

Providing Feedback: HOCs and LOCs

Who are you to critique someone else's work?

You are an experienced reader and a sympathetic writer. If you find a paragraph elegant and clear, other readers likely will too. If you find a sentence confusing or wordy, other readers likely will too. You don't need to be an authority on the paper's topic to recognize when the author is communicating information clearly and convincingly.

What should you look for?

Strengths and weaknesses in prose aren't all created equal. It can be helpful to use a system of Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) and Lower Order Concerns (LOCs) to plan your feedback strategy. For instance, there is little point in pointing out all the comma errors in a paper if the author's central claim (thesis) isn't working. Furthermore, revising for HOCs almost always affects LOCs. When an author revises a thesis statement, for example, s/he will likely also make changes to a paper's organization, tweaking transitions and sentence structures in the process.

Your teacher might provide you with a list of things to look for when you're doing your peer review. You can also ask the author if there's anything in particular s/he would like you to address. If not, you might use the bullet list on the last page of this handout as a starting point for evaluating an essay.

How can you provide useful feedback?

Your job is to provide constructive criticism. This means pointing out both strong points and weak points in a paper. Your feedback should be friendly, engaged, and attentive. Avoid obvious extremes: trashing the author's prose will likely do more to damage the author's ego than to improve his/her writing, while overly praising a paper gives the author little useful feedback for revising.

- Provide written feedback so that the author can refer back to it when s/he revises the paper. Be specific. To improve as a writer, the author needs to know why you think one spot works well or what makes another spot confusing.

POOR: "This is great!"

BETTER: "Great—this example really supports what you said in the last paragraph. (Maybe it should go in the last paragraph instead of here?)"

POOR: "This doesn't make sense."

BETTER: "I don't understand this—you said X above, but now you're saying Y, which seems like the complete opposite. Do you really mean both?"

- Address local concerns—like the two examples above—with notes in the margins. At the end of the paper, provide a few sentences that address the paper as a whole, noting what works well and what needs improvement. For example:

Hi Percy—

I enjoyed reading your paper on the recent rise in popularity of organic foods. I think you have a strong thesis, and you support it with convincing evidence, especially in your paragraphs on Whole Foods and Trader Joe's. However, the paragraph on farmers' markets seems pretty weak to me. I understand what you mean, but it reads more like opinion than fact. Are there any sources you could cite to make it sound more authoritative? I also wanted to mention that you often use the word "product," but I think you might mean "produce." Are those just typos? If you really mean "product," then you might want to define the term. I pointed out a few produce/product places for you above. Let me know if you have any questions about my comments. Happy revising!

—Annabeth

- If you notice patterns of errors (for example, a word that is consistently misspelled, like produce/product above, or a punctuation mark that is consistently used incorrectly), then point out the pattern rather than marking all the errors.

HOCs/LOCs Checklist

Higher Order Concerns

Purpose

- Does the essay do what the assignment asks it to do?

Thesis

- Does the draft have an explicit thesis statement that focuses and organizes the paper?
- Does the thesis statement make a claim (*vs.* just stating a non-contestable fact)?

Development

- Is the thesis supported with sound reasoning and solid evidence?
- Are there places in the draft where more details, examples, or specifics are needed?
- Do any paragraphs seem too short or in need of more material?

Organization

- Is there an effective introduction? A satisfying conclusion?
- Do the paragraphs have a clear focus?
- Is there a clear logic to the flow of ideas? Do the transitions work? Is the essay easy to navigate?
- Is the order in which information is presented effective?

Sources: Incorporating the ideas of others

- Are outside sources appropriate for the purpose?
- Are in-text quotations properly introduced and incorporated into the paper's argument?
- Is everything cited that needs to be? Does the author provide citations, including page numbers, for all direct quotes and paraphrases?

A Middle Order Concern: Style

If prose communicates ideas clearly, but lacks flair, style becomes a LOC. When writing style prevents an author from communicating effectively, it becomes a HOC.

- Are sentences clear and easy to follow?
- Is word choice engaging and appropriate?
- Does the language hold your attention?

Lower Order Concerns: Grammar, punctuation, and spelling

Ideally, grammar, punctuation, and spelling are LOCs: a missing comma here or there, an occasional subject-verb disagreement, and a few typos won't make or break a paper. However, when problems with mechanics obscure an author's ability to communicate effectively, they become HOCs.

- Does the author correctly handle mechanical issues your teacher has discussed in class?
- Are there any errors that detract from your ability to understand what the author is trying to say?
- Are there patterns of errors (e.g. a word repeatedly misspelled, a punctuation mark repeatedly used incorrectly)?