

*edit!.../v.t. ... partly backform ... bring into order
for publication ... reword for a purpose ...
(The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary)*

EDITING YOUR THESIS

Editing is all about the shape you will want your thesis to be in:¹

- well-structured
- readable
- academically convincing (methods used in your field of research; no logical flaws; good reasoning; data to support your arguments – or rather, arguments that are supported by your data; references to prove that you have taken into account what has been going on in your field)
- nothing to distract, confuse or irritate your readers (spelling & grammar,² typography³)

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO TO GET THERE?

- Get to know your word-processing programme first!⁴ If necessary, get yourself a book helping with that – there are some good ones available, take a look at them and see what works for you. You just need to know what you can do with your programme and how to do it; it will save you a lot of time. (Should have done that before you put down your first sentence though, but that shouldn't keep you from doing it now.)

1 Be aware though that you raise expectations by any kind of high-standard printing, binding etc.: is your thesis up to that? If not, you may do more harm than good that way...

2 Actually this is mostly proof-reading, but that shouldn't make a difference to you.

3 Decide on a font that is easy to read (so preferably one with serifs, i.e. not Arial), that comes with all the options you will need and, most importantly, that you feel good about; check with the rules and regulations applying to your thesis.

4 See paper "Get yourself to write!"

- If you haven't got them already, get hold⁵ of a good dictionary that tells you not only the meaning of a word⁶ but also how to use it properly⁷ (yes, even if English *is* your first language, you can't do without), a good book on English grammar and one on usage – and learn how to use all of them!
- Know about any rules & regulations applying to the look of your thesis. Know about conventions (especially regarding references, bibliographies etc.) in your academic field as well. That doesn't mean you have to follow them if you do not consider them right; it's your decision – but you can't decide without knowing. If you aren't sure, ask (e. g. your supervisor or their assistants).
- Be aware of the purpose of things like references and bibliographies: your readers should be able to scrutinize your arguments, so give them all the information they need to find anything that you have referred to. Decide on what your references should look like – and then make sure they all look like that.
- Well in time, find someone who
 - is an expert in the English language – preferably a native speaker, but that isn't enough, they still need to be an expert in language matters;
 - is a critical reader, both in their abilities and in their being willing to tell you about their points of criticism – it's no use if they're too polite to let you know where you might have gone wrong!
 - is willing *and* able to give of their time and energy *when you need them* (and is reliable in that).

You might want or need to split tasks between several people; just make sure you split by task rather than between parts of your thesis, because the latter might show.

- Allocate enough time for editing, proof-reading (on paper!⁸) and even major corrections that might prove necessary because of that. And "enough" will probably mean "a lot". There is no point in wasting your friends' time if you can't make use of their comments because you have to hand in your thesis the day after tomorrow...
- Most importantly: be prepared to make decisions; editing is all about that! Being an academic means enjoying a lot of intellectual freedom – but that comes with an equal amount of responsibility, too. This is *your* thesis; who else is to decide what it should look like?

5 Generally second-hand will be fine, as long as you find everything you need in there – check this up. Most importantly you need to be happy with using them, otherwise you won't use them...

6 *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* is still popular – but useful only if you're happy with the explanations. If this is too advanced for you, try the *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary* instead; or the really old-fashioned *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* if you can get hold of a copy (not much use with modern words, of course); all of them are aimed at non-native speakers, the *Penguin New English Dictionary* for example isn't. Yet if you do go for the plainer ones, you will definitely need a book on usage as well! Best go to a bookshop well-stocked in this field, ask for advice and then browse all appropriate books: for your preferences are all that matters!

7 Your choice depending on whether you apply American or British usage – just make sure you stick to one of them.

8 Don't try to save money here. At least the final going-through needs to be with a paper print-out, typos to be spotted a lot easier that way.

- Writing is a process, and the editing part is not to be underestimated in importance. All the years⁹ spent on doing your research and writing your thesis will be mostly wasted if you are sloppy about this last bit.

STRUCTURE

The outer layout of your thesis reflects the inner structure: it is *not* just the table of contents or something slipped over the body of text when it's finished; it is all about how things are related. So what is the backbone of your thesis? You need to be sure about this, so you can put flesh on the bones – it doesn't work the other way round... Flaws become more apparent when you directly compare aspects that stand on the same level in the outline of your thesis, so make use of your word-processing programme, which allows you to view and print out the structure down to any desired level (see above),¹⁰ and of your friends'/readers' critical eyes: does your order of things make sense, to you and to them? If not: why not? How would it be better? If you struggle with this, don't despair; you're not stupid or anything – it's just a challenge that comes with the task, so go for it and enjoy! If everything was obvious, there would be no need for a doctoral thesis at all... Discuss structural problems with other people (including your supervisor!), even/especially if you have to explain things to them first – this is what helps you get things clear in your mind. And be prepared to make major changes should they become necessary; do *not* turn a blind eye on those flaws just because correcting them means a lot of work! Forcing things to fit something that you have realized to be wrong doesn't turn you into a mediocre academic – it means you are not an academic at all, and that is the last thing you will want your supervisor (or anyone else, including yourself) to see.

