

evidence? Are the ideas developed with sufficient complexity, subtlety, and insight? Is there adequate awareness of and attention to opposing views? The following are possible marginal comments for addressing these concerns:

Interesting idea!

Nice comparison of X to Y here.

Good point—I hadn't thought of it in quite this way.

Expand and explain; could you give an example?

Aren't you overlooking X's point of view here?

I don't see how you got from X to Y. Argument is confusing.

This is too much a rehash of X. Move from summarizing to analyzing.

You have covered X well but haven't addressed Y or Z.

You need to anticipate and respond to opposing views here.

What's your evidence for this assertion?

Is the Draft Effectively Organized?

As writers, we all struggle with organization, often rethinking our first-draft structure significantly as we revise. Student writers have even greater problems with organization—not only with creating a logical and coherent structure but also with signaling that structure to readers. To size up the organization of a student's draft, consider questions like these:

- Do the title and introduction orient the reader to the draft's purpose and forecast where the paper is going?
- Could the reader easily outline the draft or write a summary of the argument?
- Can the reader tell the purpose or function of each paragraph?
- If you get temporarily lost, does the overall argument start getting clearer at the end (a sure sign that the writer is clarifying his or her ideas as she writes)?
- Are paragraphs unified and coherent? (Common problems include paragraphs that are short and choppy, that have no topic sentences, or that change direction midstream.)
- Do some parts of the draft need more development, especially with details and evidence?
- Are there parts that should be added or deleted? Are there parts that should be shifted or moved around?
- What's missing from the draft?

What follows are some commenting strategies that may help writers improve their structure as they revise.

Use Marginal Comments to Note Where You Get Lost or Confused

A first rule of commenting is simply to tell students where you get confused. Consider "readably" marginal notes such as the following:

Whoa, you lost me.

How does this part relate to what you said on the previous page?

Can you clarify your point in the section that I have bracketed?

Your readers need a transition here.

These short, choppy paragraphs make it hard to tell what your main points

are.

This paragraph wanders. What's its central idea?

You seem to be making several points here without developing them. Break

into separate paragraphs and develop each?

Your introduction made me think you would do X next, but this is about Y. You're bouncing all over. I need a road map of where we have been and

where we are going.

Comment on the Title and Introduction

Readers pick up important clues about structure from the title and the introduction. Good titles often "nutshell" the writer's argument (see discussion of titles in Chapter Thirteen, pages 251-252). Good introductions serve the same purpose. They should engage the reader's attention and, in most academic writing, set forth the problem or question that the essay will address. Typically, the writer's thesis comes at the end of the introduction (see discussion of introductions in Chapter Thirteen, pages 250-251). To help students understand why writers need to orient readers early on, I make it a regular practice to comment on titles and introductions. I praise strong titles and ask the student to revise weak ones. If the introduction sets up the problem well or has a good thesis, I praise it. If it doesn't, this weakness becomes the primary focus of my end comment. In many academic papers, writers also need to provide a mapping passage that forecasts the structure of the paper. Asking students to add a forecasting passage can encourage them to solve structural problems as they revise.

Comment on Topic Sentences and Transitions

When I help colleagues revise their article or book drafts for publication, I find that my most frequent comments focus on topic sentences of paragraphs. Drafts can often be improved dramatically if the opening sentence

of key paragraphs better states the writer's point. (Often a paragraph or a whole section needs to be revised once the topic sentence is clarified.) Also, transitions between paragraphs may need to be added or improved, either through use of transition words ("next," "therefore," "on the other hand," "moreover") or through backward-looking summaries and forward-looking forecasting ("In the previous section I have argued [X], but now a new question arises: Y"). I regularly praise good topic sentences or transitions as well as call attention to problem areas. My hope is that when I point out paragraphs without topic sentences or transitions, students can see models of "the right way" in their own drafts.

As an example of the kinds of paragraph-level revisions one hopes to promote, Exhibit 16.1 shows how a student in a first-year seminar revised a section of a draft in response to teacher commentary.

Does the Draft Effectively Manage Old and New Information?

Cognitive psychology has shown that humans store new concepts in long-term memory by linking them to existing concepts. In other words, new information becomes meaningful only if it can be linked to old information (Willingham, 2009; Zull, 2002). Cognitive research applied to reading reveals that readers process information in a text by linking each new sentence to the meanings developed so far in those parts of the text already read (Colomb and Williams, 1985; Gopen and Swan, 1990). For prose to be cohesive (and hence easily understood), most of the sentences need to follow the "old/new contract": Old information comes at the beginning of a sentence—linking back to what has gone before—while new information comes later, often in the predicate, after the sentence has linked to the old. Once the reader assimilates a sentence's new information, that new information becomes old information, integrated into the unfolding meaning of the text. When writers consistently break this contract by beginning sentences with new information, the reader gets lost ("Hold on," says the reader. "I'm confused. You're dropping in stuff out of nowhere.") I illustrate this principle for students with the thought exercise in Exhibit 16.2.

