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### **The Rainbow Review: An Online Customized Critique of Style and Content**

Meeting student writers at their skill level is not an easy task, yet every writing instructor knows that the more individualized the teaching approach, the more likely it is to succeed. Yet while we may recognize that each student presents his or her own set of skills and weaknesses, abilities and needs, tailoring our responses and methodologies to fit individuals seems a daunting task. Furthermore, the *kairos* of every academic rhetorical situation, the context and moment when teaching and learning take place, also varies widely. While inexperienced freshmen in FYC may call for gentle guidance and encouragement, other more advanced writers in a professional writing class may actually request a more extensive critique. For their part, instructors rarely have time to respond to unique needs of students with varying abilities. In trying to meet this challenge, I have used Instructional Technology, in its most familiar form, the word processor, to develop time saving techniques that can be tailored to the needs of individual students, and in particular, those advanced writers who often long for intensive feedback.

I want to stress this last point because I think the needs of advanced students have been neglected in the process approach to teaching writing. It has been my experience that such students often request copious feedback and careful criticism. They want to know if what they've written is clear, concise and engaging—or not. They don't seem satisfied with general directives or questions to guide their revisions—and indeed, these types of responses may not help them progress as writers. Time and again, students have

asked me for precise feedback, textual interventions and rewordings that *show* how their prose could be improved. In short, what they really want is a good editor.

Having majored in journalism and worked as a journalist before teaching writing, I have had the good fortune of diligent editors scrutinizing my copy, crossing out flab, clarifying vague sentences, making nouns and verbs more precise, getting rid of passive constructions and the like. I appreciated this gift of concentrated attention and would like to provide my students with this same careful editing. I realize that such extensive feedback may not be appropriate for every writer or every paper, but I think it especially beneficial for more skilled writers who may be more mature and sophisticated in their desire for critique. For them, there is no substitute for a through stylistic critique which *shows* rather than *tells* what is wrong with a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph. Again, I know that in my own case, no matter how many times I read “wordy” in the margins of my papers, I didn’t understand how to fix the problem until I saw a professor/editor actually reword my prose more concisely.

As a writing instructor, I’ve tried without success to find editing, commenting and evaluation software that was suitable to my editing aspirations, but none of it seemed to allow for in-text insertions. So over the years I’ve developed an easy to implement online process for increasing the amount of specific feedback on student papers. Students write their papers using Word, or any other word processing program, and send them to me as email attachments. I, in turn, evaluate their papers online. Because I use the highlighting feature of Word and also the red font color of the Track Changes feature, my evaluations are quite colorful, hence the name, “Rainbow Review.”

I employ four techniques available in MSWord and most other word processing and shareware programs. The features I use, highlighting, track changes and macros, greatly increase the amount of specific commentary on student papers, and once the techniques are set up, simultaneously cut down on grading time. (By the way, it helps tired eyes reading lots of papers to set the magnifying feature at 150%.) The four components offered below may be used separately or in combination. They are progressively more specific and offer a deepening degree of critique. With basic writers, I might use only the first technique; for more advanced writers I can offer a complex and complete review of their prose by combining all four.

**1). A Highlighting Critique** – Uses color coded highlighting to indicate specific areas for revision

**2). A Track Changes Response** – Uses the Track Changes feature of Word to strikeout wordy phrasing or inappropriately used words and add bracketed intertextual comments

**3). Macros for Feedback** -- A growing array of automated macros (clickable icons placed on the Reviewing bar) which insert frequently used comments, punctuation suggestions and the like

**4). A Macro for End Comments and Grade** -- A macro which generates a simple two row chart for end comments, a grade and a reminder to revise to confirm the grade

### **Highlighting Critique**

I have a color coded highlighting system in which each color stands for a particular area in need of revision. The simple system provides students with a concentrated, non-directive evaluation. When I receive a student paper, I open it in Word, making sure the highlighting feature is available in the tool bar. (Normally it is

there by default.) As I read through the paper, I highlight words, phrases, sentences or whole paragraphs, with each color illustrating a particular problem or strength. Created as a simple table in Word (or FrontPage for web-based syllabi) below is the highlighting rubric I give students to for interpreting my review.

