



Translating TA: Comments & Writing Terms

Ever gotten a paper back with comments and feel like you have to interpret a foreign language? Their comments could probably help improve your writing, but what do they mean?! Below are 4 common editing comments, along with translations of the writing problems they designate. As a bonus, we've include some suggestions about how to revise accordingly.

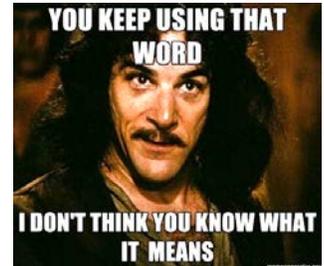
1. “Awkward” (or “Construction”)

This isn't a personal statement, we promise! Finding “awkward” in your paper margins just means those words sound funny or unnatural as written. But there's an easy fix: *read your writing aloud when you revise*. Your editor-ears will hear “awkward” spots that your reader-eyes miss. Complex ideas that seem clear in your mind can become convoluted when on paper. This is a natural pitfall of thoughtful writing, and with diligent editing it's an easy fix.

2. “Word Choice” (sometimes combined with “Awkward”)

The English language comprises +170,000 words, each with multiple meanings. Do not randomly substitute similar terms (ie: thesaurus mining) to vary word choice. Find the word that captures your meaning most fully. This provides clarity and reduces vagueness or repetition. Words are tools—find the tool that best fits your writing task.

- **Pro-tip:** *A thesaurus is not a book of exchangeable words. Synonyms are related-but-not-quite-equal terms. Use one to find the right word, when the words in your head do not exactly capture your meaning.*



3. “Paragraph” Problems (i.e. “Break”, “Topic switches”, or “¶”)

Just like words, paragraphs serve a purpose. They break stories and scholarship into manageable chunks, with ideas that build on one another. When you see ¶ - a symbol called a “pilcrow”- it means that the paragraph should break differently, often where the mark is. Paragraphs can have different problems. Maybe you have multiple ideas in the paragraph, change topics mid-way, or include pieces of evidence that deserve their own paragraphs. Remember, the relationship between a topic sentence and any other sentence in its paragraph should be clear, even if you only read those two sentences. Too many ideas in a paragraph? Split them into different paragraphs to clarify how your story or argument progresses.

4. “Vague” (or “explain more”, “unpack”, “add detail”, etc.)

Your reader needs more. It could be more historical detail, a clearer argument, or an explanation of significance. If writing is like a microscope, “vague” demands you turn up the magnification to get rid of blurriness. Here are some ways writing can lapse into vagueness:

- **Causes & Effects:** Students often spend too much time writing about *what* happened and not enough time explaining *how or why* it happened. Big “systems” (e.g. capitalist markets, democratic governments, or even climate or ecology) certainly influence change. But they do not do it alone nor automatically. Human decisions and ideas usually drive and shape them. Find who the “actors” are. How, precisely, does stuff do stuff to stuff across time and space?

- **Unclear significance:** This is the “so what” question. Think about how your paper builds on or goes beyond approaches you saw in class or in research you’ve found. Does your paper explore gender in the Chinese Qing dynasty differently? Or challenge how people usually tell the history of the Battle of the Bulge? Or provide a new angle for studying Wisconsin history? Thinking, and thus writing, in these terms will help define your project’s significance.
- **Unclear argument:** This means your reader can’t pick out *the point you are making*. Perhaps you haven’t sufficiently distinguished your claims and ideas from those of your authors or sources. Perhaps your language mostly summarizes what happened instead of making claims about its significance. Don’t just tell your reader that something happened. Instead, explain how your particular formulation of evidence helps the reader understand why the historical event unfolded the way it did.
- **Too general:** This is possibly the most vague accusation of vagueness, but most likely your context is too broad. For instance, “the late 1800s” is not very specific, nor is “the second half of the nineteenth-century.” But if you said, “Between 1820 and 1880” – followed by the specific developments and people that set the stage for what you are discussing – your reader will better understand what you mean.
- **Too abstract:** Much like the previous two, this means some element of your point is unclear. Perhaps you are using highly abstract words like “freedom,” “the market,” or “equality.” Instead, use concrete, precise terms like “legislative representation,” “merchants and wholesalers,” or “challenging the racial prohibitions in public education.” These will help you ground your writing in specifics.