Using Peer Review to Improve Student Writing

Overview

Having students give feedback to one another on their papers can have many advantages: the students get opportunities to develop their ability to give constructive feedback, they receive advice on their drafts, they have a broader audience for their work than just a single instructor, and they see different approaches other students have taken in responding to an assignment. However, peer review has to be carefully managed in order for students to take the process seriously; students tend to be skeptical of the value of receiving feedback from their fellow students rather than instructors, and to regard peer review sessions that provide vague or tangential feedback as "busywork." This handout first describes general considerations that can help improve the quality of the feedback students offer one another before describing several approaches to peer review.

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General Considerations

Clarity of Purpose
Students need to know what they are expected to learn from exchanging feedback with their peers. Are you asking them to develop their own analytical skills? To become better proofreaders? To learn how to decide which advice to take as writers? To become more comfortable with the kinds of editorial processes they might encounter in their academic or professional futures? Being explicit about your goals can help them see how the peer review process fits into the larger context of your course.

Group Size
Peer review groups can be large (an entire class could workshop a single student's work, for example) or small (with students working in small groups).

Whole-class workshops can be helpful for developing shared standards about what to focus on in reviewing a paper and what kind of tone to use in delivering feedback. This method of peer review works best when students have read and prepared comments on the paper before class and come ready to discuss the work in detail. It also helps for instructors to have prepared comments on the paper and to be ready to lead discussion. Time constraints may make it impossible to offer a whole-class workshop for every student's paper, but workshopping one or

two sample papers provided by volunteers or drawn from past iterations of the same course can prove very helpful.

Smaller workshop groups can range in size, and your choice of commenting format (see "Forms of Peer Review" below) will affect your choice of that size: students can't be expected to review many papers for one class session if you want them to write detailed critiques for each of them. Thus, if you are using comment letters, your groups might include only three or four students. Class demographics matter here, too; students will not appreciate having to write three comment letters if some of their peers are only required to write two, so you will need to find a way to divide work evenly.

When using small-group workshops, it can be helpful for the instructor to "float" between groups to offer feedback on whether students are giving one another sufficiently detailed and engaged feedback. For example, if the reviewers in some groups seem too readily inclined to agree with one another, the instructor might point out that it can be valuable to the writer whose work is under review to hear competing perspectives and probe for those.

With almost any approach to peer review, it can be helpful to make sure that students get feedback from more than one peer on any given assignment. This allows them to have a better sense of whether a particular reader's perceptions of their work is likely to resonate with others. If you use small groups throughout the term, you will need to decide whether to have students work in the same small groups consistently, which can help them develop a sense of camaraderie and investment in one another's work, or whether to change the membership of the groups from one paper to the next. In any class, some students will be better at giving feedback than others, and these students might be seen as a scarce resource that should be shared as widely as possible.

When to Schedule Peer Review
Students can benefit from peer review at any stage of the writing process. To decide when to schedule peer review for your students, think about what you hope they will get out of it. If you want students to help each other with the formation of thesis statements or thinking about how to structure their papers, a peer review session early on would be most useful. If you want students to work on helping one another develop their points or polish their prose, scheduling peer review later in the process is probably best. Take care in deciding how peer review will work for your students; different kinds of peer review will better serve different goals, as the varieties of peer review explained below make clear.

Pacing
When students engage in peer review in class—whether they have prepared written materials in advance or not—some groups will finish earlier than others. Letting those groups leave as soon as they have finished can create an incentive for everyone to rush through the peer review process in order to leave early. Thus, it can be useful to either schedule the peer review session first, if more than one activity will take place in class that day, or to ask groups that finish early to engage in follow-up work, such as having each member of the group read through the feedback received and start making notes about how he or she might revise the paper.

Make It Count
Whatever approach you take—whether you have students take work home or do all of their peer reviewing in class—making the work they do as reviewers count in some way toward their grade can provide an incentive to do this work well. It can also be helpful to provide students with feedback on their feedback, letting them know, for example, whether the comments they are

giving one another are tracking issues that are truly relevant to the assignments in question and whether their comments are specific enough to be helpful.

