



“I put students in peer review groups, and they just tell each other ‘looks good.’”

Reframe your thinking: Praise and proofreading are safe and non-confrontational: students give useless peer feedback because they assume critiquing a classmate’s ideas is rude and they don’t want to be responsible for lowering a peer’s grade. They also don’t know how deep to dig—something often reflected in the scant attention some students pay to peer feedback. A successful peer review will show the writer how their draft is received by a real audience without asking students to judge or grade each other. It’s your job to guide students through what to look for in a draft and how to name it, because ‘give feedback’ is far too open an instruction.

*This guide is adapted from Linda B. Nilson’s article “Improving Student Peer Feedback” (2003) and John Bean and Dan Melzer’s book *Engaging Ideas* 3rd edition (2021).*

Lay the groundwork for a peer review session. Put students in groups of three so each student sees two other people’s drafts. Explain your expectations around timing (recommend at least 60 minutes for the session) and the feedback form, and encourage students to provide written and verbal feedback with the understanding that the discussion of the work will likely stray beyond the response form. It can be helpful to give students a sample paper to review and comment on in class using the peer review guidelines, then share out the language used for giving feedback: specific feedback will look like ‘your strongest paragraph is the third because you’ve provided evidence to back up your claim.’ Compare that to ‘looks good’ so students understand the specificity required to be useful. Stress to students that they will be accountable for their effort in the peer review—decide whether you want to collect the response forms to credit the quality of feedback given.

Give students specific, non-emotive questions to answer. Concrete questions lead to concrete answers, so giving focused, actionable directives for the session improves your chances of facilitating a successful peer review session. Having students fill out some kind of peer response form creates accountability in the peer review process, provides context on what you value in their responses, and gives the writer a form to refer to rather than trying to remember the feedback on their own. However, it’s critical that the questions on this form don’t evoke emotion, and don’t demand judgment of their peer—*Does the opening paragraph capture your attention? Is the central idea clear throughout the paper?*—as students are not predisposed to judge a peer’s product unfavorably. Instead, pose questions that any student, no matter how unfamiliar with the discipline’s rules, is capable of answering without judgment—questions that simply ask students to identify (paraphrase, list, outline, star, underline, check, bracket) parts or features of the work (the thesis, main points, evidence, justifications, topic sentences, transitions, mechanical errors):

- What do you think is the thesis of the paper? Paraphrase it below.
- Put stars around the sentence you believe is the thesis statement in this paper.
- What are the writer’s justifications (readings, logic, evidence etc.) for taking this position?
- In each paragraph, underline the topic sentence.
- Bracket any sentences you find particularly strong or effective.
- Put a checkmark in the margin next to any line that has a spelling, grammar, punctuation, or mechanical error. Let the writer identify and correct the error.
- After reading this paper, were you persuaded by the writer’s position? Why or why not?

Some of these questions are not really questions at all—they’re tasks. The attention to detail required by these question-tasks prevents students from skimming the work in front of them. Picking out all the parts or features of the work may require reading two or three times and requires students to perform cognitive

operations (primarily comprehension and analysis) rather than the more demanding process of evaluation. Students learn when they're actively practicing the disciplinary advice you provide all semester about construction, organization, types of evidence, and intended audience.

Position fellow students as the real audience for the work. At least in revision stages, position your class as the intended audience so students write truly to communicate. This positioning helps students give honest feedback rather than formulating answers that guess at what the instructor wants or that try to adhere to disciplinary conventions that they don't yet know. Take, for example, a peer review session where reviewers are asked to identify the thesis of the paper: if three students each identify a different thesis statement, it tells the writer that they did not make themselves completely understood by a significant part of *her audience*. It means they should revise their paper to make their thesis clearer and figure out a clearer way to keep multiple readers on the same track. Similarly, if a couple of peer reviewers say they didn't know the thesis until the conclusion, the writer should state or reiterate the thesis early on. What audience members find to be the strongest and weakest evidence tells the writer which content to highlight or downplay. Whether the writer actually changed any minds points to the effectiveness of the argument. When peers are a genuine audience, student-writers understand that their purpose is to communicate clearly and help their audience understand their point.

Consider conducting an advice-centered peer review. While the advice above is directed toward a response-centered review where students state their responses to questions or tasks and the writer can use this information to see whether they need to be clearer, advice-centered peer review is more product-oriented and directive: peer reviewers collaborate to give actionable advice to the writer. These work best when students understand the criteria for an assignment through norming sessions or a discussion of the rubric, and they are generally used once students can already do a response-centered review (this is a more advanced peer review). Bean and Melzer suggest this classroom procedure for conducting an advice-centered peer review (pp. 247-8):

1. Divide the class into groups of three or four and have the group exchange drafts and process memos with another group.
2. The students in each group collaborate to compose a jointly written review of the drafts they have received. Groups create a written review of each draft, guided by the rubric. While generating this review, circulate and monitor, because some groups will stall, go off-track, and need a nudge. To sum up their reviews, reviewers do the following:
 - a. Write out at least two things you think are particularly strong about this draft.
 - b. Identify two or three aspects of the draft that are currently weak, problematic, or ineffective. Consider the writer's questions in their process memos when addressing weaknesses.
 - c. Make two or three directive statements recommending the most important changes that the writer should make in the next draft.
3. The groups then return the drafts to the original writers, along with their collaboratively written reviews. If time remains, the groups can meet jointly to discuss their reviews. Of course, writers should take the reviews as advisory only and make their own decisions about how much of the advice to use.

Finish the session with a Next Steps Plan the writer puts into their own words. Advice received from both response-centered and advice-centered peer reviews becomes actionable when the writer puts the advice into their own words. Before the end of the session, have the writer complete a short Next Steps Plan. From everything they heard or received, have them consider: What did my readers agree on? Where did they disagree—and what will I do about it? What are my top three changes, in order of priority? What am I choosing to leave alone and why? This forces the student to prioritize the tasks that must be completed rather than drowning in a sea of scattered comments, and it reveals to the student (and you!) whether they actually understood the feedback.