Tips for editing your writing for grammar, punctuation, etc.

First and foremost, if this is something you struggle with at all, don’t try to focus on content and structure at the same time. If you notice errors at this stage, go ahead and fix them, but give yourself at least one pass through the paper dedicated specifically to looking at the words and sentences.

- Try to allow some time between the drafting and the editing (more than a day, if you can manage it).
- If you know of specific issues that you may have (e.g. unnecessary commas or sentence fragments), it can be useful to look specifically for this on one pass through your paper. It’s a good idea to develop a list of your problem areas if you don’t already have a sense of errors you’re likely to make in drafting.

The second most important tip is to find a way to make yourself see what is really on the page (as opposed to what you meant to write). This is harder than it sounds. Our brains have a tendency to read past errors to the meaning if at all possible. Normally, this is a blessing, but when editing (especially one’s own writing), it’s a handicap. Here are some strategies that may help; experiment until you find one (or a combination) that seems to work for you:

- Print a hard copy for this
- Read draft out loud. This slows you down, and you may hear problems better than you can see them.
- Read backwards, one sentence at a time. This really makes you look at each sentence individually, not as part of a stream of ideas.
- Read draft to a partner, who can point out when something doesn’t make good sense or seems awkward.
- Have a partner read out loud to you, asking them to read exactly what you’ve written. You may hear something that differs from what you intended to write.

Finally, a word of warning about two popular techniques for editing:

- If you like to have someone else read your paper, make sure that they only point out errors, not fix them. If someone else makes corrections, it has become a collaborative project—which is fine if it’s a group assignment, but if you are being graded individually, it misrepresents your skills. It also deprives you of the opportunity to figure out the correction yourself and so improve your own skills.

- If you use spellcheck/grammarcheck, remember that it will not catch every error, and the suggested correction may not really be what you need. So don’t over-rely on it. (Don’t ignore it, either: It is useful for some kinds of typos and other errors.)