

How to Plan and Guide In-Class Peer-Review Sessions

Incorporating peer review into your course can help your students become better writers, readers, and collaborators. However, peer review must be planned and guided carefully.

The following suggestions for planning and guiding peer review are based on an approach to peer review that is discussed in the handout, “Peer Review: A Method for Teaching Reading, Writing, and Collaboration Skills.” This approach implements four key strategies:

- 1) Identify and teach the skills required for peer review.
- 2) Teach peer review as an essential part of the writing process.
- 3) Present peer review as an opportunity for students to learn how to write for an audience.
- 4) Define the role of the peer-reviewer as that of a reader, not an evaluator.

Before the Semester Starts

1. Determine how peer review will fit into the course.

A. Decide which writing assignments will include a peer-review session.

Given the time that is required to conduct peer-review sessions successfully (see below), in undergraduate courses, peer review will work best with papers of 5 pages or less. Instructors who want to incorporate peer-review sessions for longer papers will have to ask students to complete part of the work outside of class (e.g. reading peers’ papers and preparing written comments); such an approach is likely to be more successful if students first practice peer review during class, with the guidance of the instructor.

B. Decide when peer-review sessions will occur.

The ideal time for peer review is after students have written a complete draft of a paper, but while there is still time for substantial revision (see the handout, “Peer Review: A Method for Teaching Reading, Writing, and Collaboration Skills”).

Each peer-review session will require at least one class period. While it is possible to complete a session in one hour, a one-and-one-half hour class period is preferable (see below for a detailed discussion of how to structure peer-review sessions).

As you look over your course schedule, make time for a “mock” peer-review session *before* you ask students to review one another’s writing, so that they can learn to identify and begin practicing the skills necessary for peer review. Before the semester begins, furthermore, you should find a short sample paper that will serve as the focus of the

“mock” peer review. You can also write this short paper yourself (for more detailed suggestions on how to set up a mock peer-review session, see below).

Instructors should schedule the first peer-review session early in the semester to give students time to get to know one another and to develop peer-review skills. The atmosphere of trust and mutual respect that is necessary for the success of peer-review sessions does not develop instantaneously. Ideally, the first peer-review session should focus on a short piece of writing, such as a paragraph or two, so that students develop comfort with giving and receiving feedback before taking on the task of reading longer papers.

2. Design peer-review worksheets that students will complete during each peer-review session. These worksheets should include specific tasks that reviewers should complete during the session. The guidance you provide on the worksheets should help students stay “on task” during the session and should help them discern the *amount* of commenting that is desirable.

The role of the peer-reviewer should be that of a reader, not an evaluator or grader. Do not replicate the grading criteria when designing these worksheets. Your students will not necessarily be qualified to apply these criteria effectively, and they may feel uncomfortable if they are given the responsibility to pronounce an overall judgment on their peers’ work (see the handout, “Peer Review: A Method for Teaching Reading, Writing, and Collaboration Skills”).

Peer-review worksheets should ask the reviewer to begin by offering a positive comment about the paper. After that point, the peer-reviewer role in commenting should be descriptive: each reviewer should describe his response to the paper. For example, a peer-reviewer might write: “I found this description very clear” or “I do not understand how this point relates to your thesis.” The worksheet should give students specific tasks to complete when recording their response to a paper (Nilson 2003). Where evaluation is required, it should be based on the reviewer’s impressions as a reader. Examples of specific tasks include

- indicate which parts of the paper the reader finds most or least effective, and why
- identify or rephrase the thesis
- list the major points of support or evidence
- indicate sentences or paragraphs that seem out of order, incompletely explained, or otherwise in need of revision

Performing these tasks should enable each peer-reviewer to provide the writer with a written response that will help the writer determine which parts of the paper are effective as is, and which are unclear, incomplete, or unconvincing.

Do not require students to tell the writer how to revise the paper. Advanced under-graduates, students who have been meeting in peer-review groups for an extended time, and graduate students may be able to handle adding more directive responses (e.g. suggesting that the writer make specific changes).

The Teaching Center provides *sample peer-review worksheets* that may be adapted to suit various types of courses and genres of writing. (For a sample worksheet that can be used for peer review of a thesis-driven essay and a sample worksheet that can be used for peer review of a scientific paper, see attached documents).

3. During the course-planning process, think carefully about the kind of comments that you will provide students when you review drafts and grade papers. With your comments, you can model for your students the qualities you would like to see reflected in their comments as peer-reviewers. For example, you can give them examples of comments that are descriptive and specific. For suggestions on how to write comments that are 1) “readerly” rather than “writerly” (Bean 2001), 2) specific, and 3) a balance of praise and constructive criticism, see the handout, “Tips for Commenting on Student Writing.”

4. Decide whether and how you will grade students’ contributions to peer-review sessions. One way to communicate to students the importance of peer review and the skills it requires is to grade their contributions to the peer-review process. If you do grade students’ performances in peer review, you will need to decide ahead of time *what* exactly you will be grading and *what criteria* you will use to judge their achievement. Furthermore, you might decide to use a straightforward ✓-/ ✓/ ✓+ system, or you might assign a point-value to different aspects of the work required for peer review. You should then decide how to incorporate each peer-review score into the course grade or into the grade earned for each paper.