## Rainbow Review Evaluation Key

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From time to time, your assignments will be returned to you with color coded highlighting as a way of commenting on your writing. Each highlighting color indicates a different area for your attention. Use the highlighting as a guide when you revise your papers.

Examples of excellence in your writing will be highlighted too! (In Aqua)

Teal	Weak argument that needs support; can you provide more proof through examples, quotations, illustrations, facts and the like?
Blue	Meaning seems unclear; can you reword for clarity?
Purple	Inaccurate; can you check your sources for facts?
Dark Green	Organization is hard to detect; can you rethink presentation of information and be sure the body of your paper corresponds to your thesis or lead?
Maroon	Problem with AP Stylesheet or MLA citation form; can you check and revise?
Pink	Phrasing is awkward; passage may sound ungraceful or unidiomatic; can you revise your phrasing?
Yellow	Punctuation, grammar or spelling is unconventional; can you revise with standard usage in mind?
Light Green	Using the wrong word, a cliché, a lackluster word or unconsciously repeating the same words; can you search the thesaurus for engaging substitutes?
Light Gray	Passage is wordy or redundant; can you eliminate unnecessary words?
Red	Eliminate forms of "to be" (is, are, am, was, were, be, being, been). Can you revise with active verbs for energy and economy?
Olive	This word or phrase is very general or vague. Can you use a more specific word or give more specific details?
Aqua	This is great writing. Don't change a thing!

Incidentally, the highlighting feature of Word is comprised of 15 different colors. I've used only 12. Other could use all 15 and, of course, designate colors differently from the way I have. Below is an example from a student paper which illustrates my technique. This short excerpt from a 250-word feature story was written for a journalism class. Readers will notice that I've used gray highlighting to indicate wordiness, light green for incorrect word choice, red for an avoidable "to be" construction, pink to indicate awkward phrasing, and aqua to signal effective writing. When students receive their reviewed papers, they are instructed to read the passage, think about the highlighting, then revise accordingly. This level of feedback is useful for beginning writers and others who may not need a "full correction" response.

It seems the unfulfilled Y2K meltdown that the entire country was worried about did in fact claim a victim. Before PDAs, camera phones, and wireless internet the blind date was still a perfectly practical – though seldom successful – way to set two friends up. But with the prophesy of Y2K's mass chaos not coming true and technology progressing at warp speed, the blind date has died. It has been replaced by what young adults are term ing the MySpace Revolution.

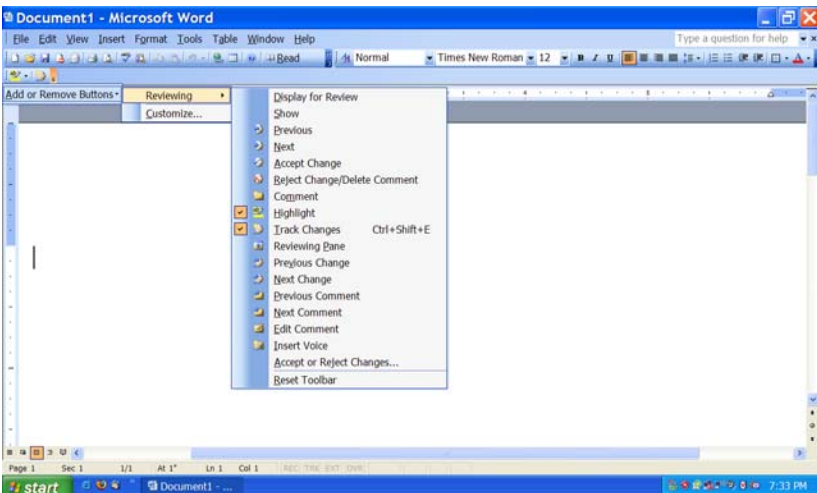
### Using Track Changes for Evaluating Student Texts

I must warn the reader that what follows may seem a bit tedious, but following my instructions carefully will save you hours of work in the long run. While the Track Changes feature of Word has myriad functions, I do not find many of them useful in responding to student drafts. They often add distracting clutter to the text. Therefore, I

turn off the Commenting feature by making sure Comment is not selected from the *Insert* drop down menu on the main menu bar.

