

# LeaRNING Notes

## #3 Using Peer Review Effectively



A student who is reviewing a fellow student's paper writes the following as the only comment: "It looks good. I like the examples."

Sound familiar? In a national survey of 560 teachers of writing and 715 of their students, Sarah W. Freedman found that many teachers were discouraged with peer review because they had difficulty getting students to respond effectively to one another's writing.

The students also complained about the writing responses, saying that their peers' comments were too vague and unconstructive. The result is that students and teachers move away from peer review, an unfortunate outcome because the potential benefits of peer review can positively impact student learning.

(1985, *The Role of Response in Acquisition of Written Language*, Berkeley: California UP)

### MAKING PEER REVIEW "WORK."

*Suggestions from successful writing programs*

**Tell students the reasons you think peer review is a good idea**--including all of the fringe benefits (which might be most important to many students). Some possible benefits include

- Peer review allows students to take advantage of the drafting process in ways they probably wouldn't have if they didn't have the peer review due date (most common: 2 a.m. the night before the assignment is due!)
- Peer review gives students an important glimpse into how other students are approaching or developing the assignment
- Peer review opens the opportunity for meaningful feedback among peers. Students may not get great feedback every time, but when connections do occur, they are influential.
- Peer review gives students a look at how the teacher will evaluate their work. In completing the peer review process, they engage with the assignment from a reviewer's perspective and apply criteria in a way that may influence their revision and understanding of the assignment expectations

**Explain students' biggest complaints** about peer review, including the "vague" and "overly positive" feedback complaint. Advise students to balance their feedback between strengths and areas for improvement, and to be specific.

**Develop a peer review sheet** that is helpful in understanding your rubric or expectations, but not too detailed or students will become bogged down. Try organizing the guide in a step-by-step fashion. Students often respond best to a sequence moving from identifying a feature, to evaluating it, to suggesting revisions. Another option is to create a grid that students can check and include comments.

**Encourage students to write on the draft itself**, but request that they **make comments in complete (or nearly complete) sentences** on the peer review sheet. Students will often get in a rush and gloss over the comments they might make if they had to state them fully. Also, students will write more if they can write on a computer, so consider using computers for peer-review when possible.

### Show students how it works.

Ask one student to submit a draft early for copying. Hand out the draft to the class. Ask another student (not the author) to read the draft out loud. Ask the class to make comments as the reading is happening, and after the reading give students time to read the draft again silently and make comments on the review sheet. Encourage students not to get too hung up on grammar, spelling and mechanics (it is a draft, after all); ask them to point out patterns rather than trying to identify each instance. Finally, open the floor to comments, starting with what works in the draft and moving to areas for improvement. Let students know that not all responders will agree, and that this can help the author gain several options for revising. Save the teacher's comments for last, and be sure to connect with what has already been said. Then, break students into groups of 3 and have them continue the process with their group's drafts.

**Consider occasionally choosing the groups.** It's true students sometimes work better when they have the freedom to choose their own groups, but if you do peer review regularly, it can be helpful to pair students with others you feel will push their thinking and their writing.

**Do not collect drafts on peer review day.** Give students several days to make revisions based on their peers' comments, and then collect both versions. Consider asking the writer to summarize any helpful peer comments and ultimate revisions in a memo. One reason students tend to shortchange the usefulness of peer review is that teachers "take over" the writing too early. When appropriate, acknowledge the advice of the reviewer in some way; show that you, too, have considered the peer review comments

**Include peer review in your grading process.** One way to prompt students to take peer review seriously, both as the reviewer and as the writer, is to include effective peer review as part of the overall grade for the paper. If you're uncomfortable weighing the quality of peer reviewing in the individual paper grade, consider adding a more general "peer review" grade to the course or to participation credit.

#### **Other Suggestions:**

Allow students to develop the peer review sheet themselves at the beginning of class on peer review day (make the rubric for the assignment available to students as they prepare).

Have students exchange drafts ahead of time and come to the next class prepared to discuss the drafts, perhaps with written comments (course outline would need to give room for students to do this work outside of class).

#### **Sample Peer Review Instructions for Writing Assignment**

**Author** \_\_\_\_\_

**Reviewer** \_\_\_\_\_

Begin by allowing each writer to identify a few areas where they have questions. Then, read over each person's essay twice. In the first reading, just get the feel of the essay's organization and points—make large-scale comments if they occur to you as you read. In the second reading, start to fine-tune your feedback. Make comments on the draft, and then write some feedback on this sheet (use complete sentences and be as thorough as you can). After everyone has finished reading and commenting, discuss the essays as a group, one at a time. Begin with comments on what is working well and move to areas for improvement or development.

1. **Writer Questions:** What concerns does the writer have about this essay? Give suggestions for addressing these concerns.
2. **Essay focus/thesis:** Re-state the question you think this essay is trying to answer (if you have difficulty stating the guiding question of the essay, the author may need to make this more clear in the introduction and topic sentences—and possibly in the support)
3. **Organization and transitions:** Look through the essay and take note of the way the writer moves from point to point, from one paragraph to the next. Do major ideas seem to be organized in a logical way? Does the author include transitions between paragraphs and main ideas to help the reader move from one point to the next (are there any places you feel jolted or left hanging?) Identify any paragraphs that could be moved for better progression of ideas, and paragraphs that could benefit from better transitions.
4. **Support:** Identify any areas in the essay that seem to need greater support in concrete evidence or more explanation. Also, point out places where the writer needs to clarify how the evidence given supports the argument.
5. **Grammar/Spelling/Mechanics:** Identify patterns you see in grammar, punctuation and spelling errors. Point to at least one example of each pattern in the draft.

#### **RESOURCES:**

<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/peer/index.cfm>

[http://www.mwp.hawaii.edu/resources/peer\\_review.htm#facilitate](http://www.mwp.hawaii.edu/resources/peer_review.htm#facilitate)

<http://www.ods.usf.edu/Assess/docs/Briefs/Assessment-Brief-Peer-Review-of-Student-Writing.pdf>

Introduction adapted from Neubert, Gloria A., and Sally J. McNelis. 1990. "Peer Response: Teaching Specific Revision Suggestions." *English Journal* 79.5 (September): 52-56.