The following table illustrates a point-system approach to grading student performance in peer review.

Brought 2 copies of own paper to class	5 pts.
Provided peers with specific, constructive written feedback.	0-5 pts.
Participated actively in discussion of each paper.	0-5 pts.
Wrote specific response to peers’ feedback.	0-5 pts.
Total score for each peer-review session	0-20 pts.

This table makes it clear that those students who do not bring a draft to be peer-reviewed would nevertheless earn points by acting as reviewers of their peers’ work. Of course, if you use such a point-system, you will need to explain to the students the criteria by which you judge

their performance in each category. Providing students with graded examples will help to clarify these criteria.

Whatever you decide regarding whether and how you will *grade* each student's performance in peer review, you should *observe and evaluate* what students are doing during peer review so that you can give them some feedback and suggestions for improvement throughout the semester (see below for further suggestions on how to observe and evaluate peer review).

During the Semester and Before the First Peer-Review Session

1. Hold a “mock” peer-review session. First, copy and distribute a brief sample paper. You can either use a paper submitted by a student in an earlier semester (block-out the name and ask the student's permission to distribute the paper) or write a sample paper yourself, approximating a draft that would be typical of students in your course. Next, ask students to take 5 minutes to read the paper and 10 minutes to write some comments, using a peer-review worksheet. If time allows, you can ask students to work in groups of 3-4 to produce written comments; if you do so, give them an additional 5-10 minutes for group discussion.

After students have produced written comments individually or as a group, use a document camera or overhead projector to display a blank peer-review worksheet. Then, ask students to present their reviewing comments to the class and use these to write comments on the displayed worksheet. When necessary, follow-up with questions that help the students phrase their comments in more specific and constructive ways. For example, if a student comments, “I like the first paragraph,” you might ask, “can you tell the writer what you find effective or appealing about that paragraph? And why?” Your aim should be to help students understand that the point of their comments should be to *describe their experience as readers* with specific language, not to praise or condemn their peers or to tell the peer how they would write the paper. Note that while students often hesitate to give specific feedback to a writer face-to-face, they may actually be overly critical when critiquing something written by a writer who is not present. Therefore, it might be helpful to direct students to construct their comments as if the writer were indeed in the room, listening.

2. Teach students how to think about, respond to, and use comments by peer-reviewers. Just as your students will need to learn and practice the skills involved in providing constructive feedback on their peers' writing, they will also need to learn how to respond, as writers, to the feedback they receive. Therefore, you might consider including in the “mock” peer-review session, described above, an exercise in which you ask your students to put themselves in the position of the writer and come up with a *plan for revision* based on the comments that they and their classmates have formulated in response to the sample paper.

Students must learn how to approach a peer-review session with an open mind (and a thick skin, perhaps). Often, undergraduate students go into a peer-review session thinking that their papers are essentially “done” and need to be edited or changed only slightly. Thus they “hear” only those responses that confirm this view and they end up making very few changes to their papers after the peer-review session and before submitting the final draft to the instructor. Alternatively, they can become so discouraged by what they view as a negative response from a peer that they are not able to discern what is useful about those responses.

To help students resist the understandable temptation to become either discouraged or defensive during the peer-review session and to help them focus on listening carefully to their peers’ comments, it is useful to institute a rule that prohibits writers from speaking when peer-reviewers are offering feedback. An exception might be made in a case in which the writer does not understand a reviewer’s comments and needs to ask for more information.

In addition, instructors should require each writer to respond *in writing* to their peers’ comments. This written response can be recorded directly on the peer-review worksheet (see Teaching Center examples), or it can take the form of an informal letter (addressed to the peer-reviewers). Alternatively, instructors might require each writer to sketch out a *plan for revision* that 1) indicates any changes she will make in response to the reviewers’ comments and 2) explains any decisions she has made to disregard a specific comment or suggestion. The point of such writing exercises is to ask students to take their peers’ comments seriously and to think carefully about how readers respond to the choices they have made in their writing—even if that means determining that they will decide not to make changes based on those comments.

3. Assign 3 students to each peer-review group: maintain the same groups throughout the semester. With groups of 3, each student will be reviewing the papers of 2 peers during each peer-review session, but *each group* will discuss 3 papers (for detailed instructions on how to structure each session, see below).

It is best to assign students to groups, rather than to have them define the groups themselves. Students often want to form groups with friends, which may actually create difficulties. As you may want to explain to your students, it can be more difficult to provide honest feedback to a writer when that writer is a friend. Moreover, assigning students to the groups will allow the instructor to ensure that the groups are heterogeneous in terms of, for example, student ability, gender, race, and academic major. Such heterogeneity can enhance student learning in groups (Millis 2002).

Maintaining the groups throughout the semester will help your students build the trust that is necessary for peer review to be successful (Millis 2002). You should only reassign students to another group in the rare case when one or two group members drop the

course. You should encourage your students to speak with you if they find that their peer-review groups are not functioning as well as desired, but you should also make it clear that you are interested in helping them find ways to work together to solve whatever problems have surfaced.

