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Colorful Revision: Color-Coded Comments Connected to Instruction

Nancy Mack

Many teachers have had a favorable response to their experimentation with digital feedback on students’ writing (Yohon and Zimmerman; Ryan-Thompson; Dalgarno et al.; McCabe, Doerflinger, and Fox; Dunford). Although professionals may find Track Changes useful, my students expressed a strong aversion to the visually busy, marginal call-out boxes found in MS Word. Students much preferred a simpler system of highlighting and commenting in color. After experimentation I found that this color-coded system was more effective for them and less time-consuming for me. Moreover, the quantity and quality of revision increased when highlighting and comments were connected to a revision lesson taught prior to second drafts.

A recent qualitative study of first-year composition classes by Missy-Marie Montgomery, employing a questionnaire, individual interviews, and a focus group, presents an in-depth picture of the students’ perspectives on response to their writing. Students typically did not read comments or rushed through them, misinterpreting and ignoring all but the easily corrected mechanical errors. If students ignore or misinterpret traditional teacher comments, maybe we should experiment with other ways of directing students to revise their texts.

So what guidance might we glean from experts who are willing to give advice about how to improve our commentary on students’ papers? First and foremost is praise. Respected scholars Sam Dragga, Peter Elbow, and Richard Straub all advise that praise needs to be specific, explicating not just the place but the particular strategy that worked well in the paper. The aforementioned scholars recommend that positive remarks must outnumber the negative ones. Similar to praise, remarks about problems of content need to be specific, but more centered on the student’s meaning rather than the teacher’s exhortation. Lil Brannon and C. H. Knoblauch, Ann Berthoff, and Brian Huot would have teachers steer clear of commands that take over the text. Explanations about what changes to make should leave the author with some degree of choice. We have all had students accept our ideas only to
make the text worse because the change did not foster the meaning or the author was not invested in the suggested change. Teachers use questions in the margin to encourage development or clarification without dictating what to write; however, students dislike this method. Questions, like symbols, tend to confuse students, and anything that confuses is either misunderstood or ignored (Helmbrecht 311–12).

In summary, teacher commentary is most effective when it relies on specific praise with a few, brief statements about options for specific improvements.

Connections to Classroom Instruction

In a recent review of new books about assessment, Michael R. Neal makes the astute point that “to assess is not the same as to instruct, teach, or learn. Assessments influence what is learned or how knowledge is measured, but they do not necessarily result in learning” (749). Too often teachers face a set of papers, trying to do too much. We try to make the writing better through a written tutorial. I have come to realize that the extensive comments that I once wrote on student papers were an ineffective instructional strategy that took an inordinate amount of time and energy away from planning classroom instruction.

If assessment is more directly connected to the ongoing dialogue of classroom instruction, then students will gain a context that helps them to make sense of teacher comments. The significance of the classroom dialogue is emphasized in this statement from C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon:

Any remark on a student essay, whatever its form, finally owes its meaning and impact to the governing dialogue that influences some student’s reaction to it. Remarks taken out of this context can appear more restrictive or open-ended, more facilitative or judgmental, than they really are in light of a teacher’s overall communicative habits. (2)

In other words, the instructional context should give meaning to the comments on students’ papers. Instruction should introduce the concepts and methods that the teacher uses in the commentary on students’ drafts.

Model Revision Mini-lessons

Teaching one or more specific revision mini-lessons before commenting on their second draft made a stunning difference in the amount of revision students did. Previously, I had taught the same mini-lesson after commenting on the first draft, and the results were far less effective. I erroneously believed that the comments would somehow provide motivation for students to pay attention to the mini-lesson, perhaps failing because of the implied punishment. By looking at the second draft after the mini-lesson, I can offer praise for the targeted revision strategies, redirection for awkward attempts, and encouragement for more improvements.