Most students agree that Version 2 follows the old/new contract and is therefore easier to understand quickly. Each sentence opens with something old—either a repeated word from the previous sentence or a summarizing synonym for something earlier (for example, in sentence three "principle" stands for "old/new contract"). It is possible to understand Version 1, but it takes more "reader energy" to do so because it is harder to figure out how each sentence relates to the previous one.

Student Revision of a Draft in Response to Teacher Commentary

A problem is that nuclear power plants aren't safe. The Three Mile Island accident in 1979 and the disastrous Chernobyl meltdown in 1986 are examples of lack of safety.

An editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* describes how a July 2007 magnitude 6.8 earthquake in Japan caused an indefinite shut down of a major nuclear plant and caused radioactive leaks into the air and the ocean ("No to Nukes").

While considering external shocks, opponents also want to remind us that nuclear plants are considered attractive terrorist targets, which raises the risk associated with nuclear technology. They point out that weapons proliferation is another problem. This is due to the fact that the process of reprocessing spent fuel requires the separation of plutonium from other materials to create new fuels (Editorial from the *Los Angeles Times*, 413).

Plutonium by itself is an excellent bomb material, which is probably the reason why 200 kilograms and 30 kilograms have gone missing in Japan and Britain respectively (Editorial from the *Los Angeles Times*, 413). This is of great importance considering the fact that the bomb dropped on Nagasaki only contained six kilograms of Plutonium.

Confusing. I thought you were supporting nuclear power.

Good transition —

here you clarify that you are summarizing opponents.

Too many short paragraphs make it hard to follow your ideas.

What does "this" stand for?

Student's Revised Paragraph

One of the reasons that people oppose nuclear power is their belief that it is unsafe. Opponents regularly cite the Three Mile Island accident in 1979 and the disastrous Chernobyl meltdown in 1986. A list of smaller nuclear accidents is provided by an editorial from the *Los Angeles Times*, which describes how a July 2007 magnitude 6.8 earthquake in Japan caused an indefinite shut down of a major nuclear plant and caused radioactive leaks into the air and the ocean ("No to Nukes"). Opponents also argue that nuclear plants are attractive terrorist targets. A properly placed explosive could spew radioactive material over densely populated areas. Nuclear power plants also provide opportunities for terrorists to steal plutonium for making their own nuclear weapons. According to the same *Los Angeles Times* editorial, 200 kilograms of plutonium have been reported missing in Japan and 30 kilograms in Britain. This number may seem small unless we consider that fact that the bomb dropped on Nagasaki contained only six kilograms of plutonium. These worries about safety and terrorism keep many people from considering the benefits of nuclear power.

When I give this example in class, I also show students how the old/new contract can clarify connections between paragraphs as well as between sentences. I ask them to reread the opening sentence of Version 2 ("Another principle for writing clear closed-form prose is the old/new contract") and then predict what the preceding paragraph was about. They see that the previous paragraph must have also concerned a principle for

Thought Exercise on the Old/New Contract

EXHIBIT 16.2

What follows are two explanations of the "old/new contract," taken from Ramage, Bean, and Johnson, 2009, p. 477. One of these explanations follows the principle of old-before-new and the other doesn't. Which one follows the old/new contract? Why?

Version 1

The old/new contract is another principle for writing clear closed-form prose. Beginning your sentences with something old—something that links back to what has gone before—and then ending your sentence with new information that advances the argument is what the old/new contract asks writers to do. An effect called *coherence*, which is closely related to *unity*, is created by following this principle. Whereas the clear relationship between the topic sentence and the body of the paragraph, between the parts and the whole, is what *unity* refers to, the clear relationship between one sentence and the next is what *coherence* relates to.

Version 2

Another principle for writing clear closed-form prose is the old/new contract. The old/new contract asks writers to begin sentences with something old—something that links back to what has gone before—and then to end sentences with new information that advances the argument. Following this principle creates an effect called *coherence*, which is closely related to *unity*. Whereas *unity* refers to the clear relationship between the body of a paragraph and its topic sentence, between the parts and the whole, *coherence* refers to the clear relationship between one sentence and the next, between part and part.

writing clear closed-form prose, but something other than the old/new contract. Perhaps the previous paragraph had a topic sentence like this: "One principle for writing clear closed-form prose is to state a paragraph's point at the beginning of the paragraph." The opening sentence of the next paragraph can then begin with a backward reference ("Another principle of writing clear closed-form prose"—something old) and then conclude with the new information ("is the old/new contract"). Once stated, the phrase "the old/new contract" shifts from new information to old information. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph can now begin with a reference to "old/new contract."

