

Dear Colleagues,

Feel free to use these peer review worksheets in your classes, taking my name and header off and substituting your own, and making any changes you feel appropriate. I am explicitly releasing them into the public domain, appreciating acknowledgment only, should you use them for anything other than your own classroom.

As you will see, they have different focuses. For example, #2 works on introductions, and asks students to outline the paper they believe they are about to read, based only on their reading of the paper's introduction. Worksheet #3 would be most appropriate for an "essay" paper, which recognizes explicitly that the introductory argument may not be the paper's final argumentative thesis. Worksheet #4 will serve well for a workshop on final research paper prospectuses, while I conceived #5 for peer review of the first version of a long final paper.

You will probably find that your interests require you to distribute the questions differently, building a single peer-review session based on questions from several of these worksheets.

Should you have any questions, you may email me at graebner@wustl.edu.

Let me wish you success in your peer-reviewing ventures.

Seth Graebner

First Writing Workshop

1. Clarity

A. Read your partner's paper rapidly, and mark in the margin any passages you do not understand immediately.

B. Write, here below, the thesis of this paper as you have understood it, in one sentence only. Consult the writer to determine if you are right.

C. Go to the passages marked as not immediately understood, and decipher them. Once you have understood (consult the writer as needed), write a new sentence or sentences on the back of the page. Think: Subject, Verb, Object.

D. While you are thinking Subject, Verb, Object, find any sentences where the subject and verb are separated by prepositional phrases, subordinate clauses, or other such encumbrances, and figure out how to rearrange it to bring them together, or at least closer.

2. Argument repair by paragraph

A. Look at the conclusion, as well as the arguments advanced by each paragraph (which you should be able to state). Decide whether they add up to an argument for the thesis as you had understood it on your first reading. Make some notes here about how to improve the argument. If they don't argue that, or if you find some other thesis, go to B.

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B. If there seems to be no thesis, or a thesis other than the one stated in the beginning, determine what the thesis should have been. Putting aside what the paper said it would do, what is it actually doing? In consultation with the writer, come up with a new thesis, or simply a better statement of the existing one.

C. Spend some time thinking aloud with the author about how the paper could develop in its second version. What should the author add?

3. Mechanics

A. Look over the paper to discover any passage where more than two forms of the verb “to be” appear in as many lines. Circle all forms of the verb, present and past, and rewrite the sentences on the back of the sheet, with substantially fewer usages of it.

B. Find and mark any number/gender problems. Remember to include the famous “one . . . their” mistake, in expressions analogous to “Anyone who thinks they can’t improve their writing needs to have their head checked.”

(The solution here is to substitute “People” and “need,” thus keeping the plural throughout, without having to select a gender for the singular pronouns. Other cases, just as barbarous, run something like “A student told me that they [the student] . . .”)

IAS 420 Fall 2009

Prof. Graebner

ISLAM, IMMIGRANTS, AND THE FUTURE OF
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Paper Workshop 2

I. Read the paper up to its thesis, and including any statements giving an overview of what it will talk about, in what order, etc. Then write an outline below of what you think the paper will do. Include specific points that you feel the paper should address, based on what you have understood in the first paragraph.

II. Show your outline to the author of the paper, who will compare your outline to the actual content and thrust of the paper. If the outline reflects misunderstanding, the problem is likely in the introduction. Find and fix it.

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III. Discuss with your partner any items in the outline that do not appear in the paper, and any items in the paper that do not appear in the outline. Does good reasoning justify the discrepancies? Should the author drop or add anything? The reading partner could do the author a favor by making some notes of the discussion here.

IV. Ask the author to point out a paragraph with which he or she had significant difficulty, or simply select one of the longer paragraphs. Read the first sentence, and write below both the topic and the argument that this sentence leads you to expect. Then make a brief outline of what the paragraph actually does, noting any cases where it diverges from your expectations. Circle in the text any bits that seem out of place.

V. Select one of the longest paragraphs in the paper, and circle every form of the verb "to be." Also, underline every verb in the passive voice. In cooperation with the author, come up with reformulations for these sentences.

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Paper Workshop 3

1. Read the first page, or until you get to something that seems like a thesis statement, or at least a point of departure for exploration. Does the introduction seem to lead to it in a logical fashion?

2. Go to the last two paragraphs of the paper and determine whether the writer has arrived at a different thesis from the statement you found near the beginning. (If the author was lucky enough to have found a statement worth sticking to from the beginning, you can answer the following questions about that statement.)

A. Is the thesis provable? Does evidence exist, within reach of the author, that would prove her point? Or does the thesis contain an inherently unprovable statement?

B. Is the thesis falsifiable? Could one argue the opposite, without saying something manifestly absurd, and without breaking the rules of logic?

C. Is the thesis more than trivial? (Triviality test: does it tell us something we already know from other sources, without adding anything to that knowledge?)

D. Does the thesis do more than describe? Does it actually argue something?

If the thesis fails at any of these points, indicate how, and suggest revisions.

If unprovable, suggest something provable.

If non-falsifiable, propose a falsifiable statement.

If trivial, seek the non-trivial.

If descriptive, make argumentative.

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3. Now that you have thought carefully about the thesis, go back to the introduction and consider carefully, sentence by sentence, whether it leads to the argument as effectively as it could.

4. Read the first and last sentences of all paragraphs following the introduction, and determine whether they sound as if the paragraph will argue something related to the thesis. If any do not, find out from the author what she thinks the paragraph is doing for the paper, and fix or delete.

5. Ask the author where she thinks to take the paper, or what it will include that it does not presently. Suggest changes as they occur to you.

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Paper Workshop 4--Proposals for final papers

Read the proposal, and consider the following questions.

Does the proposed paper have a title?

Does it announce clearly the subject of the paper?

Does the proposal specify the body of work or evidence the paper will discuss?

What is the thesis? Does this thesis pass the usual tests for theses (significant, non-obvious, falsifiable)?

Does the thesis actually argue something, rather than merely describe things or make statements that are true?

What is the broader significance of this proposal? If you are uncertain, consider what might help make writing this paper a worthwhile use of the author's time.

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Paper Workshop 5

1. Read the first page, or until you get to something that seems like a thesis statement, or at least a point of departure for exploration. Does the introduction seem to lead to it in a logical fashion? Is this a thesis you would expect, having read the introduction?

2. What thesis does the author announce?

A. Is the thesis provable? Does evidence exist, within reach of the author, that would prove her point? Or does the thesis contain an inherently unprovable statement?

B. Is the thesis falsifiable? Could one argue the opposite, without saying something manifestly absurd, and without breaking the rules of logic?

C. Is the thesis more than trivial? (Triviality test: does it tell us something we already know from other sources, without adding anything to that knowledge?)

D. Does the thesis do more than describe? Does it actually argue something?

If the thesis fails at any of these points, indicate how, and suggest revisions.

If unprovable, suggest something provable.

If non-falsifiable, propose a falsifiable statement.

If trivial, seek the non-trivial.

If descriptive, make argumentative.

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3. Now that you have thought carefully about the thesis, go back to the introduction and consider carefully, sentence by sentence, whether it leads to the argument as effectively as it could.

4. Ask the author about the broader significance of this thesis? What makes this argument worthwhile?

5. What will the author need to demonstrate to prove the thesis? (For example, that the effect or phenomena under study does not stem from causes other than those alleged.) What evidence will she need?

6. What theory or readings from the class could help inform the argument?

7. Ask the author where she thinks to take the paper, or what it will include that it does not presently. Suggest changes as they occur to you.