

A Color-Coded Error ID System for Grading Student Papers

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Course

Composition II, ENG 122, (3 semester hours) is designed to further the work begun in Composition I by giving students more experience as writers and readers with various purposes in different contexts. Students write analytical, research, and other advanced papers based on sources from literature and other texts. *Prerequisite: ENG 121*

Description

Marking up papers is often the most time and labor-intensive task teachers face when it comes to helping students improve their writing. Because of the unique nature of writing, composition exercises don't readily lend themselves to pre-fabricated "improvement commentaries." As such, teachers usually find themselves making extensive hand-written comments on every paper, every page. But thanks to the versatility of word processing programs, there's a quicker and better way to address commonly recurring writing errors and thus greatly reduce the time and tedium teachers face in the paper-grading process. While the color-coded error ID system described below won't eliminate the need for some individualized writing-improvement suggestions, it does offer three major advantages: (1) it speeds up the commentary process, (2) it highlights recurring writing problems, and (3) it provides students with a focused self-help guide to correcting their writing weaknesses. Further, teachers can easily modify this color-coded template to meet unique requirements for their courses, from the elementary school writing class to the college level course. Best yet, this system requires no technical expertise from either instructors or students. It's easy to use, simple to implement, visually powerful, and wonderfully adaptable to all grade levels.

This template-based teacher commentary system uses basic word processing tools to speed up the process of identifying and highlighting common writing problems when grading student composition exercises. Using teacher-chosen colors, text highlighting, and text format options, this system helps teachers draw strong visual attention to a student's specific writing weaknesses.

The example template system shown here uses 13 unique visual codes: five colors (red, blue, green, purple, and brown), four highlight patterns (yellow, blue, green, and gray), three format options (boldface, italics, and underline), and one imbedded box note. Each code corresponds to a user-created commentary template that identifies common writing errors. Color choices can be expanded or shortened, and the corresponding comments can also be changed to suit individual course needs.

In short, the system works this way. Students start by submitting a word-processed paper on an individual disk to the instructor. The instructor then reads and grades these files on his personal computer. When the teacher identifies a common writing problem within a paper, he can then highlight that problem using a pre-chosen color-coded error template system (see sample below). Any instructional suggestions outside the boundaries of the template can be added at the end of the students' papers. The result is a paper with any common errors visually identified and highlighted and keyed to an accompanying color code template.

This semi-automated process relieves teachers from having to identify and comment on commonly reoccurring writing errors throughout the entire spread of papers. Grading time is greatly reduced, thus allowing the teacher more time to focus on specific writing improvement suggestions for each student. When done, the teacher “saves” the marked up paper, either by overwriting the original file or by saving the edited version as a new file, and returns the disk to the student for review and possible paper revision.

Here’s a sample template used to highlight common college-level writing errors.

Red	Thesis statement problem; your thesis lacks clarity, focus, position, clear purpose, and/or supporting rationale(s) for your position
Blue	Unsupported (or insufficiently supported) position or statement
Green	Unclear phrase or reference
Purple	Spelling or word usage error
Brown	Wordiness or irrelevant material (in relation to thesis or sub-topic)
Yellow H	Weakness in the current course lesson focus, e.g., idea development, detail, logic, support, continuity, relevance, audience analysis, etc.
Green H	Mechanical or punctuation error
Blue H	Error in logic: hasty generalization, post hoc ergo propter hoc, begging the question, genetic fallacy, circular argument, either/or fallacy, ad hominem, faulty analogy or comparison, red herring/straw man, ad populum
Grey H	Sentence fragment, or the opposite, a run-on sentence
Boldface	A particularly serious problem (used with any color or highlighted text)
Note Insert	Special-purpose note for individualized comments
<i>Italics</i>	<i>This needs attribution and/or you need to cite the original source</i>
<u>Underline</u>	<u>Grammatical or syntactical problem</u>

As noted above, an obvious option here is for teachers to use as many—or as few—color-based codes as they may require for their individual course needs. Teachers can also customize their own specific comments for the codes; and lastly, teachers can also create a variety of additional templates to address additional course needs.

Transferability

The transferability of this color-code markup system is essentially unlimited for learning exercises on any academic level. While outlined in this module as an instructional writing aid, the simplicity, flexibility, and visually powerful nature of this system could be creatively adapted for use for a wide range of academic disciplines.

Faculty Technology Skill

- Beginning to moderate level familiarity with *Microsoft Word*

Student Technology Skill

- Beginning level familiarity with *MS Word*

Faculty Equipment Required

- Personal computer loaded with *MS Word*
- Access to color printer

Student Equipment Required

- Individual PC with *MS Word*
- Two 1.44 MB floppy disks (one primary, one backup)

Improvement on Teaching and Learning

The ability to use a word processing program to highlight commonly recurring writing problems and to identify individual writing pattern weaknesses provides teachers and students with a visually powerful learning tool and writing revision guide. As might be expected, this color-coded commentary system remains an “add on” method for making writing improvement suggestions rather than a full substitute for the traditional processes. In the end, it offers students yet another way to view their work, learn from their mistakes, and revise their papers along the suggested guidelines. This system thus offers several strong advantages. In summary, it’s...

