

The Benefits and Drawbacks of Peer Review

by Lucy Bryan Malenke

If any of your classes include writing assignments, you've likely struggled with one or both of the following challenges:

- Getting students to engage in a writing process that includes revising and editing their work
- Finding time to offer students feedback on their writing before they submit it for a grade

Requiring students to review and comment on each other's writing (and revise based on their peers' feedback) is one way to ensure that they engage in a writing process that unfolds over more than one sitting. Peer reviews also make it possible for every student to receive feedback on a draft-in-progress—something you may not have time to do yourself.

Still, if you've used peer review before, you've probably seen some of the ways it can go wrong. Educators and scholars have pointed out a number of problems that can detract from (or even doom) peer reviews:

- Reviewers may be reluctant to judge their peers' writing, especially if they perceive themselves as weak writers or novices in their disciplines ([Cho & MacArthur, 2011](#); [Nilson, 2010](#)).
- Reviewers may perceive peer review as an exercise in "fixing" or "correcting" surface-level errors and may overlook more significant problems in content, support, organization, or audience awareness ([Crossman & Kite, 2012](#); [Kelly, 2015](#); [Nilson, 2010](#)).
- Reviewers may "offer eccentric, superficial, or otherwise unhelpful—or even bad—advice" ([Bean, 2011, p. 295](#)).
- Reviewers may make harsh, mean-spirited comments (especially when protected by anonymity) or may allow friendship or race to bias their feedback ([Kelly, 2015](#); [Nilson, 2010](#); [Rysdam & Johnson Shull, 2011](#)).
- Writers may reject or ignore the feedback they receive from their peer reviewers ([Wichmann, Funk, & Rummel, 2018](#)).
- Writers may not know how to systematically address the problems highlighted by their peer reviewers ([Wichmann, Funk, & Rummel, 2018](#)).
- Writers may not transfer what they've learned via peer review to future drafts or assignments ([Gravett & Poe, 2016](#)).

The good news is that there is a growing body of literature that can help us maximize the benefits and curb the challenges associated with this process. When instructors and students follow these suggestions, writers may spend more time on their writing tasks, feel accountable to their peers and instructor, and make meaning-level and surface-level improvements to their writing ([Paulus, 1999](#); [Topping, 2003](#); [Topping, 2009](#); [van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006](#)). Studies also show that reviewing peers' work can be just as beneficial (if not more) than receiving peer feedback. Commenting on peers' writing can help students better understand the assignment, reflect on their own errors, and develop ideas for improving their own drafts ([Cho & MacArthur, 2011](#); [Crossman & Kite, 2012](#); [Gravett, 2017](#); [Lundstrom & Baker, 2009](#); [Topping, 2009](#)). Ultimately, the peer-review process has the potential to increase students' sense of ownership over their writing ([Vickerman, 2009](#)) and to cultivate self-regulation and critical thinking ([Baker, 2016](#); [Kelly, 2015](#); [Topping, 2009](#)).

Based on my work as a University Writing Center faculty member and a writing instructor, I've created a series of resources to accompany this Teaching Toolbox that explore different aspects of implementing

peer reviews and give suggestions for getting the most out of them in the context of your classes. Please use the following links to find out more:

- [planning the peer review](#)
- [preparing students for peer review](#)
- [running a peer review](#)
- [encouraging revision and assessing peer reviews](#)

About the author: Lucy Bryan Malenke is an assistant professor of writing in the University Writing Center and the College of Health and Behavioral Studies. She can be reached at malenklb@jmu.edu.