

How to Teach Peer Review: An Instructor Guide

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Note: this is a live document and is subject to change.

General Information

Purpose

The purpose of this manual is to help instructors integrate peer review into their classes. Peer review introduces students to the real-world practice of giving and receiving feedback. Plus, peer review improves student writing by showing them examples of how other classmates approached the assignment.

Audience

This guide is ideal for faculty in any discipline who work with students on tasks that involve writing.

Materials

Optional: You may want to use the [Peer Review Student Tutorial](#). You can embed the tutorial into your learning management system.

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About Peer Review

Peer review is a pedagogical tool in which students read and respond to each other’s writing. Peer review is common in lots of classes--if you assign writing, you might consider trying peer review.

When we assign peer review, we’re asking students to model themselves after professional writing behaviors. As academics, we engage in peer review when we submit to academic journals. However, the *goal* of peer review for academic journals is different from the goal of peer review for college students.

As professional academics, peer review serves as a quality control measure, ensuring that journals publish high-quality research approved by experts in the discipline.

For students, the goal of peer review is for them to learn to give and receive feedback. Our students aren’t disciplinary experts or grammar experts, so we should approach peer review as a learning experience and give them plenty of opportunities to practice.

Why Incorporate Peer Review into My Class

Since students aren’t disciplinary or grammar experts, why ask them to do peer review at all? We love peer review for several reasons:

- ➔ Peer review creates a **meaningful learning experience** for your students. They get to practice giving and receiving feedback, an essential skill for any workplace.
- ➔ Peer review **democratizes the classroom** by giving students a chance to see examples of other students’ papers (and peer review helps you as an instructor by sharing the burden of giving feedback with your students). It also helps students feel invested in their writing, as they develop ownership over their work (Keating, 2019).

- When executed correctly, peer review can **improve the quality of student writing and thinking** (READ: you'll enjoy reading students' paper and save time grading) (Donahue & Foster-Johnson, 2019).
- Peer review *may* improve students' grades (Guilford, 2001).
- Peer review teaches students that writing and creativity are social. It helps demystify the writing process by demonstrating that strong writers seek feedback. As academics, we know full well that writing is social (we talk about ideas with colleagues, receive feedback from writing groups, wade through editor and peer reviewer comments, review page proofs, etc.). Incorporating peer review into your class helps students see that writing is the creative product of a community, not the work of a solitary genius.

Different Models of Peer Review

If you teach peer review, you have lots of choices. You can assign peer review as a homework activity, or you can do it as an in-class activity. Peer review also works in asynchronous, synchronous, and hybrid courses. Below we outline a few models of peer review--there are countless ways to do it.

Homework Activity

- Assigning peer review as a homework assignment *rather than* an in-class activity has two advantages. First, it allows you to preserve class time for course content. Second, students need time to read, think, and draft peer review responses, if we expect their peer reviews to be high quality. You could introduce peer review in class or in a short video and ask students to send their writing to their assigned peer. Then, give students a week to read and respond to each other's work. Their responses will likely be higher quality than if they completed peer review during class time. You can then use class time to debrief about peer review; ask students to meet with their partner and explain their feedback. If students know they're going to have to explain their feedback to their peer, they may put extra time and effort into the activity.
- Our peer review tutorial prompts students to [write a letter](#) to their peer. However, peer review can be done on discussion boards, using VoiceThreads or audio recordings, etc.

In-Class: If You Have 30 minutes

If you have 30 minutes, you could use 10 minutes to set up the activity (see Tips for a Successful Peer Review: Frame the Peer Review Activity). Then, use 10 minutes for students to read a single paragraph from their peer's paper. You might want to focus the session on a particular writing topic. For example, you could ask students to only read each other's introduction paragraphs and to provide feedback on thesis statements. Use the final 10 minutes for students to leave comments (see How Should Students Leave Feedback Comments?).

In-Class: If you have 1 hour to 1.5 hours

If you dedicate a typical 1 to 1.5 hour class period to peer review, use 10 minutes to set up the activity. Then, you can ask students to read and comment on larger sections of their peer's paper (about 1-2 pages for every 10 minutes you provide).

