Peer Review #2: Planning the Peer Review
by Lucy Bryan Malenke

Research has shown that participating in peer review can benefit both student writers and reviewers. At its best, the peer-review process helps students better understand their assignments, develop their ideas, and implement meaningful revisions. Simply asking students to exchange and comment on each other's papers is unlikely to yield such results, however. Effective peer review requires careful planning. Following these research-supported practices will help set up your students for a productive and meaningful peer review:

1. *Consider the purpose of the peer review*. As Topping (2009) asks, "Are you aiming for cognitive, attitudinal, social, or emotional gains?" (p. 25). Do you want students to invest more time in the writing process? Improve the organization and structure of their papers? Turn in more polished final drafts with fewer grammar, spelling, and citation errors? Become better collaborators? Take more responsibility for their own learning? Your purpose for the peer review will determine the decisions you make going forward—from designing to implementing to assessing the peer review.

2. *Decide when to hold the peer review.* Peer reviews typically take place after students have completed drafts their assignments, but they can be useful at any point in the writing process (Hansen & Liu, 2005). For example, student writers may be more willing to make substantive changes to content or organization following a peer review of their outlines or introductions than if they perceive their written products as finished. In any case, you must provide sufficient time between the peer review and submission of the final draft for students to review feedback and revise their work (Baker, 2016; van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006). The less time between the peer review and the due date, the more likely students are to make only superficial changes to their writing and to ignore "substantive issues like content, argument, and analysis" (Baker, 2016, p. 181). One study found that scheduling a peer review four weeks before the deadline not only motivated undergraduate students to plan their papers well in advance, but also resulted in significant, meaning-level revisions, with the majority of students "add[ing] more than 50% new material and overhaul[ing] their final papers" (Baker, 2016, p. 187).

3. *Choose the mode of peer review.* Will students read and comment on each other's work inside or outside of class? Will reviewers provide verbal, hand-written, or computer-mediated responses (or some combination of the three)? How many papers will each student review? Will peer reviews be anonymous? Your answers to these questions will vary, depending on your objectives and particular context (e.g., how big is your class? how much time do you wish to allot for peer review?). That said, research suggests the following:
   - One study, which tested seven different peer-review designs in seven courses in a history program, found that written and oral feedback tend to serve different functions and have different foci (van den Berg et al., 2006). For this reason, the authors recommend giving writers the opportunity to receive both—for example, by having reviewers provide written feedback outside of class and then oral feedback in small groups in class.
   - Students should receive reviews from two to three peers, which gives writers "an opportunity to compare their fellow students' remarks, and to determine their relevance" and curtails the impact of poorly performing reviewers (van den Berg et al., 2006, p. 34-35).

- Written peer reviews should be confidential (available only to the writer, feedback group, and instructor)—not anonymous (which may encourage harsh comments) or public (which may unnecessarily humiliate or expose writers) (van den Berg et al., 2006; Kelly, 2015).

4. *Consider the composition of feedback groups.* Will reviews be two-way (i.e., pairs or groups exchange papers with each other) or will they be one-way (i.e., reviewers and writers do not see each other's papers)? Will you allow students to select their own peer-review groups or pairs or will you assign them?
   - Two-way reviews (in groups of three to four students) are easier to orchestrate. Students can simply exchange written products with all group members, and they can provide oral feedback as a group, rather than having to hold multiple one-on-one meetings with different reviewers and reviewees (van den Berg et al., 2006).
   - The literature on group selection is inconclusive. One study showed that groups formed by self-selection, random selection, or criteria-based selection all "have the potential to excel either beyond expectation or to perform at a level far below average" (Gunderson & Moore, 2008). Another study showed that students, when allowed to self-select their groups, will choose friends or classmates from a similar cultural background, but that students in randomly assigned groups experience just as much cohesion and develop stronger peer-based learning networks (Rienties, Alcott, & Jindal-Snape, 2014). Topping (2009), on the other hand, recommends matching students who will provide roughly the same level and quality of feedback in their peer reviews.

These ideas can help you plan a smooth peer review process, but there is still more you can do to train your students to provide high-quality feedback. It won't just happen automatically. Please see the other Toolboxes in this series for further information on preparing students for peer reviews, running a peer review, as well as 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.