Constructive Criticism Guidelines[1]

When reviewing written work:
- Constructive criticism means using a neutral tone, provide feedback that authors can act upon such as:
  - offering help with rephrasing, using different language, to make their ideas more clear
  - use imperatives (e.g. this needs to include the variables tested) instead of saying something negative (e.g. this didn't mention any variables)
- Tell the author where they did well so that they know they do not need to change that word/paragraph/section/etc. when revising their document.

Here are a few categories of less useful comments that are best avoided:
- One such category is **overly general comments**, such as "I just didn't get it" or "it's great!" The lack of detail in these comments makes them unusable to writers looking to improve their work.
- **Overly specific comments** are similarly unhelpful. If a peer reviewer focuses, say, on the writer's use of commas or comments excessively on a single point or idea to the exclusion of others, that doesn't give the writer the kind of substantive feedback that is most helpful for revision.
- Finally, and obviously, **personal insults** or feedback that gets too personal really has no place in peer review. Comments like 'this is a stupid idea" or "how lame" will not help any writer revise.

Look For Appropriate Content[2]

Does the **introduction** section
- explicitly introduce the report and briefly explain the focus and context for the report? For example, does it explain the problem or opportunity that prompted the report to be written?
  Note: do not assume that the abstract has already done the job of introducing your report; your report should be able to stand on its own without the abstract
- provide sufficient background (technical information, key definitions, etc.) for general readers?
- refrain from presenting conclusions or recommendations?
- The introduction will also include:
  - **Objectives of the study**
  - **Scope** (indicating what your analysis includes and excludes)

Does the **method** section
- explain when, where, and how the research was done using past tense?
- describe your research method in sufficient detail? For example, if you conducted a survey, did you explain who you surveyed and how (e.g., in person, by phone, by e-mail, via an online tool like SurveyMonkey)?

Does the **results** section
- state the results you promised to deliver in the introduction?
- have both text and illustrative materials (Tables and Figures) that are necessary?
  - Use the text component to guide the reader through your key results, i.e., those results which answer the question(s) you investigated.
  - Each Table and Figure must be referenced in the text portion of the results, and you must tell the reader what the key result(s) is that each Table or Figure conveys.

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[1] Lowell, S. (2011). Helpful hints for effective peer reviewing. Retrieved 5/12, 2015, from http://abacus.bates.edu/~ganderso/biology/resources/writing/HTWcritique.html
[2] Writing Support Services, Student Success Centre, University of Calgary. (2013). Report writing guidelines and checklist for revising. Retrieved 5/12, 2015, from https://ucalgary.ca/ssc/resources/writing-support/445

Does the **discussion** section
- begin by re-stating the objective you were trying to achieve and answering the problem posed in the introduction?
- describe the patterns, principles, and relationships shown the each major finding/result and put them in perspective?
- discuss any unexpected findings?
- identify potential limitations and weaknesses and comment on the relative importance of these to your interpretation of the results and how they may affect the validity of the findings.
  - When identifying limitations and weaknesses, avoid using an apologetic tone.
- discuss everything, but is still concise, brief, and specific?

Does the **conclusion** section/paragraph
- summarize the most important findings in the report and indicate their significance (answering the reader's implied question "so what")?
- include only conclusions that flow from the data and discussion presented?
- how the report's objectives have been met?
- refrain from introducing new information?

Are **appendices**
- included as necessary to provide detailed additional information that is not essential in the body of the report but that would be of interest for specialist readers?
- informatively titled and labelled as Appendix A, Appendix B, etc., according to the order in which they are mentioned in the text?

Are all **figures and tables**
- numbered in separate series (e.g., Table 1, Table 2, Figure 1, Table 3, Figure 2)?
- informatively titled (e.g., Table 1**:** Annual precipitation in Calgary, 1980 - 1990)?
- properly formatted, with the title for tables above and that for figures below?
- referred to and discussed in the body of the report?
- accompanied by a source citation, if the information was borrowed or adapted?

Is the **writing style** generally characterized by
- sensitivity to the audience (e.g., by including definitions and avoiding jargon for general readers and by using gender-neutral terms and pronouns)?
- straightforward, concise, and natural wording (e.g., "use" rather than "utilize", "now" rather than "at this point in time," and "We" rather than "The writers")?
- precise wording (e.g., avoiding general terms like "a large increase")?
- grammatical parallelism in lists and headings (e.g., We propose to identify the factors contributing to the problem, to evaluate their impact, and to recommend solutions")?
- relatively few sentences over 30 words or two typed lines?
- relatively few paragraphs over a half-page long?
- a coherent flow, linking new information to known or previously given information? (e.g. the results, discussion and conclusion all deliver what you promised in the introduction)
- correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling? (Hint: keeping generalizations in the plural, e.g., writing "users" rather than "the user," may eliminate some problems.)