



## Color Code

Among my favorite classroom activities are “writing arts and crafts,” which include this technique as well as the Cut and Restructure activity. Arts and crafts sounds fun and relaxing, which sets students at ease (unlike “revision,” which can feel scary and overwhelming). And these activities really are a lot of fun!

After practicing them once in class, many students continue to use them at home, so we don’t need to spend a lot of class time before they become part of the students’ regular repertoire.

### How It Works

In a corner of the first page, students create a key to their color coding, which can be expanded as they work. For instance, the first topic in an essay might be an explanation of the prefrontal cortex and its jobs. Students thus write “prefrontal cortex” in their key and color those words blue. Then, every time they come across writing about the prefrontal cortex in their essays, they color that paragraph or set of sentences blue.

The next subject might be adolescence and its unique psychological features. They can write “psychology of adolescents” in the key and color that orange. Then they color each corresponding part of the essay orange. They can keep adding colors for however many themes or ideas appear in the essay.

### Why it Works

As students finalize the key and color in the entire essay – in hard copy with colored pencils or on a screen with highlighting – they begin to see patterns.

This color-coded version underscores organizational details easy to overlook: there’s a single red sentence in the midst of a section of yellow; there’s a full paragraph of blue towards the beginning of the essay and another towards the end; one paragraph is a mishmash of colors.

Once students see those patterns, fixing them becomes much simpler: put each color into a single paragraph; craft a sentence that begins with red and then becomes yellow to transition between paragraphs; erase a repetitive purple section.



Color coding also helps students split their work into stages, allowing them the freedom to compose first and then confidently revise their early writing into more developed final drafts.

As students reorganize their essays around the colors, they will often feel inspired to rewrite or add material. They'll begin to see the ways in which their transitions, for instance, are implied rather than articulated, or they'll notice that a particular color, the subject of which they thought they had discussed at length, only comprised a few sentences, and they'll develop that idea further.

## Alternatives for Colorblind Students

Colorblind students can use this same activity with adaptations: either choose only the colors they can see or use a variety of other visual cues, like italics, bold, small caps, or varie fonts. On hard copy, they can do a single underline, double underline, circling, boxing, and other written visual cues.

## Color Coding For Everyone

You might think that this activity feels too childish for older students, but I have never had a student – even seniors in college – balk at this activity. And I point out to them that I use this technique myself. In fact, many years ago I color-coded several chapters of my dissertation when it felt disorganized and out of control. Happily, I still have those drafts, which I bring to class. They benefit not only from the activity but from knowing that adults and professional writers also need techniques for improving their writing.