

# CONDUCTING (EFFECTIVE) PEER REVIEWS

## *Faculty Resource Series*

Though detailed peer reviews are common as part of research and publication processes, for students, they can sometimes feel a bit awkward: many of us have seen students read another student's paper and simply remark something along the lines of "this looks good" with no further engagement. In general, students tend to struggle with a) knowing how to give good feedback, and b) doing so in a way that feels socially acceptable to a peer. However, peer review can be a fantastic way to get students valuable feedback on their writing (thus saving you time!), and for giving students the practice of thinking critically and evaluatively about a writing task. This guide provides some strategies for conducting effective peer review sessions in your classes to meet these goals.

### Why should I do peer review in my course?

Peer review can be a fantastic tool! When done well, its benefits abound.

**Feedback from peers can be incredibly useful to students' revisions.** Unlike experts in a field, students in a class are peers who tend to speak similarly about the content matter and their writing ([Cho, Chung, King, & Schunn, 2008](#)). This means that students sometimes have an easier time understanding each other, compared to their instructor. Additionally, research has found that when revising, students' revisions actually benefit more from receiving feedback from multiple peers than a single expert ([Cho & Schunn, 2007](#))!

**Reflection on a writing task is beneficial to students' learning.** When students are asked to critique each other's work, they are asked to reflect upon the task at hand in new ways, and are often exposed to new ways of doing this task ([Moon, 1999](#)). Thus, students are asked to engage in reflective learning with each other, which helps transform and improve their learning of the content matter ([Mezirow, 1991](#); [van Zundert, Sliujsmans, van Merriënboer, 2010](#)).

**Peer review sessions can save you time.** Again, research shows that when students are trained in giving feedback well, peer review feedback often can mimic expert feedback and drastically improve student papers ([Cho & Schunn, 2007](#)). Because of this, peer review can be a great way to get a round of feedback on early drafts, and to have students address major issues before you read drafts.

**Providing critical feedback is an important communication skill on its own.** Outside of whatever communication task you are asking students to do, giving critical and constructive feedback is also a communication skill that students should learn! In training students to do this well and having them practice, you are also preparing them to succeed in their disciplines as professionals.

## Why do students struggle when participating in peer review?

There are at least two key reasons that students tend to struggle to participate in peer review well ([Nilson, 2003](#)).

**They don't know how to review.** Reviewing a paper well is a difficult task. Over time, we tend to learn as faculty that reviews are intended to help writers improve their papers, and we comment on the largest issues that are likely to impact a text's effectiveness on readers. Novice writers do not necessarily know how to give feedback in a way that will help improve a text's quality, and may even see critical feedback as a simple negative emotional reaction to a text or its writer.

**They don't want to be rude.** Students are not used to being in the evaluator seat, and thus tend to feel an anxiety and discomfort in giving critical feedback to their peers. Because some students feel that giving an review of a paper is an emotional judgment of the paper, they do not want to offend their peers by providing critiques.

## How to conduct an effective peer review (for you and students!)

Based on these ideas, there are several strategies you can use to conduct an effective peer review session in your course (based partially on [advice from the WAC Clearinghouse](#)).

**Model effective feedback.** Before your in-class peer review session, model how to give effective feedback on a paper. Consider popping a sample student paper up on the projector, and reading it aloud as you interject your thoughts and comments. You may read through the paper, interjecting the types of comments you would give: "Ok I am confused going into this paragraph because it seems like a sudden shift. I am going to write in the margin, "I am not sure how this paragraph connects to the former." This will demonstrate how a student should think about reviewing a paper as connected to their reading process.

**Specify tasks or criteria for peer review.** Giving students specific questions or tasks to respond to will take some of the emotional aspect out of reviewing. Consider proving the rubric or even a checklist of features for students to evaluate each other's papers on.

**Explicitly remind students that critical feedback from peers is helpful.** To further encourage students to provide not only positives, but also places to improve, remind them that the point of the exercise is to improve their papers, not to simply receive validation. In this sense, only positive feedback is a waste of time! Additionally, remind them that peers are a good audience because they help capture ideas and reactions in a way that sometimes is harder for faculty to convey.

**Plan out the logistics.** Plan what your class session will look like: Consider having peers review 2+ other papers; allow ~15 minutes to review a 5 page paper; consider pairing students with peers they do not normally interact with (to get different opinions). Planning these details will allow your session to run smoothly.