

Peer Review Guidelines*

The goal of peer review is to help you learn to give effective feedback to your classmates about their writing. The peer review process should look something like this:

- Read your peer's paper once just to get a sense of the paper, jotting notes to yourself as you go.
- Write (or digitally record) your comments, using the guidelines on the following pages to ensure that you are working productively.
- For each review that you do, plan to spend about an hour. This includes the time it takes you to read the draft, think about your comments, and write or record your letter, but does not include the time it takes you to upload your documents. If you are not spending at least an hour with the text, you may not be considering it fully enough.

Guidelines for Offering Feedback

- ***Be mindful of your tone as you respond to your peer's writing:*** There's certainly no need to go overboard with niceties, but consider integrating a couple of positive comments for things that seem to be working well, especially at the beginning of your comments. You might want to use language such as: "I like how you . . ." or "I'm impressed by. . ." Essentially, think about ways to achieve something like the balance between being honest and congenial that you'd aim for if you were talking face-to-face. A tone that works particularly well is one that is both friendly and supportive.
- ***Ask questions:*** Your job as a reviewer is not to fix the paper, but rather to help your classmate understand how the writing affects readers. Given this approach, it can be very helpful to ask questions, just as you might do if you were talking face-to-face. It will be helpful for the writer to reflect on these questions when making writing choices.
 - **Questions about claims.** You might ask, "What in the readings or evidence prompted you to develop this claim? Why are you interested in this aspect of the topic? How does the evidence support your claim? How many pieces of evidence do you have (and does the quantity of evidence say anything about the strength of that evidence)? Do you have additional evidence that isn't included in this draft?"
 - **Questions about evidence.** If the writer needs more evidence, you might say that you would like to hear more about a particular point, that you didn't understand a certain point, and/or that you have additional unanswered questions.

- **Questions about organization.** If you think a certain paragraph doesn't belong, you can describe your response as a reader; for example, "When I got to this paragraph, I wondered what it was doing here – it seemed like you had been talking about A, but all of a sudden, here's this paragraph about B! Can you help your reader understand how this paragraph should fit in?" The student may need better transitions, or may have left out something important that will clarify matters, or he or she may see that the paragraph doesn't really belong. But let the writer make those decisions – if you say, "Take that one out!" you are making the writing decision for her/him.
- **Questions about sentence structure.** How might you help your classmate learn to revise a sentence without changing it? Make up a similar sentence and carry out your revisions on it, explaining what the problem is, what options there are for revising it, and why you selected the option you did. Offer several different options, not just one, so that the writer sees that he/she has many choices.
- **Questions about word choice.** Ask why the writer chose the word; tell what the word means to you and why it seems odd to you in this context. You could say, for example, "In your opening paragraph, I wonder how you chose the word 'bellicose.' When I read this word, I think of someone who is aggressive and warlike; is that what you meant?"
- ***Look for patterns:*** When addressing sentence-level issues, look for patterns of error, rather than going through the draft and pointing out errors in the order in which they occur. The same sort of big-picture reflection will be helpful with non-sentence-level issues, too. If you notice wordiness, see how often it occurs; if you see one transition that troubles you, check out the others. You can then try to offer the writer new ideas about this general issue, instead of just commenting on one sentence here and another one there.
- ***Beware of taking over:*** Avoid the following, as easy and tempting as they may be:
 - Revising the writer's thesis or claim
 - Presenting new evidence for the writer to include
 - Rewriting individual sentences
 - Telling the writer to use a different word (and suggesting what the new word should be)
 - Telling the writer to remove a paragraph or to move it to a specific place
- ***Organize your comments:*** Consider outlining or clearly grouping your comments, realizing that a certain approach may work well in one instance, but not necessarily another. Here are some strategies:
 - Organize your comments by first addressing the writer's concerns (in an orderly way) and then moving on to additional concerns you noticed.

- Emphasize the more significant writing issues (such as how effective the claim is, how powerful the evidence) at the beginning of your feedback, and ending with more minor issues (word choice, spelling errors, etc.).
- Make your comments chronologically: Feel free to note specific paragraphs or sentences where problems occur; for example, you could say, “In the second paragraph you. . . .”
- **Use your time effectively:** You should plan to spend about an hour reading, thinking about, and responding to the paper. To use this time most effectively, consider the following strategies:
 - Consider holding off making any comments until you’ve read through the whole paper at least once. This allows you to get a sense of the overall writing, to make sure your comments focus on the real issues, and may save you having to go back to amend earlier comments. (Taking notes as you read, of course, is still a good idea!)
 - Consider letting the writer’s stated concerns/goals guide your approach to the organization of your commentary. This gives you a focus while reading, as well as a set of topics on which to center your comments. (Of course, if you identify issues that you perceive to be of more concern than those your classmate raises, you should certainly comment on those.)
- **Consider your language choices:** Because your classmate isn’t with you and you can’t see her/his reactions, be sure to write in a respectful and fairly neutral style. It’s important to avoid evaluative claims; instead of saying, “Your paper is really successful,” it would be more appropriate to say, “After seeing your presentation of the evidence, I was convinced of your argument.” Be especially careful about anything that might sound overly harsh, offensive, or patronizing.
- **Make your organization explicit:** If you are responding in writing, consider simple visual strategies (bullet points, numbering, boldface, etc.) to keep your content clear and to emphasize your main points. If you are recording your comments, you may want to use language such as: “First I’ll make some suggestions related to your organization. Second, I will discuss ways you might make your claims more effective. Finally, since you asked about commas, I will point out a few places where you make the same error and include a link to a handout that should help.”
- **Know the limitations of this type of work:** In the time you spend with this paper (roughly an hour), you may find that you could discuss a large number of different writing issues. Keep in mind, however, that your classmate may be overwhelmed (and dismayed) if presented with a list of fifteen things to look at or work on. Therefore, it is essential that you prioritize your comments. Use signals such as, “If you only had time to work on one thing, I think you could increase

clarity the most by considering. . .” or “The three areas that gave me the most trouble as a reader were. . . .”

- ***Refer the writer to other resources:*** As a peer reviewer, no one expects you to be the expert on all issues related to writing. If you sense that there is a problem with the writing but are unsure, feel free to refer your classmate to a handout from class, a chapter from one of our texts, the Writing Studio Web site, or the course instructor. It is particularly helpful to point out several places in the paper where the error/problem occurs, and then let the writer try to resolve the issue using the resources you suggest.
- ***Emphasize the fact that you are just one reader:*** Keep in mind for yourself, and emphasize for the writer, that you are just one a reader; consider prefacing your comments with phrases such as, “As one reader. . .” or “From my perspective. . .” You are not offering the definitive summary of what does and does not work in the paper.

*from Julie A. Reynolds and Vicki Russell, *Can You Hear Us Now?: A comparison of peer review quality when students give audio versus written feedback*, *Writing Across the Curriculum Journal*, vol. 19 (2008), pp. 29-44)s