

Writing skills: checking for errors

Before submitting the essay, you should have one final check through to ensure that you have avoided making the sorts of errors that can creep into your work. You can do this by reading through the essay on the computer screen but most people find that it is easier to spot errors on paper so you might like to print a copy and go through it with a pen in your hand so that you can circle errors when you spot them.

The list contains some of the things that you might like to check before submission. The points listed will help you to spot some of the commonest problems that occur.

1. Read through the list and note any of the points that you think would help you in checking your own work.
 2. Add the relevant points to the template to make a personalized checklist.
 3. Consider whether there are any other points that are not listed that you would like to add. If so, type these into the checklist.
 4. Save or print the list.
 5. When you have completed your piece of coursework, use the checklist to give your work a final polish.
 6. When your work is returned to you, check to see if your lecturer made any comment about errors that were not on your checklist. If so, make sure that you add these to your next checklist.
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- Check spelling (make sure spell check is set to UK English and not US English)
 - Check grammar and readability of the essay. Reading sentences out loud can help this.
 - Ensure that sentences do not start with conjunctions such as 'and', 'but' or 'because'.
 - Ensure that sentences do not end with prepositions such as 'of', 'for' or 'to'.
 - Make sure each paragraph contains a complete idea or argument and that it flows from the preceding paragraph and into the paragraph that follows.
 - Make sure each paragraph 'touches base' with the question. This will strengthen the focus of the essay and help to filter out irrelevant material.
 - Is there an introduction that explains the content, purpose and structure of the essay?

- Is there a conclusion that draws together all the strands of argument from the body of the essay into a direct answer to the question posed by the essay?
- Remember that the use of contractions/elisions is inappropriate in academic writing. Eliminate all instances, changing 'can't' to 'cannot', 'hasn't' to 'has not', 'won't' to 'will not' and so on.
- Check that there is no confusion between 'it's' (short for 'it is' which should be written in full) and 'its' (possessive form for objects – the object equivalent of 'his' – for example, 'the court opened its doors at 10am'.
- Avoid the use of the first person in any form (I, one, we) with a more abstract approach to writing – 'this essay will outline' rather than 'I will outline', 'it could be argued' rather than 'one could argue' and 'a common principle can be seen' rather than 'we can see a common principle'.
- Does the department/lecturer have a preference in relation to gender-neutral language and has this been adhered to in the essay?
- Ensure that the essay avoids the use of unnecessary Latin whilst making sure that necessary Latin phrases, such as *mens rea* and *res ipsa loquitur*, are used correctly and written in italics.
- When a word has a legal meaning that differs from its everyday meaning, make sure that the two are not used together as this can cause confusion.
- Make sure the written style is appropriate.
- Check that references are provided for all quotations as well as legal principles and ideas that are attributable to a particular writer.
- Ensure that references are complete.
- Make sure that the style used for references is consistent throughout the essay.
- Remember that plurals are not confused with the possessive: for example, 'in the 1990s' is a plural phrase referring to a collection of several years so it does not need an apostrophe.
- Provide page references (and paragraph references, where approach, for case law) for all quotations.
- Find out what the 'house style' of the department is and ensure that it is adhered to throughout the essay.
- Provide a full bibliography.
- Check that all cross-referencing is accurate.

- Ensure that references to Internet sources include the date upon which the website was accessed.
- Ensure that long quotations are presented in block format.
- Is a long quotation necessary or can the idea be paraphrased to save words?
- Does the essay comply with the word limit?
- Make sure that the essay is well-presented and looks polished.
- Ensure that case citations are complete and correct with the names of the parties *only* in italics.
- Check for hanging headings at the bottom of the page and reformat to eliminate these.
- Check for unnecessary capitalization. Only proper nouns and words that start a sentence should be capitalized.
- Does the essay make sense?