

Teaching Tips: Peer Review Across Disciplines

1. Imagine All Possible Benefits of Students Using Peer Review

STUDENTS who are assigned to participate in even a small-scale peer review can have all the following gains **even if** their peers' comments on their writing are not particularly astute. Through peer-review participation, students can

- prepare an early draft and thus have the option to revise
- imagine that someone besides "the teacher" will read their work, and thus have increased motivation
- come to see review as a normal and valued part of writing
- see peers' versions of the assignment and norm/expand their own options (not the same as copying others' ideas!)
- learn to question the choices writers make
- become more critical readers of their own and others' texts
- acquire additional vocabulary for referring to texts
- suggest strategies to others that they might practice themselves
- become more adept at and comfortable with drafting and revising

FACULTY who assign peer review activities can have the following gains even if students' comments are imprecise:

- build classroom community and engage students in active learning
- vary the format of instruction/learning and often gain an energy "pick me up"
- allow students to have feedback on their writing without increasing the faculty's paper-load
- have students certify that other students have met a writing deadline without collecting papers

2. Adapt Peer Review to Your Teaching Situation

USE AS MUCH OR AS LITTLE TIME AS YOU NEED, IN WHATEVER FORMAT SUITS YOUR CLASS:

- Students may review for as little as 5 minutes or as long as an hour (many of the benefits accrue regardless of time!)
- Students may work with designated or random peers, in groups of 3-5 or with nearby partners
- Students may share 1-page "rants," hypotheses, sketches, abstracts, whole drafts or only parts thereof
- Students may read drafts aloud, trade with a partner, pick up an anonymous draft from a front table and return it

CONSIDER ASSIGNING PEER REVIEW OUTSIDE OF CLASS:

- Course management systems, email, blogs, and wikis allow peer-review assignments to take place online
- Students with clear task-lists and/or clear assessment protocols can begin/complete PR as homework

ADAPT PEER REVIEW TO YOUR NEEDS AND YOUR STUDENTS' ABILITIES:

With some minimal preparation, most students can

- explain what they liked best or were most persuaded by
- ask three questions they have about a topic
- suggest one place the peer could provide more detail
- identify key elements important to the professor: "You have no direct quotations," "You use passive voice"

With additional preparation (see below), many students can

- identify the most powerful/direct and the least powerful/direct sentences they read
- make paired comments about particular criteria: "You're best at ___ here; you're least good at ___ here"
- make suggestions to improve particular elements: "For better attention-getting, try ___."

If you know likely traps students may fall into with this project, you can

- demonstrate what those are and
- ask students to check each other's work for exactly those possible missteps

3. Teach Key Reviewing Skills

PEER REVIEWING IS A TEACHABLE SKILL: Plan to invest **20-25%** of scheduled peer-review time in discussing and practicing reviewing skills, especially the first time or two you add such an activity (even if you're not a writing teacher!).

Generate and/or discuss criteria for evaluation to increase students' attention

- Ask students to deduce from the assignment prompt or a grading rubric what to look for as they review
- Ask students to list, define, and give examples for criteria for good writing (in this genre/discipline)
- Draw students' attention to any particular criteria that are the focus of this peer-review session

Share and discuss "model" texts to help students' vision

- Create one or more "good" and/or "bad" paragraphs, thesis sentences, reports, rebuttals, conclusions, etc.; design the text(s) to model traits you want students to focus on during this particular review session
- Let students—in whole-class discussion, in groups or pairs—identify strengths and weaknesses in the model text(s)

Share and discuss appropriate comments to help students' practices

- Provide model comments for students to review, and/or ask them to describe comments that are helpful or not
- Ask students to generate "good" and "better" (usually more-specific) comments related to the model text
- Encourage students to do the difficult, generous work of suggesting specific alternatives

4. Support Revision and Reflection to Close the Loop

REVISING IS DIFFICULT EVEN WITH GOOD FEEDBACK: Short activities help students value and use what they've learned

Help students understand what they may have gained, even if peers' commentary is imprecise:

- Show of hands or quick freewrite:
 - Who saw something a peer wrote that gave you a good idea?
 - Who learned something about what this assignment could be or is supposed to do?
 - Who suggested a change to a peer that you might make to your own writing?
- List on board: What were the most helpful comments from peers this time
- Class discussion: Who got suggestions to change X? to add Y?
- Student notes: A large, a medium, and a small change you could make based on what you learned today

Set aside a little class time for students to practice revising (soon) after peer review

- Ask students to take 5 minutes to "try something" with their current draft: Add/Move/Delete a sentence or paragraph, respond to one peer's suggestion, go "out on a limb"
- Try directed group revision for common needs: "Everyone find one place to possibly add a sentence beginning, 'Another example of this is....' and then share your new sentence with your neighbor"
- Ask students in class to try one of three improvements you know other students have often needed in this assignment; provide "before" and "after" examples to demonstrate options

Make revision and reflection part of the final document

- Collect reviewed drafts with final drafts, at least as a check on students' participation
- Consider assigning 5% of points for "significant revisions" after significant class investments in peer review
- Ask students to annotate their own drafts (yes, right on the pristine final draft!):
 - Make a margin note at two places to explain a revision you made that improved your essay: "Here I ___."
 - Make a margin note at two places where you still have a question: "Do I have enough/too much ___ here?"

5. Consider Peer Review Instructional Time As An Investment

Time invested in carefully constructed peer-review sessions, even short ones, usually pays off:

- In more student engagement, deeper and more active learning, and stronger community-building
- In reduced grading time for faculty, especially those who angle reviews toward specific student misconceptions
- In better student attention to and valuing of writing, which usually increases writing quality