Next, I go to View > Toolbars and make sure the following toolbars are turned on: Standard, Formatting and Reviewing. The Reviewing toolbar will appear under the Standard/Formatting bar on the Word page. Second, I turn on the Track Changes feature by going to Tools and clicking Track Changes in the drop down menu.

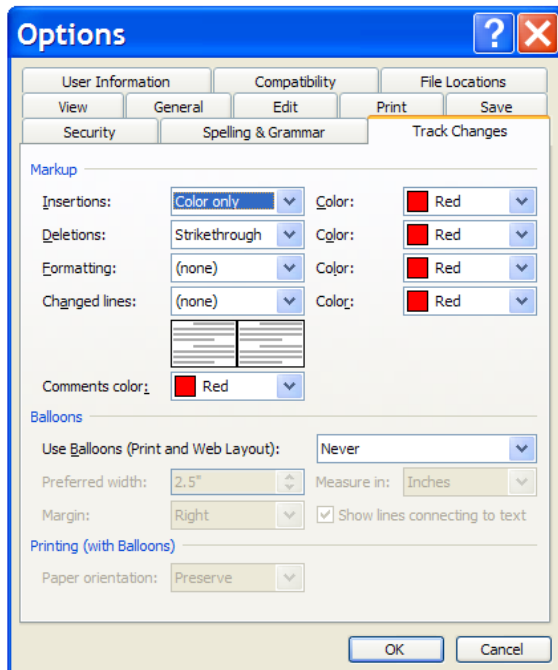
After that I add the Track Changes icon and Highlighting icons to the Review bar under the menu and tool bars. To do this, go to the end of a tool bar, click on Add/Remove Buttons > Reviewing and then select Highlighting and Track Changes. The last step of this process should look like this:



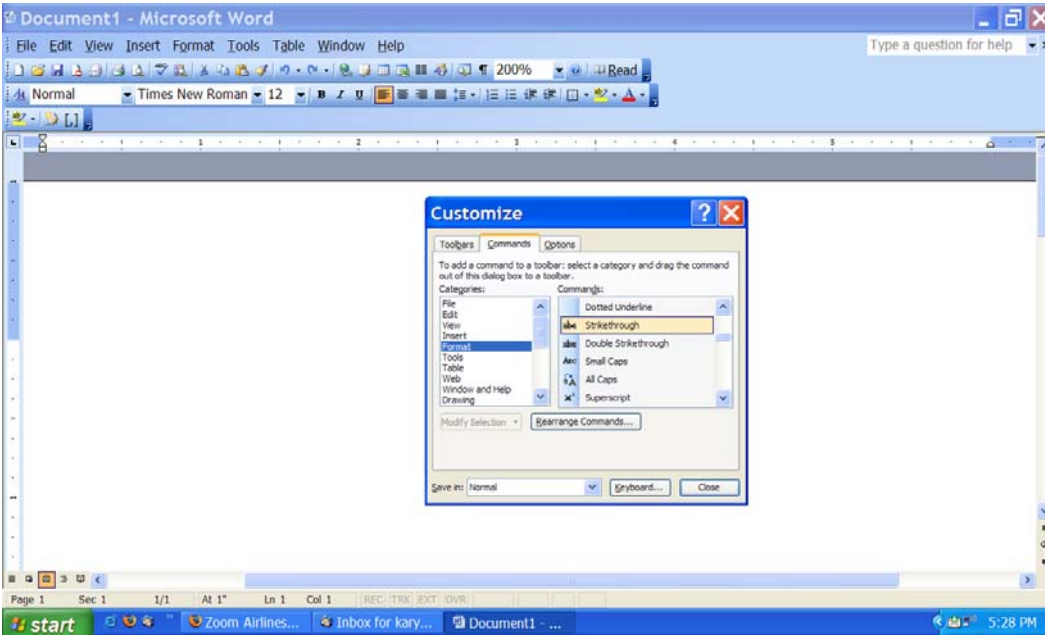
Now that you have Track Changes turned on, it is important to limit Track Changes so that only the strikethrough and red intertextual commenting features are operational. I choose red for the font color. As I said above, I find many of the tracking features such as comments in balloons and vertical bars in the margins redundant and visually confusing to students. I therefore turn off these features as illustrated below and