Mini-lessons have one to four specific revision targets, such as action, dialogue, sensory details, and inner thoughts for narrative or memoir writing; and organizational thesis statements, introductions to direct quotation of a source, com-
mentary after quotes, and transitions for literary analysis or argumentative essays. The concept is always introduced with a student model text reproduced for the whole class. I use whole texts or at least several paragraphs with multiple examples of the concept.

Next, students highlight the text for the feature wherever it occurs. At this point, it does not matter what colors or whether highlighters or colored pencils are used. Colored pencils are cheaper and will not bleed through the paper. Highlighting can also be done electronically. If they will be identifying more than one concept during the class period, students use a different color for each concept. I always have them make a key for their color(s) at the top of the page, noting the name of the concept that they have been identifying and that I will use later when providing feedback. The point is to have students participate in finding, marking, labeling, and analyzing the model examples. Then, individually or in groups, students select their favorite example and explain not only why it is effective but also how the textual strategy functions rhetorically for the reader.

After discussing the model text, students immediately turn to their own drafts and apply the targeted revision strategy. Students use sticky notes on a hard copy rather than an electronic revision. Volunteers share their revisions with the class with some discussion about variations, reactions, or questions. Finally, students are assigned to do more revision outside of class before they submit the second draft electronically for teacher comments. At the very least, students have done some revision because class time was devoted to revision.

Commenting on Students’ Second Drafts

Before reading their drafts, I open a document that contains the color key shown in Figure 1, with each entry highlighted in the appropriate color. Traffic light colors are familiar to everyone: green, yellow, and pink (red is too dark). I use gray highlighting to indicate text that needs proofreading if the paper is more of a final draft, and I insert comments in purple. I copy and paste this colorful key and add a few comments at the top of the paper, along with the student’s grade.

**Key**

- **Highlighted GREEN text** is interesting or good.
- **Highlighted YELLOW text** needs minor revision.
- **Highlighted PINK text** needs major revision.
- **Highlighted GRAY text** needs proofreading.
- **The PURPLE text** (shown as bold here) indicates a comment.

20 out of 20 participation points. (Points encourage students to submit drafts on time.)

*Figure 1.* Color key to highlighted text.
Students have no problems differentiating that pink is more critical than yellow or green and devote more attention to the pink markings. Color has been shown to increase the focus of students (Ostrander, Schroeder, and Ostrander). Cheri Lemieux Spiegel describes how she used color to guide how students read the teaching materials for a hybrid course (251-52). Likewise, I am trying to guide the students’ reading of their own text prior to revision. Students have told me that upon opening their documents, the colors make a vivid impression of what needs to be done. Using color to highlight a specific place in the text makes it more likely that students will attend to that particular section in their paper and possibly make the needed revision. Highlighting takes very little time for me to do in comparison to Track Changes, which requires much more menu selection, clicking, positioning, and hovering.

After adding the color key, I skim the text to decide how much and which type of feedback to use, with the goal being to give the amount and type this text needs and this student can process—and honestly, to discipline myself not to overdo it. Decisions always relate back to the concepts from the previous mini-lessons. This system has limitations: it does not work well for addressing global organizational, unity, or coherence problems. I use it mainly for development, specific details, citation, and commentary targets.

**Green Highlighting with Explanatory Comments**

Green highlighting is the pleasure for me—to find the nuggets of success and highlight what the student has done well. In order to differentiate my comments from the students’ text, a purple comment may be inserted right after the highlighted text to name the strategy or concept that the student employed (boldface type is used instead in the examples in this article). Students may intuitively do something clever, yet not be able to name or explain that strategy. In addition, specific praise is less likely to be discounted by the writer than more effuse global praise such as “good work” or “yes.” Here are examples of positive comments:

- Great use of action to dramatize what happened.
- The dialogue helped me to experience this moment.
- The sensory details made me feel like I was there.
- The inner thoughts worked well to emphasize the stress.
- This sentence helps your reader to know how this topic relates to the last one.

