

MAKING PEER REVIEW WORK

After many semesters using peer review in my own composition classes and helping colleagues in Geography, Women's Studies, Political Science, Slavic, and Art use peer review successfully in their classes, I have several specific suggestions for instructors trying peer review for the first time or refining their own methods of using peer review.

1. Set realistic goals for peer review and explain them fully (and often) to students.

Before deciding to do peer review, it's essential that you consider your pedagogical reasons for using it. After my first unsuccessful attempt at peer review, I realized that I could not expect my students to respond to each others' papers as well as a trained instructor could. Rather than see peer review as a substitute for my comments, I now value peer review as a way to get students actively involved in their own learning. By having my students read their peers' writing and talk together about the processes of drafting and revising, I want to encourage them to become more self-conscious about their own writing process and to begin to take control over that process.

The primary reason that students struggle with peer review is that they don't understand what they are supposed to do and why they are doing it. If students don't understand the purposes of peer review, they will see it as mere busy work. *Before, during, and after* peer review sessions, take time to explain your goals for peer review. My main goal for peer review is to emphasize to students that writing is fundamentally a form of communication between real people. Talking face-to-face about a paper can help writers articulate what they are trying to say in their papers. It is also a chance for real readers to tell writers what they're hearing and what isn't coming across clearly.

Just as important, I stress to students that peer review teaches them to be critical readers. As they learn to read their peers' work with a "critical eye," they can begin to apply that "eye" to their own drafts. In addition, reviewers can give each other encouragement and share new ideas and new strategies for writing.

2. Do peer review more than once.

Being able to read and respond to papers effectively takes practice. If you plan to do peer review, I strongly recommend that you do it more than once. With practice, students will learn how to give each other constructive feedback, and additional peer reviews will reward the initial investment you put into preparing your students for the first one.

3. Guide your students with central questions and focused tasks.

To help our students learn how to do peer review, we need to clearly explain what we want them to do. Often peer review doesn't work because we give our students too many things to concern themselves with. Feeling uncertain about their ability to "teach" their peers anything about writing, peer reviewers will give up before they even begin. Giving students a few central questions or a brief set of guidelines will help them focus their responses to one another. I often ask reviewers to consider two central questions:

1. "What is the writer trying to say/argue for in this piece?"
2. "How can s/he make this argument more effective and persuasive?"

4. Help your students see the difference between revision and editing.

For most students, revising means editing. To prepare students for peer review, I lead a discussion on the differences between revision and editing, describing the large-scale changes they should suggest to one another: tightening up or shifting focus, clarifying purpose, cutting, adding, reorganizing, taking the conclusion as new introduction and starting over, etc. Until they've talked through large-scale issues, I outlaw discussion of grammar and mechanics, reminding students that it's a waste of time to polish a sentence that you later decide you don't need.

5. Encourage both honest responses and constructive advice.

I remind students to be "real readers" who tell the writer honestly what they are hearing as the main ideas, what they like, what confuses them, etc. To make the criticism constructive and positive, I outlaw "shoulding" on each other ("You should do this..."). Instead, I ask them to phrase their responses in "I" language ("I hear...", "I'm confused when...", "I'd like to hear more about...", etc.).

6. Give students a clear format for peer review and require written reviews (either a worksheet or a letter to the writer).

In many Communications-B and writing-intensive courses, you probably won't have time for students to read drafts aloud in class. Instead, set a firm draft date to have groups exchange copies of drafts. Students then read the drafts and write reviews outside of class. To encourage students to take the reviewing process seriously, consider grading the reviews as a separate writing assignment. The following class period, have students discuss their reviews in small groups, making sure to give them clear guidelines on what you want them to discuss.

I write a procedure to follow on the board:

- 1) Divide time evenly between group members.
- 2) Writer of each piece presents main concerns (which may have changed after seeing other papers).
- 3) Each reader gives the writer an honest response to her/his piece, making sure to articulate what s/he thinks the writer's main idea is ("mirroring").
- 4) After writer's purpose or thesis is clear, move into open discussion of questions and suggestions for the writer.
- 5) Writer sums up suggestions and tells group her/his plan for next draft.

I remind students that they have different roles. The writer keeps the group focused on her/his concerns and leads the discussion. Readers are honest and constructive, using questions to help the writer talk through her/his ideas.

7. Observe group work and coach students on becoming better reviewers and writers.

By observing how your students work in their groups and intervening to encourage careful listening and questioning, you can coach them to become better reviewers and writers. I recommend "hovering" around the groups to keep them on task. If the students are doing peer review for the first time, they will probably finish early and need to be prodded to spend more time on each paper. They may also be "too nice," avoiding tough questions and honest responses. Talking afterwards about what the groups did well—sharing good written reviews and using a skilled group as a model—can help students improve as peer reviewers.