- quick and simple to use
- visually powerful
- easily adaptable to all academic levels
- a way to offer new insights into, and avenues for improving, a student’s writing skills.

Nontechnology Comparison

The benefits of this technology-based commentary system offer specific advantages to both teachers and students alike.

For teachers, the template system...

- reduces the grading time spent in the traditional hand-written paper commentary system by semi-automating the error identification process
- eliminates the tedium of making the same constructive suggestions to fix similar writing errors on every student paper

- provides a strong, visually focused guideline to help students recognize their writing errors and revise papers on their own
- provides a clear, concise record and portfolio of a student's original writing, the teacher's comments, and, if appropriate, any follow up revision work.

For students, the template system...

- provides a clear and focused system to identify common writing errors
- provides a generalized self-help guideline for fixing their writing errors
- provides insights to patterns of potentially reoccurring writing weaknesses
- provides a permanent record of their original work, the teacher's constructive criticism, and any revisionary work thereafter; after a string of written work, the entire portfolio can provide a history of the student's writing improvement.

Pertinent Issues

There are few—if any—serious issues related to this approach, save perhaps for the rare case of color blindness in a student.

How to Use in the Classroom

This is essentially a six-step process:

1. Decide which color codes to use and for what specific instructional purposes.
2. Give students a color printout copy of the error codes (or an electronic file) along with a detailed explanation of how the system works and how you intend to use it.
3. Explain that papers will be submitted on a disk to be read, graded, and returned by you.
4. Exhibit a sample marked-up paper and explain how you want them to identify their specific mistakes from the general guidelines given in the error codes themselves; then tell them how you expect them to revise their work accordingly.
5. When using your template, make it easier on yourself by copying and pasting the code key right into a student's paper. Wherever you see a common error you'd like to highlight, put your mouse on the appropriate template error code, click on *Microsoft Word's* Format Painter icon (the paint brush), and then drag your mouse over the targeted error. That part of the student's text will then match the appropriate color-keyed error comment on your template.
6. Finally, add any subject-specific comments at the end of the paper, delete the color-keyed template, save the file, and return the "graded" paper and disk to the student.

Be sure to supply students with a color printed handout at the start of the semester to eliminate the need to add the key code to each paper. For continuity's sake, it would probably be best to keep the code key simple and consistent throughout the course. For other needs for which a template might be useful, simply create and employ a new and unique color-keyed template.

See Appendix A for a sample handout you might construct.

See Appendix B to see what a typical student paper might look like using the color-keyed markup system.

Helpful Information and Web Sites

- *Microsoft Word* Help File for additional markup and editing tracking options (or consult a standard *Microsoft Word* software handbook
- <http://www.microsoft.com/>

Appendix A

Writing Improvement Suggestions: A Color-Keyed Guideline

A color-keyed editing system to help you identify and fix common writing errors:

The color or format code below indicates the general nature of the problem(s) I've found and highlighted in your paper. Please note that some words or phrases may have more than one correction code overlay. Not all errors or weaknesses may be highlighted, so please review your paper's end notes, if any, for additional suggestions. Review the highlighted areas carefully and attempt to correct the problem yourself. If, after careful study and consultation with your text sources, you're unable to identify and correct any highlighted problem, please seek either my help or that of the College's Writing Center staff.

Red	Thesis statement problem; your thesis lacks clarity, focus, position, clear purpose, and/or supporting rationale(s) for your position
Blue	Unsupported (or insufficiently supported) position or statement
Green	Unclear phrase or reference
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Appendix B

Sample Student Paper Using the Error Highlighting System

The following exercise asked the students to write—and submit for publication—an actual letter to the editor to a local newspaper. The letter that follows received a “C” grade. I’ve “enlarged” the line spacing to 1.5 spaces for enhanced readability. Obviously other comments about the writing could have been made; my purpose here was to focus on just a few of the problems rather than “dumping” all the potential revision possibilities on this particular student.

Dear Sir,

In response to "Hacking can't be only answer for Net Piracy" on July 28, I concur with that topic statement. However, using clandestine, covert, and hidden skills to access ones computer is a violation of privacy, and therefore the House of Representatives should pass on the bill and have legislation find another means of cleaning up net piracy. Searching one's files by this process is guilt before trial, and an illegal search and seizure.

Congressman Berman ensures that he can retrieve every single illegal file on P2P users computers. However, even as it is not guaranteed, and he does not state what techniques or programs this "hired help" will use, and further implicates the violation of privacy for us.

"The bill is a nightmare," said Mark Lemley, who teaches intellectual property law at the University of California at Berkeley. "I am amazed that after Sept. 11, members of Congress are willing to sacrifice our nation's computer security in order to give Hollywood yet another tool in its already formidable arsenal against piracy."

Copyright owners are putting alternative "garbage" files to trick people into downloading them. It is an acceptable way of stopping piracy because it does not threaten anyone's privacy, it slows down illegal file sharing without the possibility of damaging ones computer, and potentially get rid of copyrighted material being stolen from peer to peer networks. The industry's frustration is understandable, and some alternative ways have been forming. The general public must be ware that this bill is unfair. Take the time to go to your legislator and say no to the bill. As I stated before, I do not have a problem cleaning up net priacy, but I do have a problem with violation of privacy.

Sincerely,

Peter Appleton