Peer-editing students' papers
a guide for students

Ann McNeal
School of Natural Science
Hampshire College
Amherst MA 01002

Helping other students to edit their papers can be a tremendous help to both parties. You will very likely find that your own writing improves as you notice strengths and weaknesses in other students' writing. Here are some steps to help you give more effective feedback.

- When you begin the process, look over the requirements for the writing you will be editing and any specific feedback sheet your teacher may give you.
- Read the paper quickly once, making notes and marking spots you did not understand. It's very useful to retain these first impressions before you get into details. Note if you lose the thread of the paper at any particular points. Note places where more explanation or clarification is needed.
- Then go back and read in more detail, trying to understand what makes certain parts of the paper readable and clear, while other parts may need work.
- Go back again to the requirements and give feedback on how the paper meets each of the criteria.

General guidelines for feedback:

- Be specific both in your praise and your criticism.
- Be positive.
- Focus on how the student can change the paper to improve it.

Remember how it feels when someone else criticizes your work—you can hear the call for changes much better if you feel the other person values your work and is criticizing it with respect, not brutally. But editorial comments also can be too kind. It does not help the other person if you don't give any suggestions or if you just say, "Great!" One of the skills to learn is to trust your instincts; when you don't understand something, ask for clarification!

There are several levels to consider when editing a paper:
1) the overall flow and structure,
2) the specific content and its clarity,
3) how well it meets the objectives, and
4) technical issues, including
• grammar and punctuation,
• sentence structure,
• technical terms, and
• references.

1) If the overall structure is clear, say so. If there are a few places where you could not follow
the argument, point them out but remember to point out other places that were clear. Even if the
overall structure is not clear to you, try asking specific questions such as, "What is the major
point of this paragraph?" rather than issuing a blanket condemnation like, "This is totally
disorganized."

2) Again with the specific content issues, pick out sentences and paragraphs to commend, if
possible. In your criticisms, ask for explanation and clarification. For example, "I didn't
understand what you meant about the function of the papillary muscle here." "What is the
relationship of this sentence to the one before?"

3) How well does the writing meet the objectives of the assignment? Is it at the appropriate
level of technicality? Does it include the right amount of detail?

4) Technical issues can be tricky; if you do not feel confident about grammar, spelling,
punctuation and sentence structure, you may want to word your comments as questions, like,"Spelling correct?" "Should this be a comma or a semicolon?" Be especially alert to technical
words and whether they are used correctly. Are there reference where appropriate, and are they
using the correct form both in the text and the bibliography or "references cited?"

One grammatical detail that can greatly strengthen a paper is the use of strong topic sentences.
For example, the sentence, "The authors go on to describe their methods" is weak because the
sentence itself does not have content. A better topic sentence might be, "The principal technique
used in this study was electron microscopy." The rest of the paragraph should then describe the
details of the point raised in the topic sentence.

If you remember to be positive and focus on specific changes the other student can make, your
feedback will likely be very helpful.