

10 TIPS FOR TECHNICAL COPYEDITING

Technical copyediting focuses on preparing complex scientific and technical information for publication. The reports, policy briefs, and manuscripts being edited can be destined for global publication, land on desks in the world's most influential organizations, and inform governmental and scientific thinking. While many requirements of general copyediting also apply to technical work, the stakes are usually higher in these documents. With that in mind, here are ten tips for improving your technical copyediting. Enjoy!

1. Check your style

Clients prefer different writing and citation styles, whether you're copyediting for an organization or a journal. Points like whether to hyphenate certain words, use British or American spelling and punctuation conventions, write out numbers in full, or use numerical or author/date citations should all be determined before starting, to optimize the editing time. Some organizations, such as the World Bank, will even have their own style guide to ensure the finished document aligns with their organizational needs.

2. Be consistent

Professionally edited manuscripts should be consistent throughout in terms of capitalization, punctuation, currencies, use of measurements, etc. For example, while some authors write '%' and others 'percent' or even 'per cent', your document should never use these interchangeably. Pick the most appropriate—which may often be the one most commonly used or that specified in the style guide—and use it throughout the document. Use the 'replace' function in Word to edit unwanted variants quickly.

3. Learn to triage

When a client's budget, timeframe, or document length dictates the level of editing possible, a skilled copyeditor can quickly assess and 'triage' the document, picking out the most important aspects to gain big wins. If time is short, combing the document for a misplaced semi-colon will have far less impact than chopping down repetitive paragraphs and improving the overall content.

4. Work with your authors

Each organization or publication has its own requirements and preferred way of working. While some welcome queries and have the time to consider feedback, others require a product as close to finalized as possible, with few comments to address. It's essential to determine the clients' expectations, be flexible to their needs, and give them what they want.

5. Align the voices

Documents are often a compilation of various authors' work, potentially across organizations and institutions. As such, different sections may have distinct voices and writing styles. It's important to align the voices throughout to ensure no one section stands out, particularly for being overly complex or simple compared to the rest of the document. Aligning voices makes the writing flow better and also avoids potentially embarrassing authors who may not have known the level of complexity required in their text.

6. Read it. Read it again...

Regardless of the document's length, it should be read at least twice. The first pass through the document should be a fast, superficial edit that fixes the most problematic grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other glaring issues that make the text sloppy. The subsequent passes should be more meticulous, focus on removing repetitive ideas, and improve clarity and flow.

7. Practice diplomacy

Consider the authors' feelings when leaving comments, queries, or suggestions. It's easy for authors to feel criticized when they receive a document back with many comments, particularly if that feedback is bluntly worded. Always be polite and diplomatic, and offer a suggestion based on your best guess, particularly if time is short. For example, 'The meaning of this sentence is a little unclear; do you mean XXX? If so, I suggest revising the text to XXXX'.

8. Don't be afraid to rephrase

Copyediting doesn't stop at fixing grammar, spelling, and punctuation; the overall goal is to optimize the document based on the client's requirements. It might be that a sentence needs fully rephrasing to convey the intended meaning. Don't be afraid to rephrase sentences fully; after all, the client hires the copyeditor to deliver the best product possible, including making the text clear and concise.

9. Check your references

A great technical editor will always check that the in-text mentions and final references match. Having a source cited in the document's text but missing from the bibliography/references, or vice versa is more common than you'd think in technical writing. This error often occurs when a dynamic citation manager, such as Zotero or Mendeley, isn't being used or if the sources have become unlinked from the software.

10. Don't forget the formatting

The visual formatting of a document is often crucial to its success. While a good-looking report can't disguise lousy content, a visually jarring report—for example, one mixing various fonts, text sizes, and heading styles—can impact how readers receive it. Similarly, cluttered figures and tables can detract from good content. While the level of formatting required may vary, basic alignment of text styles should always be incorporated during editing, with improvements to figures and tables made where possible.