The old/new contract also has explanatory power at the macro level. For example, it explains why a thesis statement typically comes at the end of the introduction. The thesis is the *new information* presented in the paper. The *old information* is the question that the thesis addresses. Before encountering the thesis, the reader must first understand the question, which hooks into something the reader is already interested in. The opening parts of a thesis-governed essay therefore typically begin with the question to be addressed rather than with the thesis.

EXHIBIT 16.3

Student Revision to Fix Problems with Old/New (O/N) Contract

O/N	Another argument against nuclear power is that plants are too expensive to build. But this argument is flawed. On March 28, 1979, Three Mile Island (TMI) Nuclear Station suffered a meltdown. It was the worst accident in commercial nuclear power operation in the United States. During its investigation of TMI the Presidential Commission became highly critical of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), which responded by generating hundreds of new safety regulations. These regulations forced utility companies to modify reactors during construction. Since all the changes had to be made on half-completed plants, the cost of design time, material, and personnel had to be very large. The standards set by the NRC would not be acceptable to a utility company. All reactors now being built had been ordered before 1973. With all the experience gained by research here in the U.S. and overseas, the licensing process can be cut in half without reducing the safety of the plant. A faster approval rate could lower the cost of the construction of a plant because it eliminates all the delays and cost overruns.
	Confusing string of O/N

Student's Revised Paragraph

One argument against nuclear power plants is that they are too expensive to build. But this argument is flawed because a major cause of the expense is not the cost of the power plants themselves but the tangle of regulations that builders must adhere to. These tangled regulations grew out of reforms following the March 28, 1979, meltdown of the Three Mile Island Nuclear Station. During its investigation of Three Mile Island, the Presidential Commission became highly critical of the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC), which responded by generating hundreds of new safety regulations. These regulations forced utility companies to modify reactors during construction. Since all the changes had to be made on half-completed plants, the cost of design time, material, and personnel had to be very large. However, the NRC regulations are not so costly if they are applied to new designs rather than modification of old designs. With all the experience gained by research here in the U.S. and overseas, the licensing process for constructing new-design reactors can be cut in half without reducing the safety of the plant. A faster approval rate could lower the cost of the construction of a plant because it eliminates all the delays and cost overruns.

Research has shown that violation of the old/new contract is a frequent cause of confusion in drafts (Colomb and Williams, 1985). I find that it takes about fifteen minutes to explain the old/new contract to students, and after that I can use this concept to make helpful marginal comments in a text (I use the abbreviation "O/N"). Exhibit 16.3 shows how the student writer arguing for nuclear power revised a paragraph to fill in gaps caused by violations of the old/new contract. (For further explanation of the old/new contract, see Kamage, Bean, and Johnson, 2009.)

Is the Draft Free of Errors in Grammar, Punctuation, and Spelling?

Although I have called grammatical errors, misspellings, and punctuation mistakes "lower-order concerns" from the perspective of the writing process, they can be high-level concerns for readers. Finished work marred by these errors greatly annoys teachers and may have disastrous consequences in the work world—professional embarrassment, loss of ethos, or even failure to be hired or promoted. (See my discussion of Beason, 2001, and Hairston, 1981, in Chapter Five, pages 80–81.) What teachers should do about these errors, particularly teachers across the curriculum who are not writing teachers, remains a knotty problem. If teachers circle all the errors in students' papers or serve as a line editor by making corrections, they significantly compound their workload and in most cases don't help their students improve. In Chapter Five I argue for an approach to error that places maximum responsibility on students for learning to edit their own work. This philosophy follows Haswell's practice of "minimal marking" (1983), in which teachers don't mark student errors but require them to find and correct their own errors. The teacher tells a student that his or her paper is marred by sentence errors and that the student's grade will be either reduced or unrecorded until most of the errors are found and corrected. (Haswell places a check in the margin of lines where errors occur.)

The beauty of this policy, from a teacher's perspective, is that abandoning the role of proofreader and line editor saves substantial marking time (although it adds time required to look at rewrites). More importantly, it trains students to develop new editing habits for eliminating their own careless errors. The policy goal is to encourage students to edit their drafts with a reader's eye, to use a grammar handbook, and to keep lists of their characteristic errors. Students with severe sentence-level difficulties may even be motivated to take another writing course or to seek tutorial help. The point, in any case, is to make students responsible for their own editing. (See Chapter Five for a full discussion of this complex and politically charged matter.)

