

Writing Helpful Peer Reviews

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Writing helpful peer reviews can be a challenge, especially when you're still working to understand and complete an assignment yourself. Nonetheless, simply by virtue of being a peer writer, you are completely qualified to write a helpful peer review.

You are familiar with the writing assignment, and you have been reading for years. Having written your own draft of the assignment, you understand some challenges your peer might have faced while writing. You know what your instructor has said about the assignment, and you may even have access to the grading rubric your instructor will use. You have lots of experience reacting as a reader and understanding this specific writing situation, both of which you can use to write a helpful peer review.

Making Peer Reviews Helpful for You and the Writer

There are many reasons to participate in peer review. Broadly speaking, peer reviews can be helpful for the reviewer completing the review as well as for the writer whose work is being reviewed. The act of reading someone else's work, thinking deeply about it, and commenting on it accomplishes two important goals:

1. it gives the writer useful reader feedback
2. it gives you, the reviewer, the opportunity to think about your own writing in relation to your peers' writing

The obvious way in which peer reviews are helpful is that they give writers immediate reader feedback. The sections below explain how to make that feedback most helpful for the writer and enable her to improve the paper.

However, it's also important to think about the second way peer reviews can be helpful. I've heard students note with surprise that conducting peer reviews helped them write their own papers. I've even had this experience myself. When I have the chance to read a peer's writing and comment on it, I often end up with new ideas for what to write about and how to improve my own papers. Any time we read, we have a chance to learn about writing. This is especially true if we're reading texts that are similar to something we ourselves are or will be writing. That's why it can be so helpful to have sample papers to read when we're figuring out how to respond to a new assignment in a class. Similarly, in the workplace, people often use templates or models to draft texts that are rhetorically appropriate and effective.

How to Write a Helpful Peer Review

Your instructor has probably given you specific directions for completing your peer review. Be sure to follow the instructions you received. In addition to these instructions, you can use the following concrete strategies to write helpful peer reviews.

Review the Assignment

Before you begin reviewing a peer's paper, re-read the assignment describing the paper's requirements. Note specific verbs that describe the paper's purpose, such as *summarize*, *interpret*, *assert*, and *argue*. For example, an assignment may instruct you to "assert an arguable thesis." When peer reviewing that assignment, you should pay special attention to the thesis to make sure it's arguable. If it's just making a statement of fact, tell your peer that the thesis doesn't meet the assignment requirements and explain why not. Note also requirements such as the use of outside sources and minimum length. For example, if the assignment description says the thesis should be "supported by research," your peers should include references to their research. If your peers don't, remind them of the assignment requirement in the peer review.

TIP: Using the assignment description, write down an informal checklist of assignment requirements. While completing your peer review, make sure your peer's paper meets all the requirements on your checklist.

Think Big

When we're reading, it's easy to get lost in the minutiae of individual claims, sentences, and even words. Have you ever finished reading a page and suddenly wondered what exactly it was that you just read? And how it related to the page before, and the page before that? Don't worry; it's common. But when you're peer reviewing, you should combat this tendency in order to give your peer big picture feedback about his or her paper.

Here are a few suggestions to help you focus on the big picture:

- **Read the entire paper before making comments.** This gives you a chance to consider how effective it is as a whole before attending to specific concerns. For example, after you read the entire paper, you may realize that the introduction doesn't accurately represent what it's about.
- **Write an outline of the paper after reading it.** Write a single phrase or sentence summarizing each paragraph's content and purpose. This gives you a chance to consider whether the paper has extraneous content or is missing necessary content, and whether the order of the paragraphs is effective. For example, making an outline may help you realize that several paragraphs unnecessarily repeat the same information.
- **Highlight the thesis and consider how well each paragraph relates to it.** This gives you a chance to consider whether the thesis is appropriate for the paper's content and whether the paper effectively supports the thesis's claims. For example, you may notice that the writer does not explain in one paragraph how the cited research relates to the thesis.

TIP: Don't start your peer review by marking up sentence-level issues, like spelling or a proofreading error, in your peer's paper. Instead, before you write any comments to your peer, read their entire paper without commenting and consider how well its thesis and organization work as a whole.

Give Specific Suggestions

A peer review that simply states what's effective or not effective in a paper only helps the writer evaluate their work. To write a truly helpful peer review, you should also help the writer develop ideas for revision. To do this, be sure to provide specific suggestions for how the writer might fix problem areas or might reuse an effective technique from one spot in the paper somewhere else in the paper. For example, you may note that the thesis "9/11 was a tragic day for many Americans" isn't argumentative (most reasonable read-

ers would agree that this is a statement of fact), but according to the assignment description, it should be. You can add to your comments a specific suggestion for how to make this thesis argumentative; for example, you might write,

“The thesis could be more argumentative if you add a *because* statement to the end of the thesis, like ‘*because* the government began using the terrorist attacks to strip us of our civil liberties.’”

TIP: For every peer review comment you make, try to include specific suggestion for how your peer might revise the paper in response to that comment.

Respect the Writer

Writing can be a difficult task. Writing assignments can take a lot of time, thought, and effort, even for experienced writers. Keep this in mind as you complete your peer review. Your peers have likely worked hard on their drafts in order to make them interesting and coherent for you, the reader. In completing a peer review, you can respect this effort in many ways. To demonstrate your respect, be sure to:

- **Use a respectful tone in your comments.** Ask yourself what kinds of statements might offend you or make you lose self-confidence if you read them in a review of your work. For example, statements like “This is the kind of writing I did in high school. We’re in college now.” belittle the writer and show disrespect. Instead, ensure that all your comments, including criticisms, support the writer’s efforts by using a respectful tone and providing specific, helpful advice.

- **Take your time while completing your reviews.** Willingly spending time reading and thinking about your peers’ writing demonstrates respect for the time they put in. Hastily completed peer reviews end up being obviously brief and shallow. They suggest that you do not respect your peers’ efforts enough to spend time with their writing. Be respectful by budgeting the time you need for peer reviews to make them well thought-out and specific.

TIP: Take the time to complete thoughtful peer reviews and be sure that your critiques are helpful, not hurtful.

If Your Instructor Provides a Rubric: Use Rubric Language

In addition to using the rubric to consider how the instructor might critique the paper, you can use the language from the rubric in your own critiques. For example, you may notice that you’re having trouble following your peer’s paper because it’s not clear why the writer moves from one paragraph to the next. Rather than just saying that the paragraphs seem jumbled, you can borrow language from the rubric and note specifically that the paragraphs have “absent, inconsistent, or non-relevant topic sentences” and that there are “few transitions.” This specificity helps your peer know how to fix the organizational problem and highlights how poor organization can lead to a poor evaluation of the paper.

TIP: Include language directly from the rubric in your peer review comments to provide more specific critiques and to help your peers develop revision strategies.

Questions for Creating a Helpful Peer Review

These questions are an additional resource to help you ensure that your peer review is helpful both to the writer and to yourself. You can also use these questions to conduct informal peer reviews, for example at work or if friends ask for your feedback on their assignments for other classes.

1. Have you ensured that the paper meets the assignment requirements?
2. Have you identified and evaluated the thesis? Is the thesis (or lack thereof) appropriate for the writing assignment?
3. Have you considered whether and how the organization is effective?
4. Have you provided several concrete and specific suggestions for changes the writer could make to improve the text?
5. Have you identified areas in which the writing is especially effective, and explained why it is effective?
6. Have you incorporated rubric language into your critiques?