

# A fine red line: when does editing a student's work become cheating?

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At least one university has explicitly restricted students' use of editors for their assignments.

Over the last several years, staff members at the [Centre for Academic Communication](#) at the University of Victoria reported to administrators some curious conversations taking place around editing. The centre offers free services to students to assist them with reading comprehension and writing, but staff members are instructed not to correct students' work, only pose questions. Students, however, had different expectations and complained when centre staff wouldn't "fix up" their papers.

Professors, too, misunderstood the role of the centre; some sent students there because they wanted staff to improve their students' work. What's more, the centre received calls from parents asking how much editing they could do on their children's papers without it being considered cheating.

At the time of these conversations, UVic's policy on academic integrity didn't explicitly mention editing. Sara Beam, an associate professor in the faculty of history at UVic and chair of the senate committee on academic standards, said the confusion around editing another person's work signalled it was time to clear up the matter: "No matter who [a student works with] – friend, parent, editor – they point out problems but they don't solve them for you," Dr. Beam said.

In May, UVic revised its policy on [academic integrity](#) to explicitly restrict students' use of editors. The policy defines an editor as "an individual or service ... who manipulates, revises, corrects or alters a student's written or non-written work." The use of such a person or service, whether paid or unpaid, "is prohibited." The only exemption is if the instructor grants permission in writing, specifying "the extent of editing that is being authorized."

Dr. Beam said she doesn't think the new policy makes UVic a trailblazer. "We did quite a broad consultation, and [the university policies we looked at] were trying to grapple with the same problem, but they were all doing it slightly differently."

Nevertheless, a quick online review of official policies, student handbooks or course calendars for 31 Canadian universities found only five that specifically mentioned editing. Among them was Ryerson University; its [senate policy on academic integrity](#) (PDF) states that it is considered plagiarism if a student claims another person's "edits or changes to an assignment" as their own. The University of Alberta's policy states that it is an offence if a student passes off "substantial editorial assistance" as their own work.

## A growing need for clarity

Dr. Beam said the decision to revise UVic's policy came from a desire for clarity. "Most of the time, students want to follow the rules. ... We wanted to make it explicit so students making other choices are aware of what they're doing and aware of the consequences should they be caught."

In writing the policy, UVic consulted extensively across faculties and with the university ombudsman, and also looked to Editors Canada's [Guidelines for Ethical Editing of Theses/Dissertations](#), which were first published in 2005. At the time, editors being approached to work on dissertations felt "uncomfortable about whether or to what extent it was reasonable to provide those editing services," said Elizabeth d'Anjou, a freelance editor based in Prince Edward County, Ontario, and Editors Canada's outgoing director of professional standards. Some felt no editing should take place, she said, while others "thought that there was a place for ethical editing – and, in many cases, students' advisers had told them to get an editor."

When the guidelines were produced, Ms. d'Anjou said the "assumption was that editors would only be working with graduate students," though she noted her peers are reporting an increase in undergraduate students seeking editing help. The guidelines are currently being revised.

Lenore Hietkamp, a member of [Editors Canada](#) and a freelance editor based in Shawnigan Lake, B.C., said that, over the last decade, the number of students seeking editing services has increased. And with the increased demand has come an increase in expectations of how much an editor will do. Ms. Hietkamp said some of her clients were frustrated that she wouldn't correct their work, only ask questions and alert them to problems.

Following Editors Canada's guidelines, Ms. Hietkamp said she began asking potential clients for a note from their professors sanctioning their working with an editor. Often, she never heard back from them. Eventually, Ms. Hietkamp stopped editing undergraduate papers, then cut out work for master's students, too.

"There's a spectrum of editors and what they'll do," she said, noting that she often backtracks and removes some of her edits, erring on the side of caution rather than overstepping an ethical line and interfering with student learning. "I think universities need to have a policy [around editing]. Students need some guidelines. It is the Wild West."

The ethical dilemma facing editors like Ms. Hietkamp and the staff at UVic begs the question: are the writing and communication skills of Canadian students making the grade? Editor Claudia Haagen of Victoria doesn't think so. "I've come to feel strongly – and my academic colleagues agree – that admission standards have changed, that literacy levels are not what they used to be," she said.

Roy Jensen, a chemistry professor at the University of Alberta, said universities need to improve how they teach writing and communications, regardless of the faculty. "Communications is a skill that every specialty needs," said Dr. Jensen, who wrote [Communicating Science](#) (PDF), a book aimed at helping science students convey scientific information more clearly and effectively. Part of the trouble, he said, is that in faculties where writing isn't the pedagogical goal of the class, the professors are not "comfortable grading and assessing other people's English."

## A fine line

All writers, good and bad, new and seasoned, benefit from editing. But should students, whose primary role is to learn and demonstrate learning, be able to use the services of an editor? Is it acceptable for a doctoral thesis to be edited? How about an undergraduate essay or lab assignment?

UVic's new policy does allow for exceptions, Dr. Beam said. "We wanted ... language that was broad enough to incorporate all those kinds of assignments that students are evaluated on, and yet flexible enough to acknowledge the diversity of pedagogical goals across campus."

Faculty received guidelines on how to implement the policy, she said, including information on when it's permissible to exempt assignments or condone editing in certain scenarios. "No computer science professor wants their students' code being edited, but they might be okay with the introductory paragraph being edited, because that's not their main pedagogical goal," Dr. Beam said by way of example.

Ms. Haagen said she believes responsible editing should never be considered plagiarism, that there's learning to be done even when an editor has looked over a student's work. "We all use track changes, which requires the student to work through each and every highlight and accept or reject the recommendation. The editorial decision is in the hands of the student," she said.

Todd Pettigrew, an associate professor of English at Cape Breton University who writes a [blog on higher education issues](#), agreed that professional feedback of the kind Ms. Haagen describes is not the problem. But, he said an ethical line should be drawn when someone changes a work to such a degree that it can no longer legitimately be called the student's own.

“I suspect the fear is that the original student might create a largely ungrammatical piece of prose, and the editor revises it wholesale on a sentence-by-sentence basis,” said Dr. Pettigrew. “If the editor improves the argument or provides new evidence, then she has really become a co-author, perhaps the principal author of the assignment. And that is not much different than simply paying someone to write your paper for you.”