X-Ray Scans

To make visible the logical “bones” of an essay (the structure of its argument) do an “x-ray” of the paper. In the margins of the paper, briefly summarize what each paragraph is about. If you can’t summarize the paragraph with one brief note, write as many marginal notes as needed to represent what you think that paragraph is about.

Once you’ve finished writing in your summaries of the paragraphs, go back over them and ask the following questions. In doing so, you’ll be using the “x-ray scan” you’ve just done as a tool for assessing and analyzing the logical structure of the paper.

- Were there paragraphs where you had to write more than one note? If so, what advice would you give the writer about that paragraph? Should she cut one or more of the topics covered in that paragraph (i.e., were they unnecessary tangents?)? Or should that single paragraph be expanded into multiple paragraphs, so that each idea has its own space?

- Did you see repetition, paragraphs that repeated the same point with different examples? If so, which paragraph was the strongest (and should be kept)? Which should be cut? Or can you brainstorm a way to reshape one of the paragraphs so that some part of it could be kept, but restructured and reframed to give it a new function in the logic of the argument? What would that new function be and where would the reframed paragraph go?

- Did all of the paragraphs work together to build a single line of argument? Sometimes each paragraph in a paper may present a different idea--but the ideas explore multiple lines of argument, rather than a single one (and for a coherent paper, the writer needs to focus on a single line of argument). In other words, does the paper lead the reader up a single logical staircase, with each ‘step’ logically connected to the preceding one? Or does it lead the reader up multiple staircases (exploring multiple lines of argument)?

- Are there steps missing in the overall logic of the argument?

- Are all of the “steps” required for this assignment present?
  - (List those steps here: Do you want a paragraph devoted to a counterargument? Do you want to see at least one paragraph responding to the counterargument? etc)

- Do any of the paragraphs need to be moved? In other words, are all of the “steps” in the argument in the right place? Or might there be a more effective way to reorganize?

Carol Hayes, University Writing Program, GWU