Paragraphs are a means to structure your text, too. In general, having three to a page looks good to the eye; exceptions where necessary, but they should be just that, an exception. So which thoughts are connected so closely they should be in the same paragraph? Where's something so completely different that you better begin a new paragraph? Thinking about form is thinking about meaning as well, you know.

"WORDS DON'T COME EASY TO ME..." – LANGUAGE MATTERS

There are some general guidelines to make your thesis easier to read (and they are even more important for non-native speakers because they help you avoid a lot of grammar problems at the same time). Mostly, they come down to one thing: *Keep it simple!*

- Don't go for complicated constructions just because you see them all the time. That doesn't mean you need them for academic writing (research is about proper method in searching for the truth, not about complication or even confusion), and chances

9 Well, that's true for most people at least...

10 See paper "Structure and lay-out"

are you'll get entangled in your own sentences and won't know how to get out anymore...

- Keep your sentences short. Generally, one main clause and one subordinate clause (e. g. a relative clause) should do. (If you don't know what's what: you have got a grammar book by now, haven't you?) And if you find a sentence of yours longer: is that really necessary – or are you just avoiding the hard work of making it shorter?
- So you have to become clear about what it is you are trying to say: what's the one thought that needs to go in a sentence? One thought – one sentence does make things much easier, both for you and your readers.
- Avoid the passive voice ("you are told" instead of "I tell you") – I'd say, like the plague, but that probably goes too far. Just be aware that it makes reading so much harder; so if you do know who is acting and if it is of any importance at all, please tell us.¹¹
- Know about the range and meaning of punctuation marks – use them, and use them properly! Reading Lynne Truss's "Eats, shoots and leaves" is fun and helps.¹² And know how to insert them with your word-processing programme... ("-" is not the same as "-", for example.) You might want to take a look at some book on typography as well, or check out <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typography>.¹³ By the way, exclamation marks (!) are a rare exception in academic papers... (But this isn't one, I am just trying to help you to write yours. That's why I can use "that's", "don't" etc. as well – you're not supposed to in your thesis, so spell everything out.)
- Do *not* use even a single word that you don't know the exact meaning of. If you're not sure, look it up; do use your dictionary, that's what it's there for, not to hold your door in place! (And do *not* use even a single sentence that you don't understand yourself! No kidding...)
- Being aware of the exact meaning helps with spelling as well. And the same as above applies here: if you're not sure, look it up.
- Avoid infinitive constructions wherever possible; a subordinate clause may do just as well or even better, and it's a lot nicer to read (not to mention the risk of getting entangled in a net of several infinitives...)
- Be as precise in your words as you can. Don't try to hide behind words that aren't clear – if you are unsure about what you're trying to say, sort this out first. And if you don't believe in what you're saying, why say it?

11 Yes, I am well aware that some people consider using the passive voice a necessary part of academic style. I don't. Think hard what research and academic writing actually mean, what's necessary for that – and then make up your own mind...

12 If you can't get it from a friend or the library, it's only about eight euros to buy – and remember: no *Buchpreisbindung* on foreign language books in Germany, so compare!

13 As you might have noticed, I basically stick to German typography even when writing in English, since I consider that less confusing for people in Germany. You decide: what do you think is best for your readers?

- Avoid abbreviations wherever possible; if necessary, use only ones known to your readers (that *you* know them isn't enough!) or explain.

AND THE REST...

- Save, save, save! Whenever you plan to change something, save your data first. If you can, have a new file for every step of editing, preferably on different storage devices.
- Don't even dream of using any kind of automatic hyphenation¹⁴ before you're finished with writing, editing, and proof-reading... and then have your language expert (see above) check again!
- Do you really consider it necessary or helpful to explain on two pages what you're going to do on the next three or five? A lot of people begin every single chapter like that. I find that a waste of your readers' time. Yes, there is a point in doing that when you start writing, because it makes things easier for you – but that doesn't mean your readers have to suffer from it later on; just cut it out when you don't need it anymore. Be clear in whatever you're doing instead.
- It's all about your readers: what do they need to be told to understand what you're trying to say?
- Cut it short. Nobody likes to read long theses. The better written and the shorter your thesis is, the better the mood your supervisor will be in when reading and marking it; and it's pretty obvious that it's in your interest to keep them in a good mood. So think hard about every single sentence, every single word: does it really help to make things clearer? Is it really necessary? And then it's up to you to decide...

And if you do understand some German, keep this Luther quote in mind:

TRITT FEST AUF!
MACH'S MAUL AUF!
HÖR BALD AUF!

¹⁴ Well, of course you can, just to see how much text you've got – but make sure you switch it off again before you go on.