As teachers, we should remember that for the writer, often the very process of explaining his or her ideas to a peer group helps to clarify those ideas. In fact, research in composition studies has shown that such talk can help students to better develop their papers and better understand the genre in which they are writing.

PREPARING STUDENTS IN ADVANCE FOR PEER REVIEW

It's important to take some time to talk about your expectations, methods, and beliefs about peer review before your first peer review of the semester. By preparing your students in advance for peer review, you'll help both writers and reviewers take ownership of the process and get the most out of the experience.

If you have 5 minutes...

Explain peer review to your students. Tell them why you believe it's important and useful. Emphasize how you want reviewers to be critical in a constructive way.

If you have 10 minutes...

Have a couple of students volunteer to tell the class about their experiences with peer review. Next, tell the class why you believe peer review is important and that you're asking them to be constructively critical. Highlight your students' positive experiences and offer solutions for avoiding the negative ones.

If you have 15 minutes or more...

After you explain peer review to your students, you have many options:

Discussion

Ask students about their past experiences with peer review and discuss the pros and cons of each experience.

Dos and Don'ts

Generate a list together of dos and don'ts for peer review. Have your students take the lead while you or a student writes down these ideas. Prepare a list of your own beforehand to add after your students are out of ideas (but don't be surprised if they've already covered them all!).

After class, type up the list, using your students' wording as much as possible to ensure their ownership of the concepts.

During the first peer review section and every subsequent one, distribute the list and remind students that these are their own ideas.

Practice Review (thinking ahead for another semester)

Distribute copies of a student's paper from a previous semester (with, of course, the student's permission), or use a sample you write yourself. As a class, do a peer review session of this paper. Afterwards, talk about what was useful and what wasn't. Generate a list, as above.

Peer Review Analysis (thinking ahead for another semester)

This semester, videotape some peer review sessions. Next semester, play excerpts from successful peer review sessions and discuss with students what was effective about these.

GUIDELINES FOR PEER REVIEWS

Answer all the following questions for each paper. Write on a separate sheet, not on the draft itself. Include your name and phone number (or e-mail address) on your evaluation. Don't worry about "surface errors" (spelling, punctuation, etc.); let the author do her own proofreading. Your job is to spot more important problems.

1. State what you perceive to be the major points in the paper.
2. Does the paper provide enough information about its topic? Does it present both sides of the issue clearly and impartially? Does the paper evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of argumentation for each side? Does the author take a stand and provide her reasons for taking that stand?
3. How stimulating did you find this paper? (Respond openly and honestly; be critical and helpful.) Which parts of it struck you as tamest, most obvious, or least interesting? Which parts interested you most, and why?
4. How fair and reasonable did you find the paper? Were there places where you felt the author was being too critical or not critical enough? Jumping to conclusions? Neglecting to cite enough evidence? Overlooking important evidence on the other side?
5. How readable did you find the paper? Did the author's writing style make it easy for you to follow the train of thought, or did it sometimes get in your way? Did the organization of ideas seem logical and sensible? If there were places where you got lost, bogged down, or confused, be sure to point them out.
6. What would you advise the author to concentrate on when she works on her revision?
7. Don't ignore a problem because you don't want to hurt a classmate's feelings. Express your concerns tactfully and diplomatically but completely. Be as specific as you can.

PEER RESPONSE DUE DATE, FIRST DRAFTS: APRIL 10
PEER RESPONSE DUE DATE, SECOND DRAFTS: APRIL 22

PEER REVIEW CHECKLIST

This is to give you an idea of the type of things you should be looking for and accomplishing in both your own paper and that of your peer(s). Use what follows as a kind of checklist for determining what is working effectively in a paper and what is not.

Introduction

- Has the writer (either yourself or your classmate) clearly expressed the question (major claim, thesis) that he/she has selected to analyze? What is that question?
- Is there any unnecessary information included in the introduction?
- Having read the entire essay, suggest an alternate way to begin the essay.
- Having read the entire essay, does the introduction fit the paper?

Body

- What are the main points that are being made in each paragraph? Briefly outline the point of each paragraph and sketch the evidence given in support for each.
- How is the evidence linked to the main point of the paragraph? And to the main point of the essay?
- Is there any unnecessary information throughout the body of the paper, such as plot summary, excessive quotation, or unsupported claims?

