

Peer Editing Guidelines:¹

Some guidelines for how to comment on writing:

- The first time you read through a paper, try to hold off on writing comments. Instead, take the time to read the paper in its entirety. If you need to take some notes, do so on another piece of paper. This strategy will prevent you from making over-hasty judgments, such as faulting someone for omitting evidence that actually appears later in the paper.
- Respond as a reader, not as a writer. Do not tell someone how YOU would write the paper. Instead, tell them how you are responding to each part of the paper as you read it, pointing out gaps in logic or support and noting confusing language where it occurs. For example, if a sentence jumps abruptly to a new topic, do not rewrite the sentence to provide a clear transition or tell your partner how to rewrite it.
- Be specific. Comments in the margin such as “vague,” “confusing,” and “good” do not help students improve their writing. In fact, many people find these comments “vague” and “confusing”—and sometimes abrupt or harsh. Taking a little more time to write longer, and perhaps fewer, comments in the margin will help you identify exactly what someone has done well or poorly. Information about both is crucial for helping someone improve their writing.

Here are some examples of specific comments:

Rather than “vague”

- “Which source are you referring to here?”
- “I don’t understand your use of the underlined phrase. Can you rewrite this sentence?”
- “Can you provide specific details to show what you mean here?”

Instead of “confusing,” “what?” or “???”

- “I lost the thread of your argument. Why is this information important? How is it related to your argument?”
- “You imply that this point supports your argument, but it actually contradicts your point in paragraph 3.”

Rather than “good”

- “This excellent example moves your argument forward.”
- “Wonderful transition that helped clarify the connection between the two studies you are summarizing.”
- “An nice metaphor that helped me understand your argument about this historical reception.”

When you are confused while reading:

- Mark an ‘X’ in the text where you are confused
- Ask the writer to explain his or her ideas
- Ask the writer to state his or her thesis
- Ask the writer to state the question the thesis answers
- Help the writer to brainstorm (mapping, outlining, etc.)
- Ask the writer to fill in the blanks:
- My purpose in this paper is _____
- My purpose in this section is _____

If you cannot see the point of a section or comment (but remember to be positive in asking questions, not negative):

Ask the writer ‘So what?’ questions (this often helps a writer be more specific)

For example: What does this sentence have to do with your thesis?

What does this paragraph have to do with the paper?

Other techniques:

- Counter the writer’s stance or thesis
- Bring up other perspectives
- Offer more examples and details to the writer

How to write final comments:

¹ For some of these peer reviewing guidelines and other helpful writing resources, see <https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/writing-assignments-feedback/commenting-on-student-writing/#FinalComments> and <http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

- Begin by making positive comments; when pointing out weaknesses, use a descriptive tone, rather than one that conveys disappointment or frustration.
- Limit your comments; do not try to cover everything. Focus on the 3-4 most important aspects of the paper. Provide a brief summary of 1) what you understood from the paper and 2) any difficulties you encountered.
- Distinguish “higher-order” from “lower-order” issues. Typically, “higher-order” concerns include such aspects as the thesis and major supporting points, while “lower-order” concerns are grammatical or mechanical aspects of the writing.
- Refer back to comments you wrote in the margins.

How to edit your own work:

After drafting and revising to make sure that we’ve communicated our ideas clearly and effectively, we can take time to make sure that our writing reflects that hard work that we’ve put into it. At the editing and proofreading stages of the writing process, we check our work to make sure that it’s consistent, clear, and error-free. This handout covers a few basic strategies for editing and proofreading our work.

Analyzing Sentence Structure

Writing can sound repetitive, and even unclear, if we do not vary our sentence structure enough. Typically, you should try to avoid series of very short or very long sentences; instead, try to make your sentences vary in length.

Exercise for Revision

Taking your paper, or a peer’s, highlight or underline every other sentence. After doing this for a paragraph, section, or page (whatever you have time for), look at the paper to get a visual sense of sentence length. If many of the sentences appear to be around the same length, try to shorten some or combine others to help vary the length.

Reading Aloud

Reading a piece of writing out loud is an excellent way to check for repetition, find typos, and get a general sense of the flow of your paper. Though reading out loud might feel uncomfortable, it is a strategy that can help you see your paper in a new light, thus helping you to improve it considerably.

Reading Aloud Exercise

Taking your paper, or a peer’s, read out loud a paragraph, section, or page (whatever you have time for). When you find typos, errors, or parts that might need to be revised for other reasons, simply make a mark on the page (do not stop to correct it). After you have finished a segment of the paper, go back and make changes to the paper (or call the author’s attention to the possible errors that you noted).

Another variation of this exercise is to read the paper backwards. You can read it backwards word by word or sentence by sentence to be able to focus on spelling issues and typos.

Keeping a Checklist

If you know that you tend to have specific issues with your writing, keeping an editing or proofreading checklist is a good way to ensure that you’ve addressed all these issues before submitting your work for class or publication. A sample checklist might look like this:

- Verb tense
- Comma consistency
- Capitalization

Checklist Exercise

As you read through your paper, or a peer’s, look specifically for the issues on the checklist. If commas are known to be a problem, look specifically at all the commas in the paper, checking the usage of each. Or, if you are looking for capitalization issues, ask yourself as you go through each word or sentence: “Is everything that is capitalized in this sentence supposed to be capitalized? Are any words missing capitalization?” Continue like this for each issue individually.