

## **Peer Review**

### **Why use Peer Review?**

A benefit of peer review is your students will have to think and write about the assignment considerably earlier than they might have otherwise. Another benefit is your students will write with a real audience in mind, which can motivate them to compose a good first draft. In the peer review discussion, your students will have to explain and defend their ideas to their peers, a process that helps clarify and develop the writers' ideas as well as exposes all group members to the ideas of others. Finally, and maybe the best reason of all, your students will become more sensitive to the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing when they critically review other students' work.

### **Organizing Peer Review**

You can organize peer review on your own or through the Writing Center. An advantage to including Writing Center tutors is that they are strong writers and experienced in running group and individual conferences. With a writing tutor present, writers receive feedback from both informed peers and an objective, experienced peer reviewer. (If you decide to use the Writing Center, contact the center several weeks ahead to make arrangements.)

An additional decision concerns the size of the review groups. You might choose to have students work in pairs; this requires minimal organization on your part but means that each student will profit from only one peer review. Another design is organizing small groups of three or four readers.

Other decisions to make are whether to hold peer review in or outside of class and whether to have students exchange and read drafts at the time of or prior to the group meeting.

#### **Exchange of drafts at the time of the group meeting**

The exchange of drafts on the day of the group meetings simplifies the organizational process. A drawback is that students have to take group time to read the drafts.

#### **Exchange of drafts prior to the group meeting**

Early exchange of drafts serves several purposes: your students have much more time to read and formulate responses and, if you wish, you can use the written responses to evaluate student effort. Schedule the exchange of drafts to allow time for thoughtful reading and commenting.

**General tips on organization**

Whatever the specifics of the design you choose:

- Make sure your students understand the importance of completing as finished a first draft as they possibly can.
- Insist that students have drafts finished, duplicated, and ready to trade at the assigned time.
- Plan on twenty to thirty minutes of discussion per draft.
- Allow a minimum of two days between the end of the peer reviews and the final due date, so students have time for substantive revision.

**If you participate in the peer review groups**

Plan to be less active than you would in a conference with one student. In a successful group conference, the writers respond to and question each other, and you oversee the interaction.

**Beginning the group discussion**

- Remind the group they are in a **first draft** conference; the drafts won't be polished. Their role is to help one other improve their drafts through constructive criticism.
- Explain that sentence level discussion should be minimized. Students are better able to discuss organization, focus, thesis, and use of evidence.
- Review the assignment with the group, making sure that they all understand the goals.
- State that because the conference is a conversation among participants, they should address their comments to each other, not you. Try stay out of the discussion unless you find that something important has not been said.
- The writer is always the first to talk about his or her draft.

**Suggestions for beginning the discussion of a draft**

- Ask the writer to say what type of help he or she would like from the group.
- Begin with positive feedback. Ask all the readers what they thought the writer did well, or to identify something he or she learned from reading the draft.
- Have the writer state the thesis and how he or she went about proving it, and then ask the others if they can find this thesis and argument in the draft.

**As discussion proceeds**

- Remain quiet as long as the conversation is constructive. As soon as you talk, everyone else will stop talking.
- Use questions rather than statements to prompt discussion. Consider using questions that invite discussion, perhaps by comparing papers, e.g., "How does this introduction compare to the one we just discussed?"
- Look for cues that indicate you should take charge, such as when the conversation gets chatty or too much time is spent on one issue.

- Reinforce useful criticisms.
- Encourage those writers who seem uncomfortable in speaking.

**At the end of the meeting**

You may want the writers to receive all written comments and annotated copies of their drafts. Some faculty also ask students to indicate in writing those group members who were particularly helpful.

**A final note**

Your students probably will not be very effective readers for their peers the first time around. The more opportunities you make for your students to comment on writing, the more effective they will be. Taking the time in class to demonstrate your own process of responding to drafts might be quite helpful.

If you'd like, a writing tutor could visit your class to model the thinking process needed for effective peer review (also see "Tips for Peer Review," directed to student reviewers).