



## Use Peer Review to Improve Student Papers Before You Grade Them

### How Can We Improve Student Papers Before Their Due Date?

Maybe you have been hesitant in the past to have students review their peers' papers or maybe you had a poor experience when you used peer student reviews. How can we improve the peer review experience and spend less time grading the final papers?

#### Current Research Supports Using Students to Review Undergraduate Drafts

Dan Melzer reviewed "more than 1300 books and articles on instructor and peer response" to offer insights about using peer review (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 243):

1. **"Peers provide similar response as instructors when suitably trained and guided by a script or rubric from the instructor"** (p. 243).
2. **"Students learn as much from reading their peers' drafts as they do from the comments they receive from peer responders"** (p. 244).
3. **"Instructors who train students for peer review will find that they get much better final drafts and will spend less time responding themselves at the back end"** (p. 252).

#### 1. Prepare to Have Better Peer Reviews by Training Peer Reviewers

Peer responses may be of less value "when a peer response treatment occurs with little or no training on the purpose and methods of peer review" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 245). [Without guidelines for peer reviewing, students frequently respond with comments that are not helpful, such as "nice," "good," "confusing" etc.]

**One method to improve peer reviews is to create "support" teams of 3 students early in the semester.** Use the student support teams all semester to peer evaluate each other's papers – that way, each student gets feedback from 2 other students and has the opportunity to review 2 different papers.

##### Preparing a Peer Review Worksheet (*Remember: Training Does Not Have to Be In Class!*)

Without training, students doing the reviewing may resort to commenting on grammar or punctuation because they are not sure what to focus on.

- Peer reviewers could use a portion of the same rubric you use to grade final student papers, but leave off the points from your rubric or create a hierarchy of response – that way students can avoid including too much commentary.
- Peer reviewers could identify and evaluate the major elements of the paper such as the thesis, structure (headings), use of evidence, coherence within and between paragraphs, etc. Do NOT ask peer reviewers to check punctuation or grammar.
- Peer reviewers could identify at least two things that are done particularly well, and two or three aspects of the draft that are weak, problematic, or ineffective. Include two or three recommendations for the student writer (adapted from Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 247).

## Provide Guidelines for Peer Reviewers

- Before you make your first comment, read the document all the way through.
- Point out the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the document.
- Offer suggestions, not commands.
- Be sure that your comments are clear and text-specific so that your peer will know what you are referring to (for example, terms such as "unclear" or "vague" are too general to be helpful).
- As a reader, raise questions that the peer author may not have considered.
- Try not to overwhelm your peer with too much commentary. Follow the rubric and identify only the issues you are supposed to address.
- Be careful not to let your own opinions bias your review (for example, don't suggest that your peer completely rewrite the paper just because you don't agree with his/her point of view).
- Reread your comments before passing them on to your peer. Make sure all your comments make sense and are easy to follow (<https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/peerreview/tips.html>)
- Evaluate how well the text fits the rubric, assignment sheet, or class material. Suggest next steps for improvement. (Adapted from Purdue Online Writing Lab -- [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/the\\_writing\\_process/feedback/giving%20feedback\\_peer%20review.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/feedback/giving%20feedback_peer%20review.html) )

**Remind students: "As a peer reviewer, your job is not to provide answers. You raise questions; the writer makes the choices. You act as a mirror, showing the writer how the draft looks to you and pointing out areas which need attention."** - S. Williams (Univ. of Hawaii at Manoa's Writing Program)

## Keys to Successful Peer Review

- Identify and teach the skills for peer review. Encourage students to respond as a reader, not as a teacher.
- Prevent overly harsh peer criticism by instructing students to provide feedback as if they were speaking to the writer or presenter directly.
- Peer reviews could be assigned about 2 weeks before you do the final grading. The ideal time for peer review is after students have written a complete draft of a paper, but while there is still time for substantial revision.

## 2. Benefits of Peer Reviews for the Student Reviewers

- **[Peer Reviews can] give students opportunities to talk about their writing.** Students need to talk about papers in progress so that they can formulate their thoughts, generate ideas, and focus their topics. (Univ of Wisconsin Whitewater (<https://www.uww.edu/learn/restiptool/improve-student-writing>))
- Through seeing how their peers have responded to an assignment, student writers make significant improvements to their own drafts. (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 284).

## 3. When the Peer Review is Complete, What Should Students Do with the Comments?

What does empirical research suggest about the use of peer reviews:

- "Students who get feedback from . . . peers receive responses that are similar to teacher response.
- Using peer review results in more developed final drafts from students reduces teachers' time in making their own comments [in the final grading of the papers].
- Online, peer response done outside of class can be just as effective as face-to-face, in-class peer reviews—a heartening finding for teachers who don't want to lose class time for peer response" (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 284).
- Prior to peer reviews, undergraduate students may think that their papers are essentially "done" and need to be changed only slightly. Help students resist the temptation to become either discouraged or defensive and help them focus on responding carefully to their peers' comments.
- Require students to submit the peer feedback they received with their final papers and include a plan for revision indicating the changes they intend to make and explain why they have chosen to acknowledge or disregard specific comments and suggestions.

## Remember to Use the FHSS Writing Lab as a Peer Review Resource!

### References

Bean, J. C., & Melzer, D. (2021). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. Jossey-Bass.

Carleton University -- <https://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/peerreview/tips.html>

Cornell Center for Teaching Innovation -- <https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/teaching-students-evaluate-each-other>

Purdue Online Writing Lab -- [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/the\\_writing\\_process/feedback/giving%20feedback\\_peer%20review.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/feedback/giving%20feedback_peer%20review.html)

University Of Wisconsin Whitewater <https://www.uww.edu/learn/restiptool/improve-student-writing>

Washington University in St. Louis -- <https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/planning-and-guiding-in-class-peer-review/>

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