Writing useful peer review comments

ENM140, Game theory and rationality 2018

All groups will participate in an exchange of peer review comments on the preliminary project reports. The peer review process is an opportunity to learn from others. However, it is not always easy to give useful feedback! We are therefore handing out this short text which will hopefully give you some useful ideas to keep in mind, both when writing comments to others and when reading the comments you have received from others.

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Writing Comments in the Margins

1) 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 a student for omitting evidence that actually appears later in the paper. (In such cases, it may be appropriate to tell the student that you expected that evidence to be presented earlier–and the reason why). While you may expect this strategy to take more time, it can actually save you time by allowing you to focus your feedback on the most important strengths and weaknesses you want to bring to the writers' attention (see "Writing Final Comments," below).

2) Respond as a reader, not as a writer. Do not tell students 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 the student how to rewrite it. Instead, simply write a note in the margin to indicate the problem, then prompt the student to come up with a solution.

This strategy is especially important to follow when a student asks you to respond to a draft before the final paper is due; in this case, your aim should be to help the student identify weaknesses that he or she should improve and NOT to do the student's thinking and writing for them. Of course, in some instances, it is necessary and appropriate to give the student explicit directions, such as when she or he seems to have missed something important about the assignment, misread a source, left out an essential piece of evidence, or failed to cite a source correctly.

3) Ask questions to help students revise and improve. One way to ensure that your comments are not overly directive is to write questions in the margins, rather than instructions. For the most part, these questions should be "open" rather than "closed" (having only one correct answer.) Open questions can be a very effective way to prompt students to think more deeply about the topic, to provide needed evidence, or to clarify language. For ideas on how to phrase open questions, see Asking Questions to Improve Learning.

4) Resist the temptation to edit. Instead, mark a few examples of repeated errors and direct students to attend to those errors. Simply put, if you correct your students' writing at the sentence level, they will not learn how to do so themselves, and you will continue to see the same errors in paper after paper. Moreover, when you mark all mechanical errors, you may overwhelm your students with so many marks that they will have trouble determining what to focus on when writing the next draft or paper.

5) Be specific. Comments in the margin such as "vague," "confusing," and "good" do not help students improve their writing. In fact, many students 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 for students exactly what they have done well or poorly. Information about both is crucial for helping them improve their writing. Here are some examples of specific comments:

Rather than "vague"

- "Which research finding 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 apt metaphor that helped me understand your argument about this historical metaphor."

Writing Final Comments

1) Begin by making positive comments; when pointing out weaknesses, use a descriptive tone, rather than one that conveys disappointment or frustration. Give an honest assessment, but do not overwhelm the writer with an overly harsh or negative reaction. For example, do not assume or suggest that if a paper is not well written, the writer did not devote a lot of time to the assignment. The writer may have in fact struggled through several drafts. Keep in mind that confusing language or a lack of organized paragraphs may be evidence not of a lack of effort, but rather of confused thinking. The writer may therefore benefit from a few, targeted questions or comments that help them clarify their thinking.

2) 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. Make sure that whatever you write addresses the grading criteria for the assignment, but also try to tailor your comments to the specific strengths and weaknesses shown by the individual student.

While you may think that writing lots of comments will convey your interest in helping the student improve, students–like all writers–can be overwhelmed by copious written comments on their work. They may therefore have trouble absorbing all the comments you have written, let alone trying to use those comments to improve their writing on the next draft or paper.

3) 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. Whatever you see as "higher" in importance than other aspects should be clear in your grading criteria. Whatever you decide, write your comments in a way that will help students know which aspects of their writing they should focus on FIRST as they revise a paper or write the next paper. For example, if a paper lacks an argument or a main point in an assignment in which either an argument or main point is essential (as is usually the case), address that issue first in your comments before you note any grammatical errors that the student should attend to.

4) Refer students back to comments you wrote in the margins. For example, you might comment, "Your argument loses focus in the fourth paragraph (see my questions in margin)." You might also note a frequent pattern of mechanical error, then point them to a specific paragraph that contains that type of error.

5) Model clear, concise writing. Before you write final comments, take a moment to gather and order your thoughts.