advise my students to do the same. If they don't, they will open my Rainbow Review to find a cluttered mess. To avoid it, first go to Tools > Options > Track Changes tab.

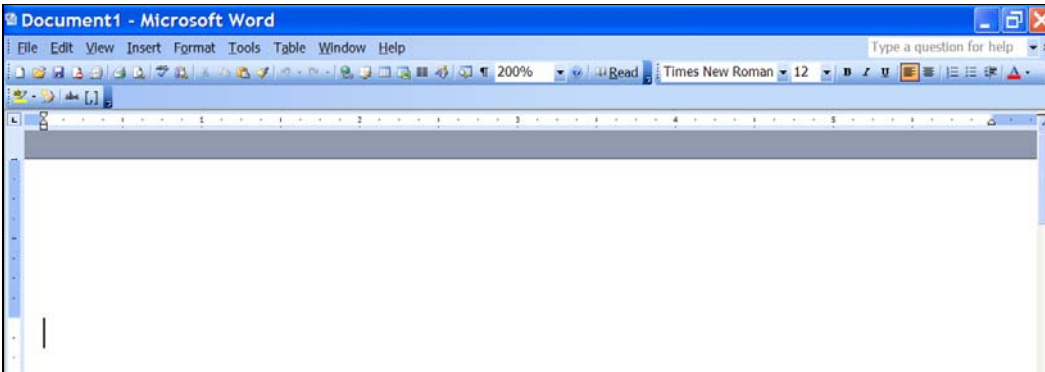
Then configure as follows:



Finally, you need to be sure that the strikeout feature appears in your Reviewing bar for easy access. To put it there, go to Tools > Customize > Commands Tab and select the Format category and the Strikethrough command, like this:



Next drag the Strikeout command out of the dialog box into the Review Bar. Hit close, and the strikeout icon will stay in your Review bar as in the illustration below.



Here is the same student text with the Track Changes feature turned on, using the text insertion and strikeout features to provide additional feedback to the student:

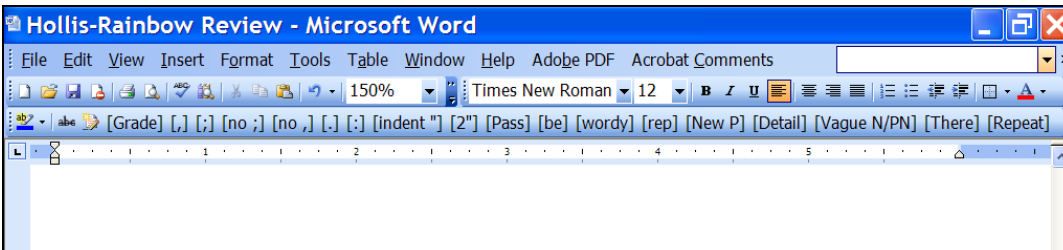
It seems ~~The~~ ~~unfulfilled~~ [potential] Y2K meltdown that ~~worried~~ the entire country ~~was worried about~~ did in fact claim a victim. Before PDAs, camera phones, and wireless internet the blind date was still a perfectly

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practical – though seldom successful – way to ~~set two friends up~~ meet someone and start a relationship. But with the ~~prophecy~~ [prediction] of Y2K's mass chaos not coming true and technology progressing at warp speed, the blind date has died. ~~It has been~~ replaced by what young adults ~~are~~ term ~~ing~~ the MySpace Revolution.