Notice that the comments vary from what was done to my reaction to a more abstract mention of a reader. I try to move students from just doing something well to understanding how that particular strategy would affect a reader.

An interesting side effect of having to write about why I like a particular word, sentence, or section is that I am pressed to explain good writing. In some cases, these insights become the basis for future mini-lessons. For example, from the student’s essay below about a local train accident, I decided to add a mini-lesson
about which phrases to use to signal to the reader the connection between the direct quote and the commentary:

Mark Aldrich, a railroad and economic historian from John Hopkins University, blames the numerous mishaps on the fact that “American railroads are uncapi-
talized, overly dependent on inferior track work, often lacking basic signaling
equipment and overburdened with astonishingly dangerous freight cars” (346).

The implication of this statement is that This phrase is an excellent way to
begin the commentary after the quote. the quality of the American railroads
is poor; standard safety equipment is missing, and the freight cars are overbur-
dened. The combination of these things contributes to the numerous train inci-
dents that have occurred throughout the years.

When I first started using these comments, I had a difficult time thinking of what
to write, so I created a master list with potential comments for all of the colors.
After reading Anthony Edginton’s article about reflection-in-action (“Focus”), I
realized that this list of potential comments functions as a place for ongoing reflec-
tion. This master list is where I keep track of the type of comments I make and
tweak the wording. Sometimes, I do copy and paste comments from my list, but
this is mostly when I am beginning a new grading session or changing a feature
of my comments. After reflection, a new type of comment becomes part of my
repertoire, and I can compose these more spontaneously. I do not use macros, creat-
ing one key stroke to insert a repeated comment, mainly because these statements
keep changing. In contrast to my planned comments, I always make a personal,
positive comment about the topic at the top of the paper that is from one to three
sentences in length. Inserting a personal, brief comment assures students that I am
giving their writing individual attention.

**Yellow Highlighting with Commentary**

I use yellow highlighting for revisions that would add to development but are less
crucial to their grade than pink highlighting, which is discussed in the next section.
The comments below point to opportunities to make changes:

- Opportunity to give more details about the action like a movie of the scene
  or describing the action in slow motion.
- Opportunity for more sensory details about the place to help the reader feel
  present in the scene and see the setting.
- Opportunity to share inner fears or worries about the reactions of others.
- Opportunity to tell your reader why this point was placed as second rather
  than last.

Phrasing suggestions as an “opportunity” encourages students to learn to spot
opportunities to revise without me. Some of the other wording comes from the
mini-lesson done in class, such as “action” or “inner thoughts.” I must be careful
to limit the number of these comments to be fewer than the positive comments.
Second drafts often need sections added with more details. For example, this student wrote a narrative from her father’s point of view as a first responder at a crash at an air show.

The sun was shining and the crowd was anxiously waiting with their folding chairs, colorful umbrellas, and picnic blankets. Opportunity for more sensory details to help the reader see the crowd. Make them come to life by describing them in more detail. Describing where the narrator was standing and how he was dressed would help the reader to see this important character too.

This is the student’s final revised version of the same section:

The sun was shining and the crowd was anxiously waiting with their folding chairs, colorful umbrellas, and picnic blankets. There were those who were comfortably reclined in their chairs in tank tops, shorts, and sunglasses, soaking up the hot sun. Others were too excited to sit and chose to stand, impatiently peaking over the many heads in the crowd to look for a sign that the show was about to begin. It was a hot August day, and the sun threatened to burn everyone’s sweaty, pink skin through their defenseless sunblock. Mothers continuously added new layers of sunblock to their children’s skin, and the tropical smells of the lotion filled the thick summer air. The children, with their painted faces and mouths full of bright blue and pink cotton candy, whined about the sticky heat and impatiently asked their parents when the planes were going to take off. I stood behind the excited crowd by the control tower, feeling uncomfortably hot in my long sleeved tan and green BDU’s.

