact or conclusions drawn from them in the argument. What the editor flags are the silly errors, often in incidental comments, that creep into almost everyone's writing: e.g., "Edmonton is about 5,000 kilometres east of Halifax," or "the 500-kilometre drive from Edmonton to Halifax," or "the police estimated the audience at 600, divided between 300 protestors and 700 supporters."

Editing texts from students whose first language is not English

These guidelines do not set out special rules for writers whose first language is not English (English as a Second Language students or ESL students). Some supervisors and instructors may permit lenience, but most take the attitude that students seeking degrees from anglophone universities should be able to present and defend their ideas in comprehensible English.

Few supervisors object to corrections of errors in spelling, grammar, or idiom. For example, “The cat sitted near the fire” and “The cat sat on the fire” are clear errors in, respectively, grammar and idiom. Correcting them is a matter of mechanical copy editing (standards D1.1 and D1.4). Trickier problems tend to arise with editing for style and diction and are best dealt with by queries because differences across supervisors, faculties, and universities vary. “The cat roared by the fire” is probably an error in diction but could be exactly what the student intended. Rather than changing it to “The cat roamed by the fire,” the editor can query along the lines of “Please check ‘roared’ in your dictionary.”

This approach and the tact it requires mean that editing ESL students can be time-consuming. The editor should estimate accordingly and encourage the student to view the experience as an opportunity to learn.

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