Creating an Environment for Useful Feedback

One sure way to make peer review more beneficial for students is to model for them how to give feedback on their peers' writing. You can do this in a number of ways. For example, you might have your class workshop a sample paper from a previous semester and offers suggestions for improving their oral discussion or written comments before asking them to review their current peers' work. You might also show them samples of written student feedback from previous semesters and ask them to discuss the strengths and weakness of that feedback and how they might improve it. Before you model productive peer review for your students, think about what kinds of feedback you want to prime them to give their fellow students.

Additive Comments

Most students equate "peer review" with "criticism," which can be constructive but is not always so. Having students provide only additive feedback—that is, make suggestions only about what the writer might add to or develop in the paper—is one way to help keep peer review positive.

Reader Response

Encouraging your students to be thoughtful readers of their peers' work and to respond to it based on their own experience of the paper as readers is also useful. For instance: "the topic sentence of this paragraph led me to expect you to focus on X, so I was confused that there was so much of Y and Z in this paragraph instead."

Constructive Criticism

While modeling useful feedback is key to successful peer review, it' s also worthwhile to mention to your students a few categories of less useful comments that are best avoided. One such category is **overly general comments**, such as "I just didn't get it" or "it's great!" The lack of detail in these comments make them unusable to writers looking to improve their work. **Overly specific comments** are similarly unhelpful. If a peer reviewer focuses, say, on the writer's use of commas or comments excessively on a single point or idea to the exclusion of others, that doesn't give the writer the kind of substantive feedback that is most helpful for revision. Finally, and obviously, **personal insults** or feedback that gets too personal really has no place in peer review. Comments like 'this is a stupid idea" or "how lame" will not help any writer revise.

Forms of Peer Review: Comments Prepared Before Class

There are many forms of peer review that ask students to study one another's papers carefully outside of class. One advantage to this is that it signals to students that you expect them to invest real time and thought in giving one another feedback. Writing the feedback in advance can help students prepare for face-to-face workshops held in class. A sample prompt for guiding students through in-class workshops based on reviews written in advance can be found in Supplement 2, "Guidelines for Small Group Workshop."

Comment Letters
Comment letters are mini-essays that analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a draft and make suggestions for revision. Sample prompts for writing such a letter can be found in Supplement 1, "How to Write A Peer Critique."

Overview and Marginal Comments
This approach asks students to replicate a commenting method commonly used by writing instructors. Reviewers write one or two paragraphs at the beginning or end of the paper about what is working well and what needs improvement, and they make notes in the margins throughout the paper that direct the writer's attention to specific places that are particularly strong or weak. A sample prompt for this approach can be found in Supplement 3, "Structured Commenting Protocol."

Commenting Forms
Forms can be used to prompt reviewers to address specific issues in the papers they analyze. These are most effective when they ask open-ended questions about how and why various elements of a paper are or aren't working well, rather than questions to which a reviewer can simply reply "yes" or "no." A sample of an effective commenting form can be found in Supplement 4, "ENG 124 Peer Critiques."

Forms of Peer Review: Comments Prepared During Class

Commenting Forms
Often instructors make use of commenting forms for in-class peer review. This is useful to do especially when it is advantageous to have the instructor on hand to provide guidance or feedback to students as they work though peer review, or when it is useful to the student completing the peer review to have the writer on hand to answer questions or discuss feedback. For this kind of peer review, it is essential that students bring hard copies of their papers for each peer reviewer or that electronic access to papers is available to peer reviewers during class. The same commenting forms used for take-home peer review can be used for in-class peer review. (See an example Supplement 4, "ENG 124 Peer Critiques.")

Self-Evaluation
When students get used to performing peer review on their fellow students' work and anticipate that doing so will be a regular part of a writing assignment, it is often valuable and interesting to ask them instead to perform a self-evaluation of their own work. This requires students to take a step back from their own writing, read it with a critical eye, and consider it from an outsider's perspective. While a form that guides students through this process is often helpful, you can also ask students to respond to their own work using a list of criteria they extract from the writing prompt or your grading rubric. It is useful to ask students to perform such self-evaluations in class, so that you can be on hand to offer guidance and feedback.

