

Conducting Peer Reviews

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Peer review is one of the most common forms of writing instruction in which writers give each other feedback on their writing. It is still the dominant model of editorial assistance to both creative and scholarly authors, and few writers work without the assistance of such feedback. Peer review can also be an invaluable classroom technique because, done properly, it provides students with significant feedback and because it gives student writers an immediate and present audience.

Peer review can come in several forms: whole class workshop (in which the entire class offers feedback); small group workshop (in which students are placed in small groups and exchange feedback); paired peer review (in which two students exchange feedback); and self-evaluation (in which students are asked to assess their own writing). Sometimes, students give feedback orally; other times they offer it in writing. In order to make the peer reviews more productive, give students general guidelines or a list of questions to consider in their reviews. See sample peer review guide in this handbook.

Below are some general suggestions for helping to get started with peer review workshops:

Deciding When to Use Writing Groups

Once you have given your class a writing assignment, you can use writing workshops to help students throughout the days and weeks before the assignment is finally due. Some of these workshops need only last ten minutes, while others may take an entire class period. Group work can be useful at any stage of the writing process.

- *Invention Groups*: Take a few minutes in the early stages of an assignment to have students try out ideas on one another. For example, you might have them brainstorm ten possible topics, then compare ideas with one or more people. Or if you've assigned a topic, have them brainstorm several possible approaches and compare them with other students.
- *Revision Groups*: Later in an assignment, have students bring in a rough draft of their paper to exchange with other students who can respond to it. You may have students take home the drafts of group members, read and write comments on them, and then come prepared to discuss them in groups during the next class. Or, you can have students read one another's papers without preparation. Perhaps the writer or another group member can read the paper aloud and then take time for the group members to respond to what they have heard.
- *Editing Groups*: Take ten minutes or so, when students have a fairly polished final draft for them to exchange papers in pairs to check for grammar, mechanics, or style problems.

Setting Up Effective Writing Groups

- For working with rough drafts, try setting up groups of four or five students. Groups of three can work too, but can seem skimpy. Groups with roughly even numbers of males and females or same sex groups work well. Lopsided groups (three men; one woman) can lead to

power imbalances. Sometimes you can simply allow students to group themselves with good results.

- For other kinds of workshops, try different sizes. Pairs can often work quickly and efficiently. Or combine two groups into an 8-10-person group.
- Try sorting writers according to levels of writing ability. Make sure strong writers have someone to challenge them. If a student is a weaker writer or seems to have some social problems, team that person with a sympathetic person.
- Experiment with having them work with both new and familiar students. Sometimes it works well to have one writing group work consistently through an entire assignment in order to see all phases of one another's work. On the other hand, students can benefit from a variety of points of view. So you might want them to group with different students from time to time.
- Ask students to give you written feedback on how their group is progressing. If a student is feeling frustrated, relocate him or her in another group.

Getting Writing Groups Started

- Expect and encourage some informal discussion to help group members become comfortable with one another. But once people seem comfortable, guide them to get started on the business at hand.
- Suggest roles students might play in groups, such as timekeeper, note-taker, reader, praiser, copyeditor, expert in the field, stickler for facts and details.
- Tell students that everyone needs to participate equally for the group to succeed. They should come prepared with comments. If their paper is being discussed, let them know they don't need to sit passively, but can direct the flow of the conversation. They can ask for help with certain problems, request clarification, or draw out silent members.

Helping Students Give Appropriate Feedback

- Explain to students that "responding" is not the same as "criticizing." Responding is a more neutral and broad term that includes positive comments, personal responses, and suggestions for improvement. Writers can learn from praise as well as from constructive comments for change.
- Encourage students to react to writing in multiple ways: in the margins of the text, in a lengthy letter, or in the context of the group discussion.
- Insist that students be respectful and frank. Few groups are too critical. Instead, most students are so nice and polite that they are of no real help to one another.
- Encourage students to review the criteria for the writing assignment, and have them look for the same issues in the writing of their peers.
- Unless it is an editing session, tell students to focus on substantive writing issues (thesis, organization, supporting evidence) rather than on grammar and punctuation.

Keeping Students in Groups on Task

- Groups work best when they are given specific tasks to do. For example, you can give students a list of questions or a checklist to follow during their review. As the semester progresses, you might ask the students themselves to come up with a list of items to consider in their reviews.

- Circulate from group to group as they are meeting, concentrating on those groups that need help. Sit in on groups from time to time.
- Set time limits. Let students know approximately how much time they should devote to each paper or task at hand.

Troubleshooting Common Problems

The most common rhetorical problem with writing groups occurs when students offer only superficial responses to writing (focusing on surface-level grammar and mechanical errors and ignoring the ideas that the writer is trying to get across). The most common behavioral problem with writing groups is getting off task. Students finish too early, stare off at the walls, and start socializing. Below are some solutions:

- Give weaker groups guidance in getting beyond superficial views. Sometimes this can be helped by not giving group members written copies of the paper. Simply have the author read the paper aloud, forcing the students to focus on the ideas more than the grammar.
- Team weak writers with stronger writers or groups.
- Make students solve the problems themselves by asking them for their solutions to a given group problem.
- Set up concrete tasks with time limits. For example, spend the first three minutes summarizing the main parts of the paper, three minutes describing the paper's strengths, and five minutes offering specific ideas for improvement.

PEER REVIEW GUIDE

Your name: _____

Writer's name: _____

Title of paper: _____

Use the following questions to assist you in reviewing the draft.

Assignment:

- Does the draft carry out the assignment?
- What could be done to better fulfill the assignment?

Title and Introduction:

- Does the title state what the draft is about?
- Is it interesting?
- Do the title and introduction catch the reader's attention?

Main Points:

List the main points made in the draft, in order of presentation. Then number them in order of interest to you, noting parts that were not as interesting or that seemed unnecessary.

- Do any points need to be explained more fully or less fully?

- Do any seem out of order? If so, where should they be moved?
- Should any be eliminated?
- Are any confusing to you?
- How well are the main points supported by evidence, examples or details? Note any that need more support.

Paragraphs:

- Which paragraphs are the clearest and most interesting to read, and why?
- Which ones are well developed?
- Which paragraphs need further development?
- What kinds of information seem to be missing?

Sentences:

- Choose three to five sentences you consider to be the most interesting or the best written because they are stylistically effective, entertaining, or memorable.
- Then choose three to five sentences that you think are weakest whether confusing, awkward, or simply uninspired.
- Are sentences varied in length, in structure, and in their openings?

Words:

- Are verbs active and vivid?
- Make words that are particularly effective--those that draw vivid pictures or provoke strong responses.
- Then mark words that are weak, vague, or unclear?
- Do any words need to be defined?
- Are any words potentially offensive to the intended audience or to anyone else?

Conclusion:

- Does the draft conclude in a memorable way, or does it seem to end abruptly or trail off into vagueness?

Final Thoughts:

- What are the main strengths and weaknesses in the draft?
- What was the single most important thing said?