

Why excellent editing is like a car wash

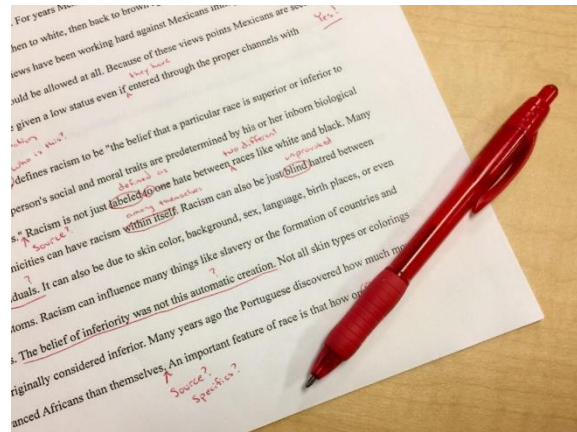
Your draft text of that brochure, speech, news release, journal article, annual report or personnel manual is done. Now, it's ready for editing.

Can you just click the "Spelling & Grammar" icon on the "Review" menu in MS Word, sit back and relax while the computer program edits your document for you?

Well, you can. Don't count on that "quick-and-easy" method to give you a well-edited document that will keep your readers interested though.

Excellent editing involves a multistep process that thoroughly scrubs your manuscript much like a car wash cleans your vehicle.

The first high-pressure spray of water in a car wash clears off loose dirt and mud splatters. The first round of editing fixes obvious formatting errors. Did the font change from paragraph one to paragraph two when that wasn't supposed to happen? Are there huge gaps of white space between words? Did the text skip a line in the middle of a sentence?



Suds and soft brushes scrub your vehicle during the second round of cleaning. Round two of the editing process is the spell-check. An excellent spell-check goes beyond just spelling each word correctly. Does the word have multiple correct spellings? If so, which one is the dictionary's preferred spelling? Which one is appropriate for your audience? What are the different definitions for the word? Do any of those definitions really fit what your document is trying to say, or would a different word convey your meaning better? Should Mr. Smith's name be spelled "Smythe?" Is "J." his correct middle initial?

Some car washes call the third round of cleaning a "bottom blast." A high-pressure spray clears the embedded grime off your vehicle's undercarriage. The next round of editing delves deeper into your manuscript to reword garbled grammar and to get rid of redundancy. Now your prose is looking better, but it still won't wow your readers.

Round four of the car wash rinses off the suds and leaves your vehicle clean but dull looking. In round five, blowers dry the dampness leftover from the rinse cycle. Then round six applies liquid hot wax to polish your vehicle to a brilliant shine. A few more rounds of editing polish your document so that it doesn't just say what you want to say but does it with impact. Long sentences break into shorter ones. Limp sentences perk up as active voice replaces ho-hum, passive voice. Clarity of meaning replaces inconsistent statements. Out go the trite expressions. In come

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attention grabbers that give your document its unique personality. Smooth sentence flow polishes your document to a high gloss.

Car wash workers use soft rags in round seven to mop up residual water droplets from your windshield. Proofreading in the next round of editing mops up any remaining errors. Maybe a comma is missing from a string of adjectives modifying a noun. Maybe a proper name is capitalized on page three but not on page 17. Maybe a hyperlink in a footnote has two letters in the URL transposed so that “Page not found” appears when you click on it. Maybe the citation in that footnote is incomplete according to the style guide that you’re using. Maybe a check for accuracy reveals that the historical incident described on page nine didn’t happen in the 18th Century but in the 19th Century.

Many car washes offer free vacuum stations where you can suction the grit out of your floor mats, the dust off your dashboard and the pet hair from your cushioned seats. The final round of proofreading goes deep into the interior of your document to clean up anything missed earlier. The pesky typo that eluded all previous rounds finally reveals itself. That often happens after letting the document sit overnight, then giving it a fresh look the next day.

Now your edited document sings!

Artificial intelligence (AI) can perform many editing tasks and even write documents for you. Excellent editing requires more than that. It needs the human touch of authentic intelligence. It requires the patience and perseverance to keep scrubbing and polishing until your document sings.

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