

Guidelines for Ethical Editing of Theses / Dissertations

Introduction

Academia uses theses as one way of testing the ability of students, especially graduate students, to use written words for communicating ideas and arguments. Yet students sometimes ask editors to provide a full gamut of editorial services, even though some of those services go far beyond what thesis supervisors approve.

The Editors' Association of Canada/Association canadienne des réviseurs has developed the following guidelines to aid its members and others in the ethical editing of English-language theses at the doctoral level. If editors respect the academic purpose of thesis writing and the priorities of thesis supervisors, we can perform a useful service. As one EAC member explained: "We are a valuable resource for students as long as we edit these papers in an ethical way – a way in which ... the work that students submit is indeed their own, only more polished."

Based on research with university administrators and with EAC members who have experience working with thesis writers, this document comprises three parts:

- 1) Guidelines to help all parties (the thesis supervisor, the editor, and the student) identify what editing is or is not permitted
- 2) Practical suggestions for editors who embark on thesis editing
- 3) An Agreement Form for the three parties to use in clarifying what the editor may do. The form provides a checklist of various editorial tasks based on the definitions used in *Professional Editing Standards* (2009) and those that appear as part of the association's Standard Freelance Editorial Agreement. Users may adapt it for their own purposes.

Some usage experts specify that a masters-level student writes a "thesis," while a doctoral candidate writes a "dissertation." More lenient stylists permit "thesis" in either situation. The shorter word appears in this document.

Part 1: Guidelines

1. The thesis writer must obtain written permission for professional editing from the thesis supervisor. The supervisor's letter should specify what the editor is allowed to do. The editor, the thesis supervisor, and the student must clearly understand the limits of the work permitted. Part 3 of this document, which provides simple explanations of various types of editing, is a convenient form for the supervisor to use for this purpose.

2. In the absence of stricter limits, the editor should restrict his or her work to the tasks set out in EAC's *Professional Editorial Standards* (2009) under

- The Fundamentals of Editing A2-A12. These standards should be reviewed for applicability to editing a particular thesis, especially A8.1, A8.2, A11, and A12. Consult with the student and thesis supervisor on A9 where appropriate.
- Standards for Structural Editing B1 and B6-B7.
- Standards for Stylistic Editing C1-C10 and C12.
- Standards for Copy Editing D1-D15.
- Standards for Proofreading E2, E6-E9, E13-E14.

3. The agreed limits should be the basis of the editor's contract with the author.

4. The contract should require acknowledgement of the editor in the thesis.

5. The editing must never affect the content or structure of the student's thesis. Consequently, the editor should not specify changes that go beyond simple correction of grammar, idiom, punctuation, spelling, and mechanics and must be particularly careful in applying structural editing standards B5-B7, stylistic editing standards C1-C9 and C12, copy editing standards D8 and D11-D14, and proofreading standards E7-E8 and E13-E14. Rather than drafting alterations under these standards, 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?"). If the editor must rewrite a sentence to illuminate a problem, he or she should retain the student's own wording as much as possible. In all cases, communicate queries and suggested changes clearly and introduce no new content.

6. Until the thesis has been accepted, the editor should keep a copy that shows the editing, either a photocopy of hard-copy editing or a tracked-changes copy of electronic editing. (Some faculties require the thesis writer to submit such a copy as well as the original unedited and final edited versions.) The editor should also keep copies of query sheets, correspondence, and other pertinent material.

7. If the 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. He or she should be provided with a copy of the ethics 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

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

This determination can be difficult because thesis supervisors – and students – may not be familiar with correct editorial terms, with the various types of editing, or with the skill sets required by each (e.g., they may think that *copy editing* and *proofreading* are identical in meaning and execution). Their primary concern is the content of a thesis, not what they call *spelling and grammar* and editors call *copy editing and proofreading*.

- The term *stylistic editing* may be especially confusing. Some supervisors and students may think that it refers to formatting, and others that it means substantive editing. To editors, the term means editing for style, which falls between structural editing (for content and organization) and copy editing. Many people do not realize this step exists, yet it is the way editors fill the role 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 EAC 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 querying and by marking spots where the text could be simplified or improved without amending it themselves. Or they can contract to edit for only what another member calls “the mechanics of writing in English”; i.e., the copy editing and proofreading standards of *Professional Editorial Standards*.

- Even if an editor does not usually sign a written contract with clients, EAC recommends having one for thesis editing. It will help reinforce with both the student and the thesis supervisor what editing may or may not be done. The contract should require acknowledgement of the editor’s work on the appropriate page of the thesis. That credit will ensure recognition of the editor’s contribution, and it will alert the thesis committee to the fact that editing has occurred.

- Standard C10 requires the editor to translate “jargon into understandable terms.” The editor of a thesis should think carefully about that wording. One of *The Canadian Oxford Dictionary*’s definitions of jargon is “words or expressions used by a particular group or profession.” Members of the intended audience of a thesis are experts in a particular field of study, so the editor should become familiar with that field’s specialized terminology and query its use with special caution.

- The styling of citations needs care. Thesis writers are often required to use a particular 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 them 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 C3, D8, D11, D12, and E13 require checking logic and the accuracy of facts, including mathematics. When working on a thesis, the editor should not, of course, question the student's statements of fact or conclusions drawn from them in the argument. What the editor watches for are the silly errors, often in incidental comments, that creep into almost everyone's writing: e.g., "Edmonton is about 5000 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."
- These guidelines do not set out special rules for thesis writers whose first language is not English. Some supervisors may permit lenience, but most take the attitude that a student seeking a degree from an anglophone university should be able to present and defend his or her 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 and D4). 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.

