

Facilitating a Peer Review Session

Peer review works best when students have clear tasks to follow. Putting students into groups and asking them to “give each other feedback” often leads to vague praise or proofreading. Students may be reluctant to criticize a classmate, unsure what useful feedback looks like, or uncertain about the expectations of the discipline. Instead, structure the peer review session around specific tasks that help writers see how their work is being received by a real reader. See the *Peer Review That Actually Works* guide before conducting a peer review session.

Before the Peer Review

1. Decide what you want students to notice

Peer review doesn't have to address every feature of an assignment at once. Choose a small number of things that matter at this stage of the writing process: thesis, organization, use of evidence, audience, or disciplinary conventions. Then, turn those priorities into specific question-tasks. Rather than asking students to judge whether something is “clear” or “effective,” ask them to identify what they actually see in the draft.

For example:

- Paraphrase what you think the writer's main purpose or claim is.
- Underline the sentence you think expresses the main point.
- Label what each major section or paragraph of the draft is doing.
- Mark with an asterisk the evidence the writer uses to support an important idea.
- Put a question mark beside places where you need more information.
- Write what you think the writer is asking you to notice about a particular example, result, image, or piece of evidence.

Question-tasks such as identify, paraphrase, list, outline, underline, star, check, and bracket require students to read a piece of work closely and react without judgement. This alleviates the pressure on students who may not yet fully understand disciplinary conventions or feel comfortable suggesting concrete revisions.

2. Give students a response form

A written peer review worksheet (see *Peer Review Worksheet*) gives students a plan to follow and leaves the writer with a tangible artifact they can return to during revision. A few carefully chosen tasks will produce better feedback than a long list of general questions.

3. Explain the purpose of peer review

Before students begin, tell them what you want the session to accomplish. This can be along the lines of: “*Your job today is not to grade your classmate's work or tell them how I would respond to it. Your job is to be a reader. Show the writer what you understood, what you noticed, and where you had questions that should be addressed in the next draft.*”

Positioning students as a real audience helps shift them away from trying to guess what the instructor wants. For example, if two readers interpret a writer's main point differently, that disagreement itself gives the writer useful information about what needs revision.

Setting Up the Session

Where possible, use groups of three to allow each writer to receive feedback from two readers. Allow at least 60 minutes for a substantive peer review session (for 50-minute class sessions, have students read drafts for homework ahead of class to save time).

Have students exchange hard-copy drafts and make sure everyone understands:

- how much time they have per group member;
- how to complete the peer review worksheet;
- whether feedback should be written directly on the draft, on the worksheet, or both;
- whether you will collect the peer review materials;
- and what students should do after receiving feedback.

If students are unfamiliar with peer review, spend a few minutes reviewing a sample passage on the board where students complete one or two of the same tasks they will use in their groups.

This is also an opportunity to show students the difference between vague and useful feedback. Feedback that says “looks good” isn’t useful. Take a little time to model a couple of specific responses that identify where something works and why.

During the Peer Review

1. Give students time to read before they talk

Students need time to experience the draft as readers before the writer begins explaining it. You might ask writers to remain quiet for the first portion of the review.

2. Have reviewers complete the question-tasks

Students may need to read the draft more than once. That is productive. Question-tasks require students to perform comprehension and analysis rather than skim a draft and offer an immediate evaluation.

3. Make space for conversation

The worksheet should guide the conversation rather than limit it. Encourage students to discuss what they noticed after completing the written tasks. A simple sequence is: Readers respond → writer listens → writer asks questions → group discusses possible revision choices.

4. Circulate

Do not treat peer review day as a day when students work independently and you catch up on email. Move between groups, listening for vague feedback, confusion, stalled conversations, or groups that have moved immediately into sentence-level editing.

Useful prompts to get groups back on track include:

- “Where in the draft did you notice that?”
- “Can you show the writer what made you think that?”

- “What did you understand the writer to be saying there?”
- “Did the two of you read that section the same way?”

The goal is to move students from judgment toward evidence about their reading experience.

If students are saying “looks good,” redirect them toward something observable via a concrete task such as:

- “After reading the introduction, what do you expect this piece to focus on?”
- “What do you think this evidence is being used to show?”
- “Write a three- or four-word label describing what each section is doing.”

5. End With the Writer, Not the Reviewer

Wrap up the peer review session 5-10 minutes before the end of class. In the remaining time, ask each writer to complete a short Next Steps Plan in their own words. Good questions to guide the Next Steps Plan include:

- What did my readers agree on?
- Where did they disagree?
- What are the three most important changes I want to make?
- What feedback am I choosing not to follow, and why?

This step helps writers consolidate the comments they received from their reviewers. Having writers prioritize the feedback also allows you to see whether they understood what their readers were telling them.

A Sample 60-Minute Peer Review Session

10 minutes: Explain the purpose of the session, review the question-tasks on the worksheet, and model an example on the board.

20 minutes: Students read and respond independently to the first draft (slightly less time can be allocated if students have read the drafts before class, for homework).

10 minutes: Group discusses the first draft; writer listens and asks questions.

20 minutes: Repeat the process for remaining writers, adjusting timing depending on whether students have read drafts beforehand.

5–10 minutes: Writers complete their own Next Steps Plans.

For More Experienced Classes: Advice-Centered Peer Review

The process above is primarily response-centered: students show the writer what they understood and experienced as readers. Once students understand the assignment criteria and have experience with peer review, you could move toward advice-centered peer review, in which students use an assignment rubric or shared criteria to recommend specific changes. See *Peer Review That Actually Works* for an example of how to run an advice-centered peer review session.