This student was a strong writer who not only improved details about the crowd in the opening but also made the individuals in the crowd distinct characters in the later parts of the tragedy. This narrative was already fairly clear, but the added details helped to make it an excellent text.

**Pink Highlighting with Commentary**

Pink highlighting is used for problems that would put the student’s grade in jeopardy. The difference between yellow and pink highlighting is one of degree. Once again, I use the wording from the previous mini-lesson for strategies that were identified in a model text. If a sentence, paragraph, or section is very weak, then it is highlighted in pink. Placing the comment directly after the highlighting is important to reduce confusion. As Edgington’s students explained, marginal comments often seem random and are difficult for students to associate with a specific section of text (“Encouraging”). Some suggestions are as follows:

- Opportunity for action, dramatizing a specific incident or a composite example.
- Opportunity for dialogue between two people while this took place or after it took place.
Commentary is needed to tell your reader what about this quote applies to the point that you are making.

Sometimes the student has not yet applied the strategy from a specific mini-lesson. For example, when students are writing literary commentaries, my goal is to get them to create a paper that references the author’s name and decisions as well as the reader’s response to the text versus the first names of the characters as if they were real people making decisions on their own. This particular student’s thesis for a literary analysis of Lord of the Flies needs to be revised:

Ralph is a poor leader as shown by the slow decline of his loss of memory. Try rewording this sentence using “Golding” or the “reader” at the beginning of the thesis.

My comments at the top of the page praised the topic of the paper. Even though I shared models of thesis statements in class, wording a thesis statement was a new skill and a struggle for many students. The final paper had this successful thesis:

Golding causes the reader to doubt Ralph’s leadership by showing the slow decline of Ralph through his loss of memory.

The pink highlighting may help students to differentiate among the comments and suggestions. Highlighting a few things in pink lets students know where to devote the most effort. It is difficult to tell when we have given students too much feedback. The colors send a clearer message about where and how much needs to be done for the next revision.

Reflections about the Effectiveness of Color Marking

Of course, any system that we use only works if students understand not just what or how the comments were made but also the why, the reasons behind the instructional choice to respond in a particular manner (Dohrer; Fife and O’Neil). At the end of a unit, I always ask students to freewrite about a list of ten or more instructional strategies that were used. I did not receive any comments indicating that Track Changes was helpful. As Edgington suggests, asking students to comment about the methods that we use for responding to their texts can help teachers to become more reflective about their practices (“Encouraging”). Recent comments from students indicate that they find the color-highlighting comments useful:

> The color coding was very helpful! I think the visual colors made the revisions much more concrete.
> I like how Dr. Mack does color highlighted revisions. It makes my writing much better and helps me to judge my own writing better in other pieces.
> I also appreciated any and all color coding revisions—I always use colors for myself because I'm a very visual learner. This made it easy to target places that needed to be reexamined.

As the comments above indicate, students reported that they found the color coding useful.
When we take over the text and rewrite student sentences and fill all available spaces with comments, writers tend to feel less capable and consequently less inclined to invest in the next writing endeavor. Perceptions about competence is an essential factor to consider when making decisions about how we respond to students’ writing because their self-efficacy may be more important than the individual writing assignment (Pajares). Self-efficacy may determine whether and to what extent students attempt revision when it is not assigned. Our desire to help students to be better writers leads us to smother them with too much information. We must use a great deal of professional restraint to step back and do less helping, if only for our own self-preservation. We can teach by showing good models, not by telling the same warnings about pitfalls over and over again. We can mentor by praising students’ efforts with metacognitive remarks that extend their intuitive wisdom about language, redirect them to make further adjustments, and encourage them to risk more revisions. We must manage our time out of class to be at our best in class, not surrendering to the cultural expectation that teaching is best accomplished by micromanaging students’ texts. Color highlighting shows students where to devote their attention and facilitates quick, brief feedback from the teacher.

Works Cited


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