MY PERSONAL CHECKLIST ✓
What Do I Want to Work On? How Do I Want to Work On It?

The Why and How of Your Personal Checklist to Edit in Layers

Your personal checklist motivates you to edit in layers. Your checklist creates your personal safety net to help catch your usual writing errors.

Personal checklists change over time as your good editing habits become automatic good writing habits. Once you no longer resort to throat-clearing phrases, and you routinely consider if passive or active voice works best in a sentence, you can strike these items from your checklist and add your next challenge – perhaps rooting out those pesky misplaced modifiers.

It's Personal – Adopt and Adapt

No two personal checklists are the same. That's what makes them personal. You are more likely to use your personal checklist if it speaks to you.

To help you construct your personal checklist we offer sample items from our students' personal checklists. Some items are funny, some items are serious self-admonitions; but all were designed by students to motivate good editing habits.

Our Checklist Categories

To help you find sample checklist items, we grouped items in categories that parallel the 5-layers and include subtopics within each layer. We start with Prepare to Edit and end with Patricia O'Conner's "How to Know When You Are Finished" from *Words Fail Me*.

Create Your Own Checklist

Download the checklist, check the items you want to include, and save your personal checklist to your computer. You can then edit the checklist as often as you like. You can also type your own checklist items in the spaces provided and they will appear in your personal checklist. Remember to save each time you update your checklist.

P●int First
LEGAL WRITING ACADEMY

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1. Prepare to Edit – Get Distance and Use Fresh Eyes, Maintain Editing Sanity, Make an Editing Pledge

1.1 Distance and Fresh Eyes

Get Some Distance: schedule a separate editing time.

Get Some Distance: If I don't have time, I can change my activity (make a pot of tea, get a coffee, or grab a piece of chocolate).

Put the document aside for at least an hour or longer if possible.

Writing Under Time Pressure: To cope with time pressure, I will allocate a finite number of minutes and I will not go over that time period.

Add your own:

1.2 Editing Sanity

Refrain From Doing Everything at Once: I pledge to stop editing as I write.

Use My Checklist to keep from editing everything at once.

Slow down; cross each item off the checklist once I have edited accordingly.

Tape a copy of this list above my desk. It works!

Print It! Let's be honest, I make errors when I edit on screen.

Print It! Make corrections in the margins and use different colours to identify the things you want to correct in the electronic copy.

Look at the Checklist – What can I take off? – I don't need this anymore. "Yeah!" What should I add on? – Time for new challenges – Shout, "Bring It On".

Add your own:

1.3 My Editing Pledge: Written with a Grin

I will actually edit and not just skim the document with a smug sense of self-satisfaction for being so clever.

I will muster the nerve to ask someone else to read it.

I will read from a printed copy, even if a tiny bit of my environmentalist soul dies.

Add your own:

2. The Big Picture Read – CAP: The What (context), Who (audience), and Why (purpose)

2.1 Overall Big Picture Read

Start with 3 key questions:

What is the situation?

Who are the readers? – present and future readers, their characteristics and needs?

What is the purpose? – inform, recommend, update, warn, advise or persuade?

Write a note beside each paragraph on what the paragraph is about. Then use the notes to check that I meet the context, audience, and purpose.

Add your own:

2.2 Context

Re-read the instructions – Did I do what I was asked?

Make a quick list of important facts and ideas. Are they all included?

Did I provide the readers with the information they need?

Do I need to add a fact section?

Do I need more information?

Add your own:

2.3 Audience

Write down who the readers are – current and future.

Take on the reader's persona and reread the document.

Skim through the document as though I were the reader. Did the key messages stand out?

Review each paragraph as though I am the reader, then ask, "Can I tell the writer why the paragraph is included?" Or, am I left asking, "Why are you telling me this?"

Could my "well-informed neighbor" understand this legal writing?

Would I be able to explain the document confidently to a person unfamiliar with the matter?

Check that my vocabulary and detail level meet the reader's need.

Ask: "Have I included any concepts that are unnecessary for this reader to know?"

Have I adopted the right degree of formality? Does it sound pompous? Too colloquial?

Add your own:

2.4 Purpose

Confirm the Purpose. Am I explaining, predicting, persuading, memorializing?

