Facilitating Effective Peer Review

In-class peer reviews are enormously productive if students know why and how they are to read each other's work. Often students are confused about their roles as reviewers, unsure of the appropriate level of scrutiny or worried that their partners won't care as much as they do. Peer reviews gone wrong are notorious time wasters that leave writers with vague, cursory judgments about their projects. Guided effectively, however, peer reviews hold abundant benefits for writers and reviewers alike.

During effective peer reviews, reviewers are focused and specific in their feedback, writers take comments about their writing seriously but not too personally, and all are aware of the purposes driving the peer review process, which are

- To complicate and enrich our thinking as writers and readers
- To provide the writer with the experience of a reader
- To demonstrate the way writing in the professional world moves forward.

To help participants gain these benefits, instructors should consider the following important elements (Bean, 2011, pp. 296–301) when planning a peer review:

1. **Should reviewers read as responders, or as evaluators?**

   Responders—Reviewers who read as responders offer their personal reactions to the writer's draft. As they discuss what they found effective, ineffective, confusing, etc., the writer listens and records their "raw data" to consider while revising the draft. Response-centered peer reviews leave the authority over most decisions with the writer, where it often resides in the professional world. And since readers are encouraged to read simply as a peer with similar background knowledge, the response-centered approach also relieves some of the pressure readers might feel to evaluate their peer's work with the expertise of a teacher. Significantly, whether or not a reader excels in writing, or even understands the assignment, he or she can give useful response-centered feedback.

   Evaluators—Reviewers who read as evaluators use the assignment criteria to determine how well the writer's draft measures up to expectations. This approach works best when students have studied the assignment description or rubric and have internalized the criteria. Whether they know the assignment well or not, however, students often drift toward this approach, since they are used to having their writing evaluated by teachers. Of course, writers are still responsible for their own papers and should take their reviewer comments as advice only.

2. **How should writers exchange drafts?**

   Writers are asked to exchange drafts in different ways, depending on the nature of the assignment, the dynamics of the class, and the point in the process at which the review is held.

   Aloud—Writers might be asked to read their work aloud to their reviewers. Reading their own work to someone lets writers hear their own written voice and discover problem areas for themselves. Reviewers take notes on what they hear and then discuss the draft.

   Silently—If silent reading is preferred, writers might be asked to bring copies for their group members to read silently during class. This way, reviewers can take notes directly on the draft.

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Anonymously—If confidentiality is a concern, all drafts may be given to the instructor with writer names replaced by numbers that only they know. Then the instructor randomly redistributes the drafts for reviewers to read and comment on the back.

In advance—If the drafts are too long to read and discuss in class, it may be a good idea for writers to exchange and read drafts a day or two before the review to maximize discussion time in class.

Online—Depending on available technology, students might be asked to exchange and review each other's drafts outside of class using e-mail or through an online discussion board. Web-based peer review programs such as Calibrated Peer Review (CPR) or Scaffolded Writing and Rewriting in the Disciplines (SWoRD) might also be helpful, allowing the instructor as much or as little presence in the process as preferred.

3. **Should I use a peer review sheet?**

   Peer review sheets can guide and focus reviewers, especially those less confident in their writing or in their understanding of the assignment. These guides are most helpful if they invite reviewers to describe and react to elements of the draft rather than ask for quick judgments. For example, the table below (Bean, 2011, p. 297) illustrates the difference between these two types of questions.

Judgment Versus Descriptive Questions for Peer Reviews

Judgment Questions	Descriptive Questions
Does the paper have a clear thesis statement?	In just one or two sentences, state what position you think the writer is taking. Underline the sentence that you think presents the thesis.
Is the paper clearly organized?	On the back of this sheet, make an outline of the paper.
Does the writer use evidence effectively to support the argument?	List the kinds of evidence used to support the writer's argument. Which pieces of evidence do you think are the strongest? Which are the weakest?
Is the paper clearly written throughout?	Highlight (in color) any passages that you had to read more than once to understand what the writer was saying.
How persuasive is the argument?	After reading the paper, do you agree or disagree with the writer's position? Why or why not?

Reference

Bean, J.C. (2011). *Engaging ideas: A professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom* (2nd ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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