Part 3: Agreement Form

Permission for Thesis Editing

Date _____

_____ [NAME], a student at
_____ [UNIVERSITY] in the Department/Faculty
of _____, is preparing a thesis/dissertation; the working title is
_____.

In readying it for submission, he or she has permission to seek professional editing of the kinds listed below.

_____ [SUPERVISOR'S SIGNATURE]
_____ [SUPERVISOR'S NAME, PLEASE
PRINT]
_____ [SUPERVISOR'S TITLE, PLEASE
PRINT]

I have read this document and agree to follow it.

_____ [STUDENT]
_____ [EDITOR]

Other Information about this thesis

Provide any information about the thesis or its author that might help the editor's work.

Indicate below which kinds of editing may be applied to the thesis/dissertation. The definitions here are adapted from the Editors' Association of Canada's Standard Freelance Editorial Agreement (2010), Definitions of Editorial Skills. The tasks are adapted from the standards set out in the EAC's *Professional Editorial Standards* (2009). (Both publications are available in full at www.editors.ca.)

Proofreading

“Proofreading” means checking formatted, edited material for accuracy of inputting, for adherence to a specified design, and for mechanical errors in text, such as spelling mistakes or small deviations from the (editorial) style sheet.

yes no

___ ___ Ensuring all elements are present (E6)

___ ___ Querying or correcting, if authorized to do so, typographical and formatting errors. (E7)

___ ___ Querying or correcting, if authorized to do so, inconsistencies in elements such as headings, cross-references, and titles of websites (E8)

___ ___ Assessing end-of-line word divisions and marking incorrect or awkward line or page breaks for correction (E9)

___ ___ Querying or correcting, if authorized to do so, inconsistencies in spelling, punctuation, and visual elements (E13)

___ ___ Other: _____

Additional proofreading tasks if appropriate:

___ ___ Handling proofing stages after first proofs; e.g., checking alterations and the rest of the type, including line breaks, throughout the changed portion; checking all page breaks, and checking the consistency and accuracy of elements affected by text flow, including cross-references, page headers or footers, folios (page numbers), nontext items, and the table of contents.

Copy Editing

“Copy editing” means editing for grammar, spelling, punctuation, usage, and other mechanics of style; checking for consistency of mechanics and for internal consistency of facts; indicating the hierarchy of headings and subheadings, and approximate placement of art (including graphs, tables, maps). If specified, it may include:

- metrication
- applying a system of citation
- editing captions and credit lines (e.g., citations of sources for art)
- editing front matter (title page, contents page, lists of tables, figures, and maps, and acknowledgements)

“Copy editing” is often loosely used to refer to stylistic and even structural editing or fact checking. It is not so used by the Editors’ Association of Canada.

yes no

___ ___ Correcting errors in grammar and syntax (D1)

___ ___ Correcting errors and inconsistencies in punctuation (D2)

___ ___ Correcting errors in spelling (D3)

___ ___ Correcting errors in word usage and amending infelicities and offensiveness in diction (D4)

___ ___ Establishing and maintaining consistent mechanical editing styles (e.g., capitalization, abbreviations, treatment of numbers) (D5)

___ ___ Following common practices and the faculty’s preferences for conventions such as the use of italics, boldface, and underlines, of metric or imperial measurements, and of abbreviations and symbols, the treatment of technical and trademarked terms, and the choice of spelling and punctuation styles. Developing and/or following an editorial style sheet (a list of words or terms that must be spelled, capitalized, hyphenated, or otherwise treated in specific ways in this manuscript) (D6)

___ ___ Querying errors or inconsistencies in the style of citations and references; querying any that appear to be missing. Querying missing acknowledgments or permissions for the reproduction of copyright material. (The editor has no responsibility for obtaining reprint permissions but may point out where they may be needed.) (D7, D14, D15)

___ ___ Ensuring internal consistency of text and art or figures, and of cross-references (D8)

___ ___ Ensuring consistency and accuracy in the styling of tables, graphs, and other art, including their labels, captions, and text mentions (D9)

___ ___ Treating non-English terms in English text appropriately and consistently (D10)

___ ___ Querying questionable items that should be checked for correctness (e.g., proper names, titles, dates, quotations) and apparent errors of other facts within the realm of general knowledge only (D11)

___ ___ Querying apparent errors in mathematical material (e.g., incorrect metric/imperial conversions) (D12)

___ ___ Ensuring all elements are present and complete

___ ___ Other: _____

Stylistic Editing

“Stylistic editing” means working to clarify meaning, polish language, and other non-mechanical line-by-line editing.

yes no

___ ___ Querying, or correcting if authorized to do so, confusing sentence structures, wrong word choices, and ambiguous passages (C1-C3)

___ ___ Checking tables, figures, and visual material for clarity (C5)

___ ___ Querying, or correcting if authorized to do so, infelicitous or illogical connections and transitions. Checking sentences and paragraphs for variety and consistency (C6-C9)

___ ___ Querying or eliminating inappropriate jargon, redundancies, and verbosity (C10, C12)

___ ___ Other: _____

Structural Editing

“Structural Editing” means assessing and shaping material to improve its organization, content, and suitability for the intended audience and purpose. Among the few structural editing tasks that may be undertaken for these are:

yes no

___ ___ Querying imbalances in content (B6)

___ ___ Querying material that might be presented in another form (e.g., number-laden text as a table) (B7)

___ ___ Identifying and flagging possible legal problems (e.g., libel, plagiarism, privacy violations, missing reprint permissions, failure to give sources) or departures from social acceptability (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, or other bias) (A9)

___ ___ Other: _____

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