

Handout #5: Guidelines for Peer Writing Assessment

When you evaluate a classmate's proof, read it once through quickly, to get an overall impression, and then read it carefully line by line, to check that it's correct and it accomplishes its goals well.

You don't need to give a grade, but you should write detailed notes about what works and what does not work. Try to focus on the most important things you notice about the paper, and make constructive comments that will help the writer improve the next draft. Remember, you are trying to help the other person learn to write better – it's not helpful to rewrite the paper for him/her, but it's also not helpful to write nothing more than “looks good to me.”

Be sure that your comments specifically address each of the following three categories. Whenever possible, try to give specific examples and/or suggestions for improvement. If you can't think of concrete suggestions, then just point out which parts are not working for you and why, or ask questions that will help the author think through what he/she was trying to say.

Mathematics and Logic:

- Does every step of each proof follow logically from the preceding ones?
- Is the justification for each step clear and correct? (This could mean that the justification is clearly stated, or that it is so obvious that it does not need to be stated.)
- Is each mathematical term used correctly according to its definition?
- Does every mathematical statement have a precise mathematical meaning?
- Is the meaning of every symbol clearly explained before it is used?
- If previous results are used, are they clearly identified? Are references given when needed?
- Is the theorem proved? Is the proof convincing?

Exposition:

- If the assignment calls for it, is there an introduction that explains the context and motivation for the results?
- Are the main results clearly and precisely stated as one or more theorems, with proofs clearly delineated?
- Are proofs organized clearly into sentences and paragraphs? Are the sentences clear and easy to understand? Are they not too long or too convoluted or too short?
- Is the overall structure of the proof clear (e.g., whether it's a direct proof, contrapositive proof, proof by contradiction, inductive proof, etc.)?

- Is mathematical notation used appropriately, so as to avoid cumbersome English-language descriptions?
- If some sentences are meant to convey intuition (rather than mathematical precision), are they clearly differentiated from mathematical statements?
- Are formulas and symbolic statements appropriately interspersed with clarifying text so that they're easy to read and place in context?
- Is the proof written at the right level for the intended audience (other students with similar background, but who don't necessarily know this result or its proof)?

Conventions:

- Are the grammar, spelling, punctuation, and usage correct?
- Are mathematical writing conventions followed correctly?
- Are symbols and formulas used correctly, with every formula playing a grammatical role as part of a complete sentence?
- Are logical terms written in words instead of using inappropriate logical symbols?