Rules for Constructively Reading Someone Else's Writing

1) Never skip talking about the strengths.

Writing makes everyone vulnerable. If it's good, don't hesitate to say how. If it's terrible, start with something nice. Be sincere, even if you must be brief.

2) Don't overwhelm the writer.

There are (at least) two ways you might overwhelm a writer:
(a.) marking the same mistake too many times and
(b.) marking too many potential improvements.

(a.) While editing, you might find that a writer makes the same mistake over and over again. Rather than putting giant red bleeding blotches all over everything, mark one or two instances and then put teeny underlines or checks by the others. The writer will learn how to deal with the mistake the first one or two times and then get the exercise of correcting themselves the rest of the time. Plus, they don't get the visual cue of 'bleeding paper' to make them tear up before you can talk to them about it.

(b.) Pick your battles. If the writer is having trouble with conjunctions that makes their paper incoherent, do not also harp on their use of the Oxford comma that you don't like. Mark problems that affect clarity or meaning first. Then, if you have hardly anything to say (that means almost nothing), you may go back and forward your personal comma-agenda.

The general guideline is that if you tell someone that 10 things are wrong, they will remember two. Their internal whimper will drown out the other eight. If you tell someone three things, they are much more likely to remember all of them.

It is much easier to tell if you are overwhelming someone in person. Their eyes well up with tears or you notice their foot start to jiggle uncontrollably. Online, assume the writer is 10 times more sensitive than you thought.

3) Make your markings clear.

Nothing is more frustrating than finding a mark that you don't understand. In written comments, explain your abbreviations the first time. Make them simple and obvious: "W.C.= word choice."

Then, explain how to fix the problem the first time so that the marking is extra clear. "Instead of 'sidetrack,' did you mean 'soundtrack'?"

Keep your handwriting legible. No one likes having to translate your creative m's and n's.

If online or typing your comments, make sure you don't comment with shorthands that only you understand. Typing can make your communication sloppy. Don't let it! Just because the letters are clear doesn't mean they make sense.

4) Restate the main point in your own words.

Hearing the main point that the piece communicated to the reader is a great exercise whether you get it right or wrong. If you say what the writer is expecting, she knows she has accomplished her goal. Having the point articulated in other words might give the writer a fresh insight into her thinking.

If you say something other than what she is expecting, she knows that the main point is lost and obscured among her other words. It's a great place to start finding the point again.

5) Speak in concepts. Give examples rather than simply marking corrections.

When people get back a piece of their writing with your markings all over it, they can quickly start to feel that they are being nit-picked. Instead, make one or two corrections and then explain why you've made that decision.

Often making these sorts of conceptual comments can help you as the editor see something about their work that you did not see before. After going back over their piece, do you notice several of the same comma problems? Is the problem commas or run-on sentences? Are they misusing introductory phrases or having a problem with conjunctions? Without conceptual interpretation, all these problems would simply blend into a series of commas or deleted commas.

Without concepts, you will correct the paper but not the problem.

Editing other people's writing takes practice and compassion. Cultivating this skill over time can help you become a better writer yourself and better at accepting the critiques that other people offer you. Good luck!