List the purpose of each paragraph and section. Check this against my outline.

Can the reader make a decision or take action after reading the document?

Will the reader know what to do next (if anything)? Have I made the choices clear?

Do all my points relate to the document's thesis? Anything missing? Anything extraneous?

Does the Introduction match the Conclusion?

Does my analysis support the Introduction and Conclusion?

Does the paper meet the purpose I set out to do?

Confidentiality: Do I need to put a solicitor-client privilege message in the document?

Did I write the predictive memo impartially?

Did I apply the law to the facts of my own case and reach a conclusion?

Have I made my case in a persuasive document?

Did I include opposing arguments in a predictive document?

Add your own:

3. Structure: Point-First Writing and Stress It Right

3.1 Overall Organization

If I'm pressed for time: Don't worry – just do a structure edit.

Create a "Headings and Topic Sentence" document. Cut and paste the headings and topic sentences into a new document. If I only read the headings/topic sentence document, with nothing else, can I get the gist of the work's message?

Highlight each topic sentence and header – Read it through just looking at these. Does it flow?

Did I organize the document with a clear introduction, middle, and conclusion?

Do I have enough white space to help my points stand out?

Is there a table of contents for long documents?

Does the document follow:
   i.   Context
   ii.   Point
   iii. Details
   iv.   Point Reiterated or Applied?

Have I organized the document effectively? Will the hierarchy of my ideas stand out?

Does the positive information stand out? Is the negative information de-emphasized?

Add your own:

3.2 Introductions: Point-first and client-centered writing

Did I shoot myself in the foot in the first sentence? Is it a snore and a bore?

Have I kept my readers guessing to the end? Or can they see my point immediately?

Ask myself – Did I lead with the point of the document?

Remember, this is not a mystery novel, I am not trying to create suspense.

Does the central point emerge quickly?

Can readers get the answer just by reading the document's introduction and the introduction to each section? Does the introduction state my conclusion and reasons?

Does my introduction tell the reader what is coming up (topic sentence) and why they are reading it (point first)

A trick: Look at the last sentence of each paragraph and see if that sentence works even better as the point-first or topic sentence.

Add your own:

3.3 Sections: Point-first

Is the document broken down into manageable sections?

Does the first paragraph of each section summarize the conclusion of that section?

Does my section's introduction give the answer with a "because"?

Ask myself – Did I lead with the point of the section?

Add your own:

3.4 Headings

For each heading ask myself:
1. What is the purpose of this heading?
2. Does it articulate a point? or,
3. Does it ask a question that is immediately answered in the topic sentence?

Headings: Are they informative and descriptive enough?

Do the topic sentences and headings match? But don't repeat?

Do the headings describe the contents of the section or paragraph?

Does each paragraph relate to its heading? (If not, create another heading.)

Are my headings creative enough to engage the reader?

Rewrite all mundane headings!

Do I need any structural headings?

Should I add any sub-headings?

Are there enough headings?

Are there headings I can use as a tool for persuasion?

Add your own:

3.5 Paragraphs and Sentences

3.5.1 Paragraphs

Remind myself, readers absorb information best in relatively short chunks.

Review each paragraph and ask myself:
1. What is the point of the paragraph (is there a point)?
2. Does this point further the argument or thesis?
3. Why do the details matter to the reader and to your argument?
4. Does the topic sentence explain this point?
5. Is the context of the paragraph stated before the details?

Did I take advantage of the paragraph's stress positions – first and last sentences?

Does every paragraph have a topic sentence?

Does each paragraph deal with only one topic or idea?

Does each paragraph adequately develop the topic?

Are there roughly 2-3 paragraphs on each page?

Highlight the first and last sentence in the paragraph. Does the paragraph have a conclusion? Some point of emphasis?

Review every paragraph:

1. Does a topic sentence begin every paragraph?
2. Does the last sentence in each paragraph "pack a punch"?
3. Does every paragraph discuss one new topic?
4. Do my paragraphs flow easily from one to the next?

Add your own:

3.52 Sentences

Do complex sentences need to be broken down into bite-size sentences?

Are the most important words in the stress position?

Beginnings, Middles and Ends – Did I put the important points at the beginning and the end?

Does each sentence say something new?

