Essays: Editing

- **Print a hard copy.** Always print off a hard copy of your essay before you begin to edit. Any changes or revisions can then be made on the hard copy in pencil for easy reference.

- **Identify your thesis.** The thesis statement is the most important part of the paper. Make sure you can locate it and identify where it falls in the introductory paragraph.

- **Evaluate your thesis.** Read and evaluate your thesis statement:
  - Does it have a point?
  - Is it an opinionated statement?
  - Is the thesis statement referred to and proven in your essay?
  - Can you tell from the thesis statement what your essay is about and what will be proven?

- **Have topic sentences.** Make sure that each main paragraph has a topic sentence; that it identifies the topic of that paragraph and that it holds the paragraph together.

- **Check for coherence.** Check each paragraph for clarity and coherence to make sure that each one has a central theme. Ask yourself: Is the topic sentence supported by evidence and examples? Does the paragraph make its point?

- **Include an introduction and a conclusion.** The introduction should be structured from general to specific, starting with a broad, general grabber statement, then becoming more focused as you near the thesis statement at the end of the introduction. The conclusion should not introduce any new material. It should directly or indirectly restate what has been said in the thesis statement. The last sentence in a conclusion should be a statement of interest that either reflects on the past or anticipates the future.

- **Cut down wordiness.** Check the required length for the essay and make sure that you are well within the boundaries. An extra page or two might be interpreted as an inability to prove your thesis statement effectively.

- **Use fresh language.** Avoid using colloquialisms, clichés, slang etc. because readers are so used to these that they tend to skim over them. Colloquialisms, clichés, and slang end up losing all meaning and sentiment for the reader. Try to use new expressions whenever possible.
Edit for the active voice. Always try to write in the active voice. It is a more concise style of writing and gives clarity and immediacy to the action.

For example:
Passive: The accident was witnessed by five people.
Active: Five people witnessed the accident.

Edit out repetition. Don’t say the same thing more than once, even if it’s reworded. Make sure that every sentence and every word is necessary and adds new meaning to the sentence.

For example:
Repetitive: His extreme strength and supreme power were evident from the way he lifted up the car with one hand.
Improved: His great strength was evident from the way he lifted up the car with one hand.

Answer the question. The most important thing about writing an essay is making sure that you are answering the question that was given. Students often answer the question that they think the teacher is asking, or try to incorporate everything they know about the topic into the essay. To combat this, have the question in front of you and refer back to it and to your thesis statement as you are writing and editing. Even if you have written a beautifully crafted essay, the teacher can’t give you full marks if you haven’t answered the question.

Have someone else read it. Get a friend or classmate to read the essay over so that you can check coherence, grammar and structure. Others often catch things in your writing that you might have missed.

Identify typical errors. Go back through old assignments that have already been marked and see what kinds of mistakes you typically make. Read through the teacher’s comments and suggestions on old papers, and examine your new essay for those same mistakes.

Use active verbs. Avoid using constructions of the “to be” verb, such as, “There are”, “She is”, “You were”, “I was” etc. especially at the beginning of the sentence. Replacing these with active verbs will make your writing more interesting to read.

For example:
Incorrect: There are many provincial parks spread out across both Southern and Northern Ontario.
Correct: Both Southern and Northern Ontario contain a large number of provincial parks.