4. Ask each student to bring 2 copies of his or her paper to class on the designated day. You can tell students that these copies are required, but if they do not bring copies of their own paper to class, they should come to class anyway, so that they can act as reviewers of other students' papers.

During and After Peer-Review Sessions

1. Structure each peer-review session: give students clear instructions and time limits. To start each session, distribute peer-review worksheets (see above), explain how students should complete the worksheets, set time limits, and ask each group to designate one person as a time-keeper to make sure that the group stays on schedule.

Peer-review sessions can be accomplished during one-hour classes, but instructors may find that an hour-and-a-half class is preferable. If you teaching a one-hour or 50 minute class, consider asking students to read their peers' papers before coming to class, then spending the first 10 minutes reviewing the paper and writing comments.

The following is a peer-review schedule that can work in an hour-and-a-half class.

- I. When papers are around 3 pages long, peer-reviewers should spend about 20-25 minutes reading and reviewing each paper: 15 minutes reading the paper (tell students to read each paper twice) and 5-10 minutes writing comments. You should lengthen the time limit when necessary, for instance when papers are longer or when they are written in a foreign language. This schedule will mean that during the first 45-50 minutes of class, each student will be reading and writing comments on papers written by 2 peers.
- II. After all 3 students have finished commenting on the 2 papers submitted by their peers, the group should then devote 5-10 minutes to a "discussion" of each paper (spending a total of 15-30 minutes discussing 3 papers). During this discussion, the 2 reviewers should present spoken feedback to the writer. If reviewers feel uncomfortable with providing spoken feedback, they might start by reading their written comments out loud to the writer. Doing so can produce the added benefit of helping the reviewers clarify their written comments. As noted above, the writer of the paper should not speak during this discussion, except perhaps to ask a clarifying question.

2. Take an active role in observing the progress of each group and offering guidance when appropriate. Even with clear instructions, peer-review sessions can go awry. Circulate throughout the session to make sure that the groups stay focused. Listen carefully to the spoken feedback, and use questions to help students make their comments as specific and descriptive as possible. For example, if you hear a student saying, *“I was confused by the third paragraph,”* you might prompt them to say more by asking, *“Can you tell the writer where you got lost?”* or *“What word or phrase confused you? Why?”* Students will soon learn to supply such details themselves.

Paying attention to how the groups are functioning overall can help you determine whether you need to give additional guidance to the class as a whole. For example, you might tell students that you noticed that many groups seem to be rushing through the spoken feedback period for each paper, and that even reviewers who wrote detailed and constructive comments on the worksheet are giving only cursory responses when speaking to the writer (e.g. *“I thought you did a good job,”* or *“Your paper was interesting”*). You might then remind them that they do not need to present an overall judgment of the paper, but they should try to say something specific that can help the writer revise the paper.

3. Have each student submit the completed peer-review worksheets when they turn-in the final drafts of their papers. Whether or not you are grading the responses that reviewers and writers write on the peer-review worksheets, you should read the completed worksheets to get a sense of what students are actually doing during the peer-review sessions and how they are responding to one another’s comments. Having the students turn in the worksheets also helps you communicate to them that you are taking the peer-review process seriously. Instructors should also give students feedback on their performance during peer review so that they know what they are doing well and what they should try to improve upon.

4. Regularly assess how the peer-review sessions are going; seek and incorporate student input. You should review completed peer-review worksheets when you grade papers not only to evaluate individual student performance, but also to gauge the success of the peer-review sessions and to determine what you might do to improve them.

Are students writing thoughtful comments that provide an adequate amount of detail?

If not, spend some time in class before the next peer-review session giving students suggestions for how to phrase comments in a specific, constructive way.

Are students using the peer-review worksheets to develop thoughtful responses to peer comments? Are they coming up with plans for revision that take into account at least some of their peers’ comments? Again, if needed, give your students additional guidance and in-class activities that will lead them through the process of identifying potential aspects

needing revision and coming up with a plan for revision that takes into account peer comments.

Around midterm, ask students to complete anonymous evaluation forms that include questions such as, “*What is the most important insight that I have learned as a result of the peer-review process?*” and “*What can be done (by the instructor or by students, or both) to make the peer-review sessions run more smoothly?*”

Be prepared to hear that the peer-review sessions are not functioning as well as you believe they are, and be open to making changes that incorporate your students’ observations and ideas. In other words, model the same open-mindedness to revision that you want them to display as writers during peer review.

Peer Review is Challenging Work

Instructors who ask their students to review their peers’ writing should recall how difficult it is—even after years of experience—to accomplish with efficiency the tasks involved in responding to student writing: reading drafts of papers (usually multiple papers at one sitting), quickly discerning each draft’s strengths and most pressing problems, then formulating specific and well written comments that will help the writer improve the paper. It can also be difficult, even for experienced writers, to respond effectively to the comments they receive from reviewers of their work. It is essential, then, that you plan carefully the guidance you will give your students on how to conduct and utilize peer review, and that you give them a chance to reflect on the process.

Sources and Recommended Reading

Bean, John C. (2001). *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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