Add your own:

4. Continuity

4.1 Continuity Fresh Start

Take a breather! Start with a fresh copy of the document. Remember, this is the "time shift" needed to return to the document with a fresh perspective.

Print a fresh copy. Otherwise, I will get confused.

Shift gears from the macro to the micro edit.

Add your own:

4.2 Transitions

Ask: Do I need a transition at the beginning of each paragraph?

What is my favorite transition term? Have I overused it?

What can I use instead of "therefore" and "however"?

Highlight transitions words – Did I use good variety?

Are the major points connected by transition words or sentence structure?

What is my transition word or phrase linking each paragraph?

Do my paragraphs flow easily from one to the next?

Should the paragraph's last sentence be the next paragraph's topic sentence?

Add your own:

4.3 Ambiguous Pronouns and Inconsistent Terms

This, It, Those, There, That, Them. Are these pronouns properly linked to the subject? Should I replace them with the actual subject?

Highlight every It, This, or That – make sure they do not begin the sentence.

Change "It is" and "There are" to the sentences' true subject.

Check pronouns – Are they connected or disconnected to the noun?

Ah – not another free-floating pronoun. Replace it.

Add your own:

5. Clarity: Cut, Trim, Remove all Stumbling Blocks

5.1 Clarity Fresh Start

Print before the clarity edit and do a happy-dance. No, really. The happy-dance is a must.

Reward myself with chocolate – I am almost finished.

Print another fresh copy. Otherwise, I will get confused.

Shift gears from the macro to the micro edit.

I am too long winded – Brevity is my new goal.

Cut, Cut, Cut is my new slogan.

Don't get carried away – Do not sacrifice clarity for brevity. I must remember that some complex ideas need more explanation. Sometimes more words can increase clarity.

Look at the Checklist Clarity Items – What can I take off? What should I add on?

Add your own:

5.1 Sentence Structure (SVO) and Length

Are the subject, verb, and object in each sentence close together?

Is the subject before the verb?

Are there too many qualifiers or conditions before you get to the subject? Are the qualifiers intrusive or helpful?

Are my sentences too long? Is there enough variety in length?

Are the sentences not much more than 25 words?

Are any sentences more than three lines long? Do the long sentences need edits?

Have I used parallel phrasing?

Did I start any sentences with "This", "That" and "It"? What is the sentences' true subject? What does "This", "That" and "It" refer to?

Add your own:

5.2 Verbs (Precise, Strong, Less Passive and More Active)

Have I chosen precise verbs?

Are there better verbs I could use to illustrate my point?

I will vigilantly check for passive voice.

Have I used active voice sentences for the most part? Have I used passive voice for a reason?

Hunt for all the "to be" verbs. Convert them to more precise action verbs.

Are there any nominalizations? Can I change them to verbs?

Use the find function to hunt for "ion", "ment", "ent, and "ant" to find nominalizations – then rewrite.

Nominalizations freeze the action of the verb into a noun – convert them.

Hunt for "by" – then ask if the sentence can be strengthened by changing to the active voice.

Check if the sentence you wrote was intended to be active or passive.

Passive Voice – Am I being lazy or is this a deliberate choice? I can use passive voice consciously for:
1. an unknown or unimportant actor
2. de-emphasizing the actor and emphasizing the action
3. detached abstraction
4. distancing the actor
5. creating an effective transition

Add your own:

5.3 Wordiness

Try to cut each section by 10%.

Try to cut each section by 20%.

Cut, but don't mess up the message.

Have you used extraneous words?

Are there any legal Twins and Triplets?

Are there any noun strings?

Have I eliminated throat-clearing expressions?

Reread the bulky words and phrases list – then edit one more time.

Avoid "in connection with", "with respect to", and "with regard to".

Hunt for "of" and tighten the phrase.

Have I eliminated all compound clusters, doublets and triplets, and throat-clearing expressions?

Have I used the most concise terms possible? Am I using concrete words, rather than abstractions?

Did you finally let go of all those lovely adjectives and adverbs?

Adjectives and adverbs: be wary of descriptive words that unwittingly insert opinion into objective writing.

Adjectives and adverbs. Test Them: Will the sentence be just as good without them?

