

Quick Reference

Peer Review: Techniques and Helpful Tips

What is it?

There are many different situations which could be classified as a “peer review;” for example, the appraisal of one’s performance in a job setting, the scrutiny of one’s ideas or work from experts within a scholarly field, etc. However, when we talk about “peer review” in a classroom or educational setting, it is often in reference to collaboratively working with others in a one-to-one or small group setting. Specifically, participants in the peer review offer **positive critique** of a project or a piece of writing in order to help the author(s) improve upon certain aspects of the work, such as organization, constructing arguments, supporting ideas, or sentence-level issues.

Where does it come from?

Our modern notions of peer review, particularly as they pertain to writing, stem from individuals such as Kenneth Bruffee (1984) who believed that creating a community of knowledgeable peers – a community where students could converse about an assignment, the subject matter, and ultimately the work produced – could help students acquire the skills and knowledge needed for college or university-level work (and, ultimately, the skills and knowledge required for work in the real world).

What does a typical peer review look like?

Peer reviews often vary depending on the assignment, the instructor, and the number of participants. It is important to remember that there is no “right” way to setup up a peer review session, but perhaps there might be a more effective form of peer review to meet the needs of participants. When thinking about conducting a peer review, ask yourself:

- Do I want my participants to know whose work they’re reading?
- Do I want my participants to read their work aloud to each other?
- Do I want my participants to focus on major revisions and higher-order concerns (such as structure, organization, articulating a central argument) or editing and lower-order concerns such as word choice, sentence structure, and grammar?
- Do I want my participants to write comments on each others’ papers, or do I want them to just talk about the work?

The answers to these questions can guide the way you design your peer review session.

Why should I do peer review?

Peer review requires students to explain their ideas to peers, which can provide the student with an avenue to think more critically and carefully about their writing, as well as expose other group members to varying perspectives, thoughts, and processes. In addition, because students are working with a group of knowledgeable peers, they often feel less threatened or intimidated. Lastly, a peer review provides students with a real audience to consider when they are writing, an audience that will need to be convinced of the writer's ideas.

The Do's

1. Be honest, but respectful and courteous, in the way you deliver criticism. "It sucks" or "I don't like it" can not only cause a participant to shut-down, but it does not provide them with a direction for how to improve their work.
2. Point out the strengths of the piece, as well as the weaknesses, and always describe why something works particularly well (or why it does not).
3. Focus on the written work rather than engaging in an argument about the subject matter or material.
4. Offer the writer some direction for how they might improve the work in the future.

The Don'ts

1. Don't argue with the writer. Instead, ask questions so that the writer has to clarify their points or find ways to strengthen their argument.
2. Don't just focus on mechanical or grammatical issues. Focus on higher order concerns such as the structure, organization, support of arguments, etc.
3. Don't make vague comments like "It's good" or "I don't like it." Be specific about what is working and what is not working in the piece and provide the writer with direction.
4. Don't rewrite the paper for the student.

Additional Resources:

"Peer Review & Feedback Forms" (University of Hawaii at Manoa)
<http://www.mwp.hawaii.edu/resources/wm7.htm>

"Conducting Peer Reviews" (University of Wisconsin – Madison)
<http://writing.wisc.edu/Handbook/PeerReviews.html>