Conclusion

- Has the writer restated (not simply repeated) the major claim of the paper in light of its discussion throughout the paper? In other words, what should the reader have learned by the end of the argument?
- What is your understanding of the initial question after reading the paper? Has this understanding been adequately expressed? And does it open up the major claim to the question of its implications? (Has this major claim ultimately been placed into a broader perspective or context?)
- Suggest an alternate ending to the argument.

General/Misc

- Suggest an alternate title. Does it express “in a nutshell” the essay’s theme? Has it followed the proper “title: subtitle” format? [Note: This assumes the paper already has a title—thus, every paper must have a title!]
- What confuses you about the draft? (For example, a certain word choice, the topic and/or its presentation, the explanation of something in particular.)
- Does the flow of the essay break down at any point? In other words, does the essay become hard to read or lose its coherence? Where? And how might you fix it?
- Does the essay remain within the chosen text(s)? If there are any generalizations, speculations, clichés, idiomatic expressions, or colloquialisms, underline them so that you can point them out to your peer(s).
- What has the writer done well in his/her essay? Provide positive comments about the strength(s) of the essay.

GUIDELINES FOR IN-CLASS PEER REVIEW

Instructions: Please read this sheet carefully in order to know how you are to help your peers.

Bring three copies of your paper to class.

Each of you will read your paper aloud. Reading aloud is the best way to judge the clarity and coherence of a paper because it enables us to connect the written word with the spoken one. If an argument has broken off; if a sentence is unclear, wordy, inaccurate or pretentious; if there is a lack of evidence; or if there is a logical gap—all of these will be immediately obvious (to the writer as well as the reviewers). Reading aloud can be a humbling experience, there is no denying that, but it is also a fundamentally productive one.

Reviewers: Concentrate on your own response to the paper rather than rendering judgment. Use the first person (e.g., “I hear...”, “I didn’t understand...”, “I’m confused about...”, “I’d like to hear more about...”, “I couldn’t follow...”). Avoid using the second person (e.g., “you should”, “you need to”, “you ought to”). Responses are a clear guide because they enable the writer to rethink the issues on his/her own. Your responses (1st person) are easier to listen to and accept, and in thus in the end more effective, than your judgments (2nd person).

Process:

1. Hand a copy of your paper to each of your peer reviewers.
2. Read your paper aloud slowly; pause at the end of each paragraph to give yourself and your reviewers time to write comments.
3. When you are finished reading, discuss the paper candidly using 1st-person responses. Make sure the writer has time to write down the comments.
4. Reviewers: when you have finished discussing the paper, answer the “Peer Review Questions” and then hand the completed form, and your copy of the paper, to the writer.
5. Writer: when you hand in your paper
 - a. please be sure to include the reviewer forms as well. Staple them to your paper.
 - b. please write me a note describing what you found helpful/unhelpful in reading aloud and peer review and how you revised your paper in light of the process.

Peer Review Questions

Writer:

Reviewer:

1. Introduction. Is the first paragraph an adequate statement of the paper’s topic and approach? Did you know from the first paragraph where the paper was headed?
2. Continuity. Is the line of argument clear from paragraph to paragraph? Did each paragraph add to the argument?
3. Evidence. Did the writer support the argument in a convincing manner? Were quotations from the text well chosen?
4. Conclusion. Does the conclusion draw together the strands of the argument? Is it a sufficient statement of the paper’s main points?
5. Strengths. What did you find best in the paper?

DIRECTING PEER REVIEW TOWARD GLOBAL WRITING CONCERNS

Peer Review Instructions

Read the paper, and comment on the draft. Note what isn't clear, what sentences are awkward, etc.

1. Write an outline (sometimes it helps to number the paragraphs when you do this).
 - a. Find failures to follow through on "promises." For example, if questions are posed in the introduction, are they answered later?
 - b. Find problems in organization. What is out of place? Even if ideas aren't out of place, can the sequence and logic be improved?
 - c. Is there an introduction and a conclusion? How can those be improved?
2. Make suggestions for improvement. Be kind and polite, but also helpful.
 - a. Depth of analysis. Does the paper merely tell facts, or does it integrate the facts around a theme? Sometimes there is a theme that the author is not stating explicitly. Help the author go beyond fact-telling. What are the implications of findings, etc. (Telling facts won't get you an A.)
 - b. Is the author explaining concepts or just parroting jargon? If there is some special jargon that is important, help the author explain the meaning early in the paper so that the reader can understand the jargon.
 - c. Are there any major misunderstandings that the author seems to have? What aren't you understanding in what the author wrote? Are there gaps in the logic?
 - d. Are there usages of words that are not quite right? If you aren't sure, get out your dictionary and help the person out by looking up a couple of words that you're not sure about.
 - e. Are there places where you can see what the author is trying to say but is not quite saying it clearly? Help out with these.