### Using Macros to Insert Comments, Punctuation, Advice

Setting up macros for frequently used comments and corrections is also a bit tedious, but provides a very easy way to add great specificity to evaluations. After set up, how easy it is to click on a symbol or word in the Review Bar and have a recommendation, punctuation mark, etc., inserted where you point your cursor. In the illustration below, you can see a screen shot of my Reviewing Bar (third bar from the top). I have 18 visible macro icons and one more accessed by clicking on the down arrow at the end of the bar. There is room for many more.



While most of the macros titles are self-evident, I'll provide some examples below and include the text they insert.

[be] = Add energy and economy to your prose by avoiding too many "to be" verbs: is, are, am, was, were, be, being, been

[wordy] = Edit to eliminate wordiness.

[New P] = Begin new paragraph here

[Vague N/PN] = Avoid vague nouns or pronouns; use specific language

[Repeat] = Avoid unconscious repetitions

I have also used macros to request that students do exercises in weak areas:

[Pass] = You can add energy and economy to your prose by using fewer "to be" verbs (am, are, is, was, were, be, being, been). Read the material on the web page below, do the quiz at the bottom of the page and turn in to me.

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/passive.htm>

Although the "Help" file in Word should be consulted regarding how to set up Macros, I offer my scaled down process here. First, of course, you must decide on what type of advice to include in your macro and what you will name it. Let's say you want a macro that will insert punctuation marks in a way to draw attention to their omission in a student text. Take a look at the way commas and quotation marks are inserted in the same student paragraph:

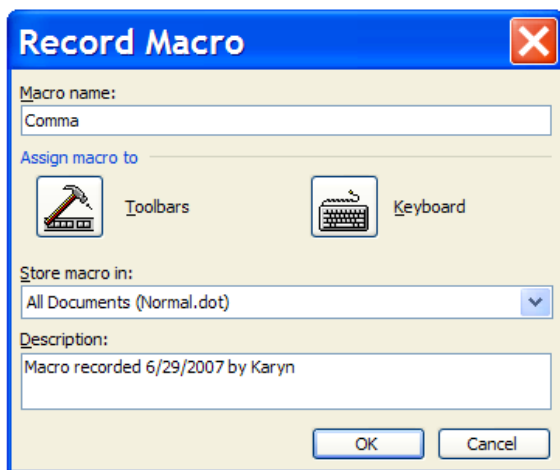
It seems The unfulfilled [potential] Y2K meltdown that worried the entire country was worried about did in fact claim a victim. Before PDAs, camera phones, and wireless internet[,] the blind date was still a perfectly practical – though seldom successful – way to set two friends up meet someone and start a relationship. But with the prophesy [prediction] of Y2K's mass chaos not coming true and technology progressing at warp speed, the blind date has died[,] It has been replaced by what young adults are term ing the ["MySpace Revolution.""]

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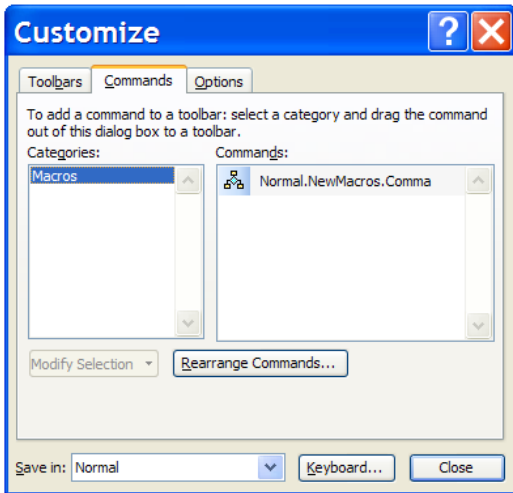
Here are the steps I used to set up the macro which automatically inserts a comma [,] into a student's text. To save time, you can create (record) a macro such as this one while in the process of evaluating a paper in Word. Here's how:

- 1.) Go to Tools > Macros > Record New Macro
- 2.) The Record Macro dialog box will appear.

