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Peer Review #3: Preparing Students for Peer Review
by Lucy Bryan Malenke

Although research supports peer review as a practice that can cultivate critical thinking, empower students to improve their writing, and enable collaborative learning, many students don't feel comfortable inhabiting the role of "reviewer," and many express skepticism that their peers can provide useful feedback. As a faculty member in the University Writing Center, I've witnessed the powerful influence that undergraduate tutors can have on their peers' learning and growth as writers—but I also know that this is attributable, at least in part, to the semester-long training course and ongoing professional development we provide our tutors. As a writing instructor, I've found that many of the strategies and approaches that writing center tutors use can easily be exported to the classroom and, in fact, are already found in the research literature. So how can you train your students to provide highquality peer reviews?

1. You may have to do a little work to get your students on board with peer review (especially if they've had bad experiences in the past). Begin by explaining to the purpose of the peer review process and its potential benefits—not only feedback on their writing, but for the development of important skills for themselves such as critical thinking, collaboration, empathy, personal responsibility, and self-awareness (Topping, 2009).

2. Prior to the peer review, provide students with guidelines for the process (e.g., a handout that outlines procedures and expectations), allow them to ask questions about the process, and acquaint them with any software they will need to use (Hansen & Liu, 2005). You may even involve students in "developing and clarifying assessment criteria" to give them a sense of ownership over the process (Topping, 2009, p. 25).

3. Distinguish "higher order" vs. "later order" concerns with your students. I often introduce this concept by asking students what kinds of issues they look for or comment on when reviewing their own paper or someone else's. I write down their responses (and add a few of my own) and, eventually, I end up with something that looks like this:

Higher-Order Concerns	**Later-Order Concerns**
organization / structure required content clear purpose effective introduction / thesis	grammar spelling formatting effective subject headings

claims supported by evidence appropriate evidence (given purpose/genre) language and tone appropriate for audience	citations and references in APA style appropriate word choice variety in sentence structure transitions

I then explain why I've put the responses in two different columns: The items in the first column are "higher order" concerns. These are the big picture issues that must be addressed before anything else in the paper can work. The items in the second column are "later order"—not "lower order"— concerns." These aren't necessarily less important, but they should be addressed later in the writing process. Why change a word or insert a comma in a paragraph that may be cut from the paper? It just makes sense to make big changes first and surface-level changes last. I typically encourage students not to focus on later order concerns in their feedback if there are higher order concerns in the paper—and if they do want to comment on later order concerns, I ask them to note a few patterns of error in their end comments, rather than spending the whole session "correcting errors."

4. Give students the opportunity to practice. You might ask students to review a sample paper (individually or in groups) and discuss their suggestions as a class (Hansen & Liu, 2005; Topping, 2009). Make sure to provide students with examples of comments and questions that will facilitate revision, as well as examples of comments that aren't specific enough, constructive, or useful (Hansen & Liu, 2005). You might also demonstrate how to provide verbal feedback or facilitate role playing activities that allow students to step into the roles of writer and reviewer (Topping, 2009). Moreover, you can model peer review by providing students with a sample draft—even your own— with more and less effective feedback, especially if you don't have time to practice peer review in class.

5. Discuss with students the social standards and expectations for peer review and how to navigate issues such as giving criticism, receiving feedback, and (when appropriate) rejecting suggestions or justifying rhetorical choices (Topping, 2009, p. 24). For example, talk to students about why readerfocused responses that use I-language (e.g., "When I read this, I wanted to know more about X") are less likely to put peers on the defensive than writer-focused responses that use you-language (e.g., "In this paragraph, you forgot to talk about X"). It may also be helpful to point out that critiques or questions raised by more than one reviewer are usually good indicators that a change needs to be made. One way to introduce these issues is to show students comments you've received from colleagues and peer reviewers and to discuss how you responded to them.

6. Consider using the following video series, created by JMU Writing Center consultants and Writing Center librarian-in-residence Liz Thompson, to prepare students for peer review:
    - What is peer review?
    - Peer review is more than grammar

- Helpful peer comments
- Using Feedback

These videos and other peer review resources are available on the Writing Center's website under the Writing Guides and Handouts tab.

As Brammer and Rees (2007) discovered, "Not surprisingly, students who receive more instruction in how to peer review are more confident in their ability to review others' papers. Students who reported that instructors used two or more methods in teaching the process of peer review also reported more confidence in their ability to peer review" (p. 77). I hope that these suggestions have equipped you to train your students to engage in meaningful and productive peer review. Please see other Toolboxes in the series for further information on running a peer review as well as encouraging revision and assessing peer reviews.

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