Guidelines for reading/commenting on drafts of informal arguments

The purpose of sharing drafts is to give constructive feedback to help your classmates develop strong, well-written arguments. Do point out good things you see, but try to push each other as well. Don’t be shy about asking tough questions and pointing out weaknesses in the drafts, and try not to take such comments on your own work as a personal attack.

For each draft, write out answers to the following questions before class on Friday. Though this writing can be fairly informal, it’s important to expand on your observations enough so that the writer can really understand what they have done well and what still needs work. (Comments like “Good introduction” or “Unclear thesis” don’t help very much.)

- Have one copy of your comments for the writer of each paper. This can be written on the paper itself or on a separate page, as you prefer, or shared electronically.
- In addition, have a copy of the comments for me. These can be put in the dropbox in D2L (either separate files or all in one file is fine), emailed to me (as an attachment or just typed into the email), or handed in in hard copy (printout or photocopy). If you give me hard copy, make sure your name is also on it. These copies for me allow me to give you credit for your commenting work, which is included in your grade for “ungraded work.”
- Feel free to also write comments within the draft itself. If you do, make sure not to correct any errors you see (grammar, spelling, etc.); if you notice these, circle or otherwise flag them, but let the writer figure out the correction for him/herself.

1. Before you even read the draft, eyeball it for length and style. It should be in the neighborhood of 2+ pages (if typed & double-spaced, average font size). There should not be formal citations or a bibliography. Do the paragraphs look like they are an appropriate length? Briefly note whether these look good or if something may need adjusting.

2. Read just the title and pause to comment. Do you feel engaged, interested? Do you have any idea what the paper is about? (Skip this step for business letters.)

3. Read just the first paragraph (or two if very short) and pause to comment. How interested are you? What is this paper going to be about? Can you tell yet what the thesis is? (In a letter, this should be very clear at this point.)

4. Read the rest of the paper. What turned out to be the position taken by the author? Is the thesis clear and consistent? Were your expectations based on the title and introduction borne out? Point out any uncertainty or inconsistency you may encounter.

5. Consider at least some of the following aspects of the paper, and identify one or two strengths of the draft and one or two suggestions for improvement. Be sure to describe the problem you see or explain what you like and why. It is not necessary to comment on everything! Do try to comment on whatever the writer was most interested in feedback on.

- clarity of supporting points and logic
- use of specific evidence to support points
- working information about the sources into the sentences (not formal citations)
- whether and how well it addresses opposing viewpoints or likely objections
- use of other strategies such as ethos or pathos
- organization: focused paragraphs, effective order, transitions
- conclusion
- sentence style: clarity, appropriate level of formality