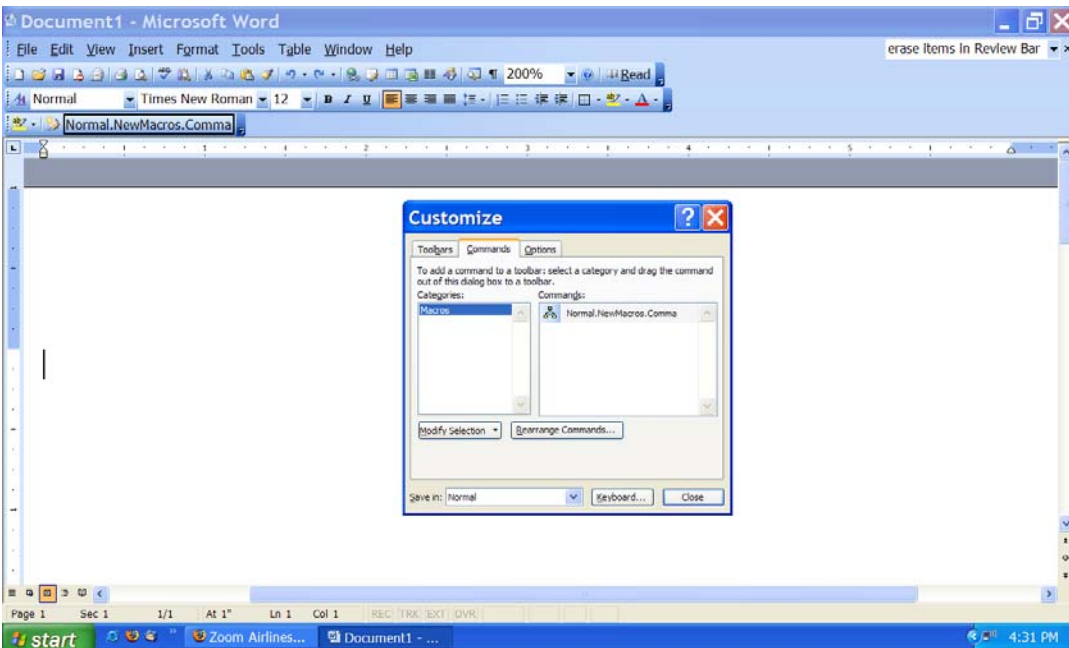
Since this macro will insert a comma in a student text, I'll name it "Comma." Put the cursor inside the Macro name box, erase the default name, and type "Comma." Careful-- do not click OK yet.



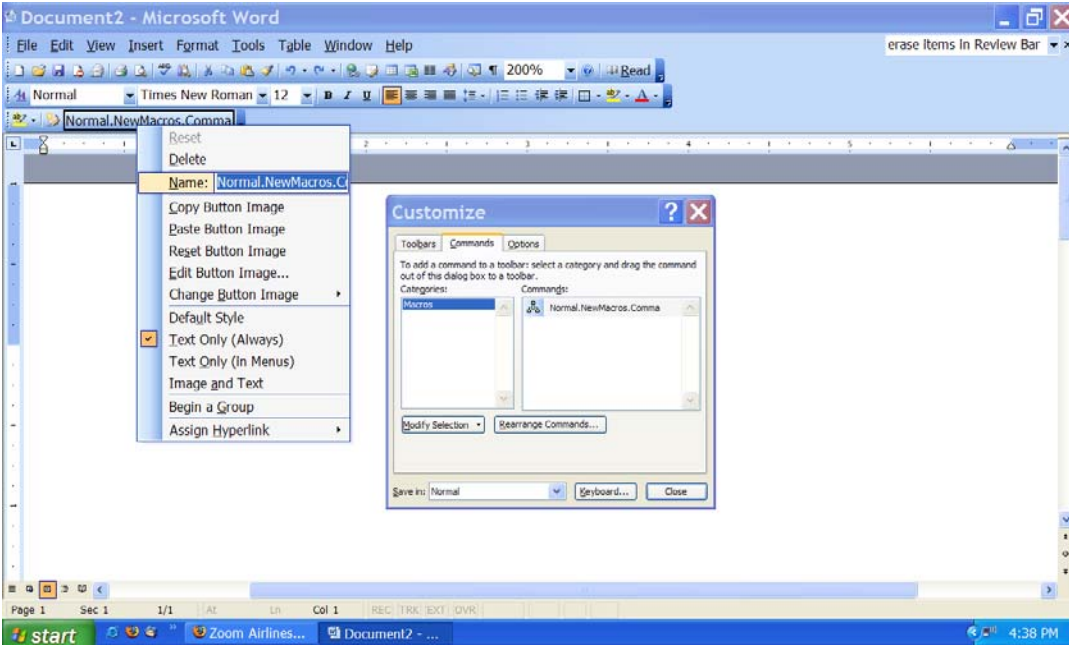
3). Next click on the Toolbars icon, then the Commands tab. You will see the window below.