"Speed" Peer Review
This method of peer review can be a useful tool when many students are struggling with a particular aspect of the assignment or desire feedback at an early stage. It works well with any part or aspect of the paper that can be fairly quickly read and for which the instructor or students can identify correct or desirable components. A good "speed" peer review could be performed, for instance, on thesis statements. For such an exercise, students should bring printed versions

of their thesis statements to class. Chairs should be arranged in a circle, and the class should come to a consensus about how exactly they should respond to the thesis. For instance, students might focus on if the thesis is specific enough, or if it responds to the prompt. The instructor then has students pass papers to the right and gives students three minutes to read and offer written feedback under the thesis in front of them. After three minutes, students pass papers to the right again, and the process is repeated. In this way, in less than ten minutes, students can get several different perspectives on the effectiveness of their theses.

Peer Review and Students' Experiences

While most students greatly appreciate the opportunity to read their peers' papers and receive feedback from peers on their own work, when students resist or complain about peer review, it is often for one of two reasons, both of which are easily addressed.

"I'm getting mixed messages."
Sometimes students have difficulty deciding between conflicting comments from their peers. It can be helpful to acknowledge that choosing which advice to follow is not always easy and to provide opportunities for your students to talk with you, either in writing or in person, before they decide what to do. For example, you might have them complete a simple questionnaire immediately after the review session that includes questions such as, "What is the most important revision you plan to make to this paper?" and "What questions do you still have about how to revise this draft?"

"Who am I to judge?"
Some students are self-conscious about their own adequacy as evaluators of other students' work; they feel that, as peers, they do not have superior experience or knowledge and are in fact so need of help with their own writing that they cannot possibly offer valuable feedback to a fellow student. An easy and honest reply to this kind of trepidation is that peer review is not about making definite pronouncements, but rather about offering suggestions which writers can consider and then take only if it seems helpful. In addition, it is arguable that, as a student in the same class and writing a paper in response to the same prompt as the writer whose paper she is peer reviewing, the peer reviewer knows more about the expectations of the assignment and the challenges it presents than anyone except the instructor. As a peer, the peer reviewer is actually more, not less qualified than an "expert" from outside the class.

"The peers who read my paper never give me helpful feedback."
Occasionally students will complain that the advice and comments about their papers that they receive from peers is unhelpful. Even for students who feel this way, peer review can nevertheless still be a useful process because it is not only the feedback a writer gets that makes peer review valuable, but also the opportunity to read and, more importantly, critique other students' work. The exercise of analyzing and explaining how a peer tackles an assignment—or fails to—should make a writer think more deliberately about her own work. UM instructor Jeremiah Chamberlin has written a helpful short essay about this aspect of peer review available here (http://www.glimmertrain.com/fmjan09.html).

Evaluating Peer Review as an Instructor

After your students complete peer review, you likely will want to gauge its effectiveness. There are a few ways to go about doing this. One is to collect rough drafts with final drafts and do a quick comparison of them—did peer review inspire the kinds of revision you wanted— substantial revision of ideas, polishing, etc.? You can also ask students to write a brief response to peer review, explaining how they think it went, which advice they took, and what was most useful and why. If you ask them to give you this information, they will likely want to know what you think of their decisions. Finally, if you plan to use peer review multiple times during your course, it will be useful to give your students feedback on the quality of their feedback to help them improve their commenting skills. Ideally, you should offer them written feedback on their feedback to others (details about what they did well and about where their comments might have been made clearer or more specific). In addition, you might choose to grade their feedback as an incentive to help them improve. An example of a simple rubric that could be used to grade peer review letters or forms can be found in Supplement 5, "Grading Criteria for Peer Critiques."

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For further information:

http://techtv.mit.edu/genres/25-humanities-arts-and-social-sciences/videos/14628-no-one-writes-alone-peer-review-in-the-classroom-a-guide-for-instructors

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