Add your own:

5.4 Wordiness and Quotations

If I pasted in block quotations, can I replace them with explanations or paraphrasing?

Is this entire quotation necessary, or will just the key words do?

Is there an introduction for the quotation?

What is the value-added by including this quotation? (What is the quotation's point? Could I summarize it just as well?)

Add your own:

5.5 Modifiers –Do I Need Them? Are They In Their Rightful Place

Where is the modifier? Can I find the modifier's noun, verb, or pronoun?

What a great modifier. Now put it in its place.

Do I need every modifier? Keep only adjectives and adverbs that help and put them where they belong, close to the nouns or verbs they modify.

Look for all the adverbs (ending with "ly") – Try to cut them out.

Add your own:

5.6 Stumbling Blocks: Word Choice, Negativity

Do I know the meaning of every word I have used? Could I define each word if asked?

Did I use words I would use in conversation?

Have I avoided arcane words, legalese, and jargon?

If legalese or uncommon words are needed are they sufficiently defined for the reader?

Have I avoided ambiguous terms that could lead to confusion?

Have I used words familiar to my reader? Is the vocabulary appropriate?

Have I avoided clichés?

What are my favorite legal phrases and throat-clearing phrases? Have I avoided them?

OK – one more read through for unnecessary legal language. Get rid of:
1. "As per…"
2. "Pursuant to…"
3. "Such…"
4. "It is important to note…"
5. "For the reasons detailed therein…"
6. "It is safe to say…"

Remember who is the audience. Ask yourself: Is the word used too technical, too plain, or just plain extraneous?

Have I used too many negatives?

Can a sentence that uses negatives be rewritten into a positive sentence?

Look for words such as "except", "unless" and "until" that are really negatives.

Have I used double negatives?

Add your own:

6. Surface Errors: Take the Time to See It Through, Tackle Spelling and Grammar Demons

6.1 Take the Time:

Use more than one technique when editing to prevent familiarity from affecting my proofreading effort.

Print the document and re-read it.

Run spell and grammar check – But don't rely on these to catch my errors.

Read the document out loud.

Use my word processor's "Read Out Loud" function.

Get someone else to read the document, unless it is confidential.

Read the draft backwards, one sentence at a time to prevent seeing what isn't there.

Do my headings have consistent numbering?

Is the technical formatting of the work product (sub-headings, font, footer, header, etc.) professional and flawless?

Make sure citations are correct and any appendices are referred to appropriately within the body and labeled correctly at the end of the document.

Are there page numbers on each page?

Is there a date?

Have you labeled the parties correctly and consistently?

Make sure your boss's/professor's name is spelled correctly.

Did you check the format of your document?

Is there enough white space to make it easy to read?

Did you leave any "widow" headings (headings left at the end of the page and the paragraph begins on the next page)?

Do you use the same font consistently throughout?

Have you used the style or format rules required for this document?

Check for accuracy in footnotes, supporting appendices, bibliography, page numbers, title page, etc.

Add your own:

6.2 My Spelling Weaknesses

Look for "affect" vs. "effect", "occurred" vs. "ocured", "there", "their", and "they're"

Check spelling – have you mistakenly used the wrong homonym?

Stop mixing up "Its" and "It's". Really – you know the difference.

Add your own:

6.3 My Grammar Weaknesses

6.3.1 Verbs and Sentence Structure

Make sure there are no run-on sentences.

Do you have the right tense for your verbs?

Did I avoid shifting verb tenses unnecessarily throughout the document?

Add your own:

6.3.2 Proper pronouns and plurals

Who, Whom, Whose, and That – check each one.

Add your own:

6.3.3 Punctuation

In order to use commas correctly, I will read my work out loud as if I am the reader.

In order to use semicolons correctly, I will carefully decide how I punctuate independent and dependent clauses.

Wake up from my comma coma. Use them right.

Add your own:

7. "How to Know When You Are Finished" *from Patricia O'Conner*

You are hung up on trivialities.

You are revising your revisions and the revisions of revisions.

You are making things worse (always save the original version).

It may not be perfect, but you gave it your best shot.

It is good enough and you are sick of looking at it.

Your allotted time has run out – 10 minutes ago. Stop.

You like it!

The person you asked for a second opinion likes it.