

Stop Searching for Errors: How to Read Holistically

By Jennifer Yirinec

The majority of students who enter my classroom are obsessed with finding grammatical errors in the works of their peers. How do I know? When doing their peer reviews, they focus almost exclusively on grammatical and typographical errors (typos)—or “local” issues. The major problem with this approach is that most students are not grammar experts. In fact, many of the grammatical suggestions I’ve seen given during peer reviews are incorrect. This is not to say that mentioning a recurring grammatical error is unhelpful when doing a peer review, but this is to say that your focus, as a student reviewer, should not be on the grammatical and typographical errors, as your peers should be able to spot these kinds of errors after a second read-through. Rather than looking for grammar mishaps, you should pay attention to more global issues: focus, organization, evidence, and even style (notwithstanding grammar). After all, these are the sections that really count on the rubric, right?

Part of the reason why students spend so much time searching for these surface errors is that grammar issues seem easier to note than more holistic problems in a writer’s essay. Realistically, it’s possible that many readers have not been taught to identify such issues or have not practiced a lot of peer review from this perspective, and so it takes a bit of training and a concerted effort to learn how to focus on the whole of a paper. Perhaps, though, many students would like to address global issues in their peers’ writing but are unsure of how to do so. Here are some tips that may help you, as a peer reviewer, read a classmate’s work holistically

- **Read the draft through once before marking *anything*.** Even if you spot a blatant grammar no-no, keep reading. Resist the urge to circle it!
- **While reading through the draft a second time, underline or highlight your peer’s thesis statement. Then, write one- or two-word annotations next to the body paragraphs that capture the main point of each.** Highlighting the thesis statement and jotting down these notes will help you to see the progression of the writer’s points (organizationally and focus-wise).
- **When using a peer review worksheet like the ones provided in this textbook, never just give a “yes” or “no” answer.** Even if you think that such an answer would be sufficient, it won’t really help your reader. Rather than saying “yes” to the question, “Do all paragraphs have topic sentences?” praise your peer for specific topic sentences that you found particularly rhetorically effective. If you say “no” to this question, point your peer to specific paragraphs that lack topic sentences. You may even choose to suggest potential topic sentences (e.g., “I think your main point in this paragraph is *such-and-such*. If this is the case, how about this for a topic sentence . . . ?”).
- **Before commenting on the paper in its entirety (like noting paper organization), address paragraph organization.** Taking the paper apart, examining and providing feedback on each paragraph by itself, will later help you—and your peer—to consider paper organization.
- **When considering stylistic issues, underline and then annotate the paper.** Merely answering the questions on a peer review worksheet will not really help your peer if he or she does not know the specific lines or sentences you’re referencing.

◇ Underline instances of passive voice. If a recurring issue, make a note on the peer review worksheet

about your peer's use of passive voice.

◇ Underline or highlight, in a different color, sentences that bog you down as a reader (ones that are wordy, choppy, or unclear). Then refer your peer to this color on your peer review worksheet.

• **When considering evidence-related issues, highlight the author's claim; then, underline the entire bit of evidence (including the introduction and analysis of material, if that material is from an outside source). Then, place the introduction of the evidence in parentheses, bracket the source material (e.g., the quote or paraphrase), and circle the analysis of the source material.** That way, you will be able to tell whether or not each claim has support and whether or not that support is effectively integrated into the paper.

Ultimately, it's important to be willing to read through your peer's draft more than once: once without marking anything, once while only annotating, and each subsequent time for a specific purpose (e.g., to identify paragraph organization, paper organization, use of evidence, use of active voice). Peer reviews are time-consuming—yes! Instructors may even allot full class periods to them or will cancel a class meeting so that students can use the online peer review tool. We, as instructors, do this for a reason: We want you to be able to provide constructive feedback to your peers. And you care about what your classmates think, right? Give the kind of helpful response that you would prefer to receive. Trust me, your peers want feedback from you, even if (and generally, especially if) that feedback takes the form of *constructive* criticism.