When I recommend "minimal marking," therefore, I am not advocating being soft on error. On the contrary, I am arguing that students' errors should be noted emphatically and that some stick-and-carrot strategy should be applied to motivate students to find and fix them. My own strategy is to write an end comment like this:

Sally, no grade yet because your paper is marred by sentence level errors. Your ideas are worth more careful editing. Please find and correct errors and resubmit.

How high I raise the grade depends on how successful the student is in reducing the number of sentence errors. To speed rereading of corrections, I follow Haswell's practice of placing a check in the margins of lines that have errors so that I need to reread only those lines to determine whether the error was corrected. If a sentence is grammatically incomprehensible, I mark it with a comment such as "garbled" or "tangled syntax."

Another approach is to line edit one or two paragraphs and then ask the student to do the same for the rest of the draft. If you line edit, however, be careful to distinguish rule-based mistakes from stylistic choices. When you cross something out, for example, students often do not know if what they did was "wrong" or just stylistically unpolished. (The next section deals with stylistic, as opposed to grammatical, problems.)

A final strategy for helping students with sentence errors is to note characteristic patterns of errors. Shaughnessy (1977) demonstrated that what often looks like a dozen errors in a student's draft may really be one error repeated a dozen times. If you can help a student learn a rule or a principle, you can often clear up many mistakes in one swoop. Sometimes teaching a principle is a simple matter (explaining the difference between *it's* and *its*); at other times it is more complex (explaining what is meant by a comma splice). Even if you do not explain the rule or principle, helping students recognize a repeated pattern of error is a real service. Here is a typical end-comment:

Sam, you have lots of sentence errors here, but many of them are of two types: (1) apostrophe errors—you tend to use apostrophes with plurals rather than possessives—and (2) comma splices (remember those from English class?).

Is the Draft Free of Stylistic Problems?

What distinguishes stylistic problems from grammar errors is that stylistic problems are rhetorical, between-sentence concerns rather than concerns of correctness. Errors in grammar are violations of the rule-based conventions that govern pronoun cases, subject-verb agreement, dangling modifiers, parallelism, sentence completeness, capitalization, and so forth. In contrast, stylistic problems involve rhetorical choices—matters of clarity and grace rather than right or wrong. Wordiness, choppyness, weak verbs, or excessive use of the passive voice are problems of rhetoric or style, not grammatical errors. Students often need advice on achieving the right level of formality and voice in a paper (depending on genre and audience) or on

understanding when technical language or the passive voice is or is not appropriate. In addition, every teacher has pet peeves about style, so you might as well make yours known to students and note them on drafts when they start to annoy you. Here are my own personal top three annoy-ances. (I invite readers to make their own "top three" lists.)

Wordiness. Even though I am not always able to practice what I preach, I prefer a succinct, plain style unclogged by deadwood or circumlocutions. I urge students to cut and prune their drafts to achieve economy and tight-ness. Here's an example:

Original Version: As a result of the labor policies established by Bismarck, the working-class people in Germany were convinced that revolution was unnecessary for the attainment of their goals and purposes.

Improved Version: Bismarck's labor policies convinced the German working class that revolution was unnecessary.

Lazy use of "this" as a pronoun. Some writers try to create coherence between sentences by using *this* as a pronoun to link backward. Sometimes the "this" stands for a noun in the preceding sentence, but more often it is meant to stand for a whole idea. No grammatical rule actually forbids using *this* as an all-purpose pronoun (although some handbooks call the practice "broad reference" and frown on it), but its overuse can lead to graceless-ness, reduced coherence, and outright ambiguity. Here is an example:

Original Version: As a little girl, I liked to play with mechanical games and toys, but this was not supported by my parents. Fortunately, a woman math teacher in high school saw that I was good at this and advised me to major in engineering. But this turned out to be even more difficult than I imagined.

Improved Version: As a little girl, I liked to play with mechanical games and toys, but my parents didn't support such "boylike behavior." Fortunately, a woman math teacher in high school noticed my talent in math and physics and advised me to major in engineering—advice that turned out to be even more difficult to follow than I had imagined.

Choppy sentences—excessive coordination. Experienced writers vary the length and structure of their sentences to emphasize main ideas, placing subordinate ideas in subordinate phrases or clauses. In contrast, beginning writers often string together a sequence of short sentences—or simply join