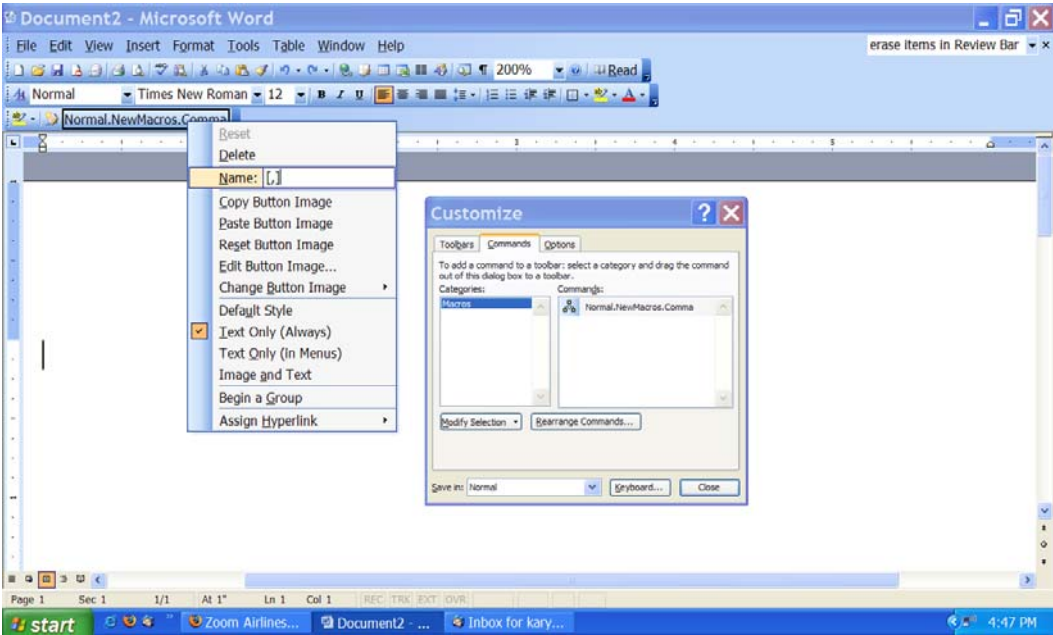
4). Next, put your cursor on “Normal.NewMacros.Comma,” in the Commands box and drag to the Review bar. Place to the right of the Track Changes icon. It should look like this:



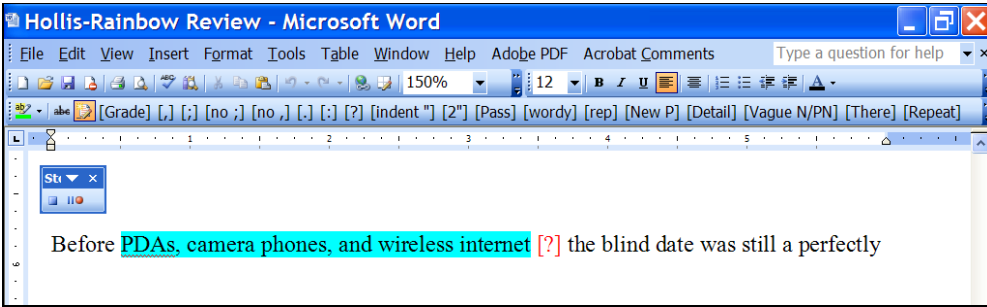
5). Now right click on “Normal.NewMacros.Comma” in the Review bar. A window will drop down. Point your cursor to the right of the Name box and select “Normal.NewMacros.Comma.”



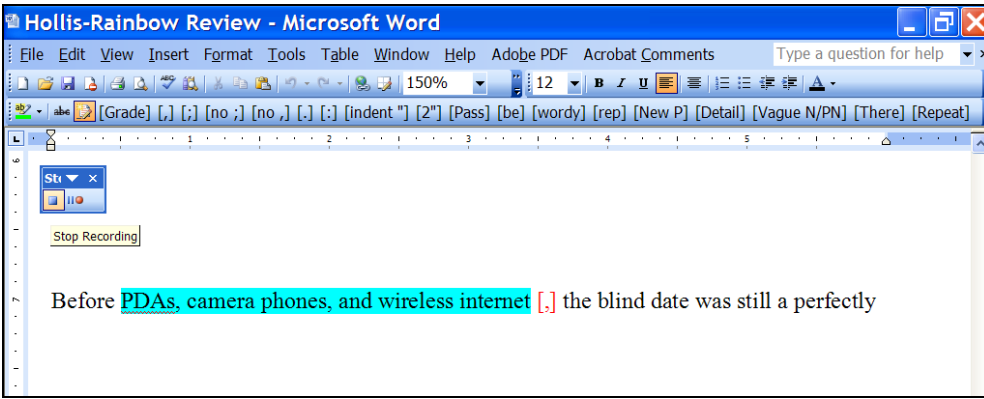
6). Hit backspace to erase the long name and replace it with a comma in brackets [,] This symbol will appear on the Reviewing bar, allowing more space for many other such macros.



7). Next click “Close.” You will automatically go back to your student paper and see the Record Macro Toolbar in the upper left corner of the screen. Make sure the Track Changes icon is selected in the Review bar. Then type the bracketed comma [,] in the student text where it should appear. At the same time you will be recording the macro. Your screen will look like this:



9). Now click on the Stop Recording button and you’re done.



From now on when you want to place a comma in a student text, you've only to hit the comma icon in the Reviewing bar.

**Macro for Grade and End Comments:**

The last technique I will explain is the use of a macro to create a two-celled table for final remarks to students and their grade. The grade is followed by an automatic reminder to revise the paper according to my editing suggestions and return it to me within a week to confirm the grade. The steps for making this macro are similar to those above except, of course, the macro will be called "Grade." When you get to the final step of actually recording this macro, you will place your cursor at the end of the paper on the left hand side, create a table with one column and two rows such as the one below. The top row is for the personalized end comments. The bottom row is for the grade and includes a reminder to revise. When making this macro, don't put a grade in until after you've recorded it. Later, when you insert the table into other student texts, you'll be able to put in a different grade for each paper.

Jennifer—Your lead paragraph was appropriately catchy for your clever and engaging topic. I particularly liked your use of specific detail and the interrupted sentence (which I highlighted in aqua). Next time work on conciseness and eliminating those wordy “to be” constructions.

Grade = B    Revise and resubmit within a week to confirm grade.

As I have indicated, the role of editor is one I want to perform for my students, especially my advanced writers; it is a role they seem to greatly appreciate. Using these relatively easy to implement functions in Microsoft Word (which are also common to most word processing programs), I have found a way to increase the kind and quantity of feedback I can include in student texts without increasing the time I spend grading and evaluating.

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