Asynchronous Classes

For asynchronous classes, you might use SpeakWrite's [Peer Review Student Tutorial](#). You can embed the tutorial into your Learning Management System and give students a week to complete it (it takes about 3.5 hours). The tutorial asks students to reflect on their experiences with peer review, write a letter for a peer review simulation, and then complete peer review with a classmate. Be sure to tell students where to post their reflection, letter for the simulation, and real peer review letter.

Synchronous or Hybrid Online Classes

Frame the peer review during a synchronous class meeting and assign peer review partners. It's helpful to allow 10 minutes for peer review partners to meet (in breakout rooms or small groups) so they can get to know one another and exchange papers. Then, you can ask students to complete peer reviews asynchronously and to send their comments to their peers. Finally, you can use 15 minutes of the next class meeting for groups to meet and discuss each other's comments.

Scaffolding

It may help to scaffold peer review and introduce it over several weeks. That way, you don't take too much of any single class for peer review. For instance, you might set up/frame peer review in Week 1, ask students to complete a peer review simulation in Week 2, assign peer review partners and exchange papers in Week 3, and collect peer review comments in Week 4. If you want to include peer review for several course assignments, obviously you only need to scaffold like this once.

Extra Credit

You could invite students to peer review as extra credit. If you do, you could assign the [SpeakWrite Peer Review Tutorial](#) for extra credit. Or, you could invite students to visit a tutor at the Eberly Writing Studio. The Writing Studio is a great way for students to receive peer feedback on their writing.

How Should Students Leave Feedback Comments?

There are a lot of ways that you can ask students to leave comments for their peers. Here, we'll review four:

1. The feedback letter

2. Marginal comments
3. End Comments
4. Verbal discussions

Notice that asking a student to mark their peer's paper with a red pen or copy edit their work *not* on this list. That's because copy editing creates an awkward dynamic between peers. Students may not have command of grammar or editing issues, and so they might not leave any comments if they can't catch unconventional writing. Plus, it doesn't make much sense of students to leave copy editing feedback at the same time that they leave comments about ideas and organization.

The Feedback Letter

The benefit of the feedback letter is that it forces students to think about how they deliver feedback, to prioritize their comments, and to consider the readers' reaction. The downside is that these letters take time to compose, so you might assign them as a homework assignment.

For the feedback letter activity, you can use [this SpeakWrite handout](#). The gist is for students to write a letter that opens with "Dear..." Ask students to begin by reflecting back to the author their main point. Students can use the PACT guidelines to tell the writer at least one aspect of their document that is effective and at least one aspect that requires major revision.

Marginal Comments

A lot of instructor's use marginal comments to give students feedback, so students will probably know what these look like. Beyond the fact that marginal comments feel familiar to students, the benefit is that marginal comments help writers because they link feedback to spots in the paper. The downside is that they need to be short, and so sometimes students may exclude helpful details.

For marginal comments, you can ask students to use the Comment feature in Microsoft Word or Google Documents. It can help to require a minimum number of comments and to set a maximum. Too many comments and students get overwhelmed by the feedback they've received. Too few comments and the peer review won't be very helpful. Three marginal comments for every 3-5 pages of text is about right, but you can play with this.

End Comments

Handout is coming! An end comment is a brief paragraph that provides praise and constructive criticism.

Verbal Discussion

Students can skip written comments altogether and talk about each other's papers during class. For this activity, though, it's best to give students some guiding questions to focus their discussion (you can use

PACT as a framework). Also, it helps to implement a rule that only the reviewer can talk while giving feedback. For instance, you could tell students that the reviewer has 2 minutes to deliver their feedback and the reviewee must stay silent during this time. This takes an enormous amount of pressure off of students whose work is being reviewed, helps them to refrain from defensiveness, and teaches them the valuable skill of active listening.

Tips for a Successful Peer Review

Regardless of the model of peer review you select, consider these tips for a successful peer review.

Introduce the Peer Review Activity

Like any learning activity, it's important that we as instructors thoughtfully frame and introduce the activity. With just 10 minutes of class (or, you