Ratiocination
A color-coding process to aid in editing

This process should be done with later drafts (nearly to final).

Note: Add/delete steps as needed to better address the needs of students and organizational strategy for the paper (sequential, cause/effect, problem/solution…). Always begin with only one-two items building to more each time you take a paper through the process.

1. Circle all “to be” verbs in any color (am, is, are, was, were, be, been, being). Then count all incidences of these verbs. Next, divide by 2 (if a remainder, round up to nearest whole number). The remaining number is the amount that will need to be eliminated (place this number at the top of the page-right hand side). This helps particularly with moving from passive to active voice.

2. In any two colors underline alternating sentences beginning with the first word in each sentence and ending with end punctuation (period, exclamation point, question mark). Use contrasting colors (blue and red or red and green). The piece of writing should have sentences in red/blue, red/blue…. If sentences are extremely short, look for fragments. If sentences are unusually long, look for run-ons (and overuse of “and”). Try compound sentences (FANBOYS-for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) or complex sentences (before, because, after, if, since…).

3. In any color “X” out every incidence of very, really, a lot. These words add nor tell us anything. Use more definite descriptors.

4. [Bracket] the first word in each sentence. Look at sentence beginnings (capitals) and varied beginnings. Think about using verbals, phrases, clauses to vary sentence structure (see Brush Strokes).

5. Draw a ∆ around all incidences of “it”. Look for a more definite noun if the pronoun is not clear.

6. Draw a wavy ~ line under repeated words or phrases (more than 3 times repeated). Try to eliminate or change.

7. In the margin, number the paragraphs. This checks for multiple paragraphs and aids with organizational strategy.

8. Read BACKWARDS to check for spelling. Start at the end of your paper and read from bottom to top, backwards-forwards. By reading this way, the focus is on single words and not context. Another variation is to have students trade papers and check another student’s paper. Don’t ever depend on spell check on the computer. Check papers several times.

9. Read forward for spelling. This time look for proper use of homophones (their, they’re, and there). The computer never catches these errors.

After the color-coding, have students reenter and make corrections for their final copies. Students can work in dyads (pairs) or triads (threes) to get ideas on how to best edit papers.

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