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They Know Their Colors: Using Color-Coded Comments to Facilitate Revisions

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<u>The clarity of color</u>

Like any parent, I was proud to announce that my toddler-aged daughters "knew their colors." At a traffic light they would announce: "red means stop, green means go." At the grocery store they might remark: "lemons are yellow, carrots are orange." At a young age, my daughters knew that color could be used not only to identify objects, but to convey information.

My legal writing students are much older than my daughters and have associated different colors with different meanings for a much longer time. They understand that an image of a woman dressed in black suggests she is in mourning, a map with blue and red states represents the outcome of an election, and a pink ribbon identifies a supporter of breast cancer research.

In the legal research and writing context, my students quickly learn colors have significance. For example, a red stop sign on their computer screen means something different from a yellow flag. In addition, like many legal writing professors, I have students use different colored highlighters to identify the issue, rule, application, and concluding sections of an IRAC paragraph. In both examples, students easily grasp that different colors stand for different things, be it the weight of legal authority or the different parts of an IRAC paragraph.

<u>Incorporating color into the commenting and revision processes</u>

Like many legal writing professors, I often fear that students will not read, and therefore not incorporate, the comments I have laboriously inserted for a variety reasons, including that there are just too many. And when a student is confronted with several comments with a uniform appearance, the student might not instinctively differentiate between the type of comment and the importance of the comment. That student might not understand that comments address a variety of topics including organization, analysis, grammar, punctuation, and citation. Similarly, students might not realize that during the revision process I, as the professor, would like them to address organization and analysis comments first and citation comments last. Instead, what students see, if the professor has commented using Word bubbles, as I do, is a steady stream of bubble comments that all look the same. As a result, students might become overwhelmed or confused and not have the most productive or efficient revision experience.

Because of this concern and my success with the use of color in other contexts, I decided to experiment with color-coded comments. The experiment involved converting the second student memo of the semester into to a PDF. In this format, I was able to color-code the text box that encapsulated each comment. I told students that as they are revising the memo, they should keep

in mind that the comments had different meanings: yellow comments related to organization and analysis, blue comments related to grammar, punctuation, and citation, and green related to things that were done well or started off well, but could still be improved. At this point, I might also add, that I also had a personal goal of providing students with more positive feedback. I thought that coding my favorable comments in green would allow me to quickly assess whether I had provided each student with some degree of encouraging feedback, as well as identified those areas needing improvement.

Although there are a number ways to color-code comments, I used two annotation features in Adobe Reader: the Sticky Note feature, which is essentially a text box which "sticks" anywhere on the document, and the Highlighter feature, which can be used to highlight text and insert comment boxes. Both features have a variety of colors to choose from. Students read the comments by either clicking on the sticky note or by printing off the comments on a separate page. (See examples below.)

Student feedback

At the end of the semester, I solicited student feedback on this method of commenting. Specifically, I asked students the following: which type of commenting (comment bubbles in Word or colored comments in PDF) they preferred; why they preferred one type of commenting over the other; and which type of commenting they would prefer in the next semester. Four students responded that the type of commenting did not matter; it was the content of the comment that had value. Nine students responded that they preferred the color-comments in the PDF format, while fourteen students responded that they preferred Word.

Some of the reasons for preferring the color comments included: "It made clearer what was well done, what was almost there and what needed most work"; "caught my eye on what to focus on, but also seeing I did well in other parts"; "easier to understand the [comments] when printed off"; "Mac compatible." Some of the reasons for preferring traditional bubble comments included: "makes editing easier"; "could see the comments as I edited my paper whereas with the PDF I had to hover over the comment and switch screens"; "too hard to find/too many pages to go through"; "easier to see what's wrong"; "easier to read when printed out"; and "Adobe isn't very user friendly."

My assessment

My own assessment of color coding comments is mixed. I like the way the color-coded comments look on the computer screen in PDF format. The screen is uncluttered and the colors are vivid. My impression and student responses reflect that this type of display is effective. Students can quickly identify what type of comment they are reading and can devise a game plan for the revision process, such as revising those comments in yellow first and attacking those in blue next. My assumption is that this approach would make the revision process much less

frustrating for both the student and professor. I also could assess my own work quickly, picking out what the student did well and areas where the student should focus moving forward.

Although I like that Adobe Reader was free, commenting in the PDF format is cumbersome. And as a result, commenting takes more time. Adobe Reader does not allow the commentator to use keystrokes. In addition, the color effect is lost when the comments are printed off without colored ink. Because of these deficiencies, the following semester, I allowed students to choose the commenting method I used: traditional Word comment bubbles or color-comments in a PDF.

I still believe in the benefits of color coding comments, but for those looking to color-code comments on PDF documents, I recommend acquiring a license to Adobe Pro, a more advanced version of Adobe Reader. Adobe Pro has more annotation features and has the ability to save keystrokes.   In addition there are a number of apps available for commenting on PDFs on iPads, including iAnnotate, PDF expert, and AirSketch. I also recommend that students are informed early on about the different meanings associated with the colors used. I am confident that with color savvy students and better software I will be able to proudly announce that my students not only "know their colors," but know what to do with them, as well.

recreation, they could not unequivocally conclude that the school intended the sidewalk to be used for recreational activities).

Additionally, when recreational use is so "incidental" to the properties overall and regular use the immunity provision does not apply. See Wallace v. Metropolitan Pier and Exposition Auth., 707 N.E.2d 140, 141 (Ill. App. 1st Dist. 1998) (finding section 3-106 inapplicable when the recreational nature of a pier "so minor or casual.")

In the case of Mr. Gershwin a walkway that has painted markings not intended for recreational purposes, and is occasionally permitted to be used for recreational use is not within the meaning of statue 3-106. In Batson the court held that even though the school occasionally permitted students to use the sidewalk for recreational purposes it was not enough to conclude that it was intended for recreational purposes. Similarly, the walkway in our case was occasionally permitted by students to be used during recess for recreational activities such as, a game of tag. Even though, painted markings are strong indicators of recreational use, in contrast to our case the painted yellow stripes were not intended for recreational use, but were used to differentiate a walkway from the playground. Bubb, 657 N.E.2d 887 at 893. Additionally, it specifically provided access for the teachers only as designated by the sign "Walkway for Teachers Only." The school also had proceeded to notify the teachers that a fence would be placed were the orange cones are, indicating that the school had not intended the walkway to be used for recreational purposes.

Also, like in Wallace where the court held that the use of the property for recreational purposes was so "incidental" to the overall and regular use, similarly in our case the walkway was used incidentally for games of tag. The overall and regular use of the walkway had been designed to provide access for the teachers only.

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