

Guidelines for Ethical Editing of Undergraduate 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 instructors approve.

Higher grades are not the goal of editing undergraduate student texts. Rather, editors flag but do not fix 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.

The Editors' Association of Canada/Association canadienne des réviseurs (Editors Canada) developed these guidelines to aid undergraduate students, instructors, and editors in the ethical editing of English-language undergraduate-level texts to ensure that the work students submit is their own. The permission form is designed to articulate these parameters.

Editing graduate student texts is addressed in a companion document.

Important notes

"Text" is used throughout this document to denote undergraduate student work, regardless of whether the project entails a term paper, take-home examination, research proposal, or undergraduate 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 undergraduate student writers. This document comprises three parts:

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

Part 1: Guidelines

Permission from instructor

All undergraduate student clients must obtain written permission for professional editing from their instructor that specifies what the editor is allowed to do—which should be to flag errors with notes and queries, without fixing them. The editor, the instructor 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 instructor for the purpose of documenting permission.

Limits to editing

In the absence of specified limits, editors should restrict their work to flagging problems for potential review with respect to Editors Canada's *Professional Editorial Standards 2024*:

- Fundamentals of Editing A1-3, A5-9 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, A9 and Standards for Structural Editing B2.8 (consult with student and instructor where appropriate)
- Standards for Copy Editing D1-4
- Standards for Proofreading E1.3, E1.4 and E2

The editing must never actually fix the content or structure of the undergraduate student's text. Consequently, the editor should not introduce changes, but rather point out correction of grammar, idiom, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics.

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 instructor, 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 undergraduate student.
- The contract should stipulate acknowledgement of the editor in the finished work to ensure that markers know a professional editor was involved.

Editorial practices

- The editor should track all changes when editing undergraduate texts and retain copies of each iteration if more than one exists.
- The editor should keep copies of correspondence, correspondence notes, and other pertinent material.

- The editor should record notes following verbal interactions with undergraduate students in person, by phone or through a web-conferencing platform.

Part 2: Practical Suggestions

General cautions

Obtaining written permission to edit undergraduate student texts 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. Editors must exercise caution when editing undergraduate texts because these students are learning academic writing skills.

The editor should contract to edit (note: flag only) for only “the mechanics of writing in English,” that is, the copy editing and proofreading standards of *Professional Editorial Standards 2024*, as outlined above.

Terminology

Instructors 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 instructors 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 instructors 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.” For undergraduates, however, the editor’s role is to guide students in this direction by restricting editing to flagging spots with queries where the text could be simplified or improved, without amending it. Err on the side of providing no structural or stylistic editing.

Cautions specific to editing undergraduate texts

Citations need care. Undergraduate writers are learning 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 D2.3 and D3.1-3.3 require checking logic and the accuracy of facts, including mathematics. When working on an undergraduate text, the editor should not, of course, question the student’s 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.” Such errors are flagged with queries, not fixed.

Editing texts from students whose first language is not English

These guidelines do not set out special rules for undergraduate writers whose first language is not English (English as a Second Language 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 instructors object to flagging 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. “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.

Transparency

The editor should copy the instructor on email communication with completed work that also includes the original text submitted by the student so that the instructor can assess how the undergraduate has worked with the editorial feedback. Such transparency ensures that the instructor can accurately assess the undergraduate’s written text.

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We acknowledge the SENSE (Society of English-language professionals in the Netherlands) Guidelines for Proofreading Student Texts in the preparation of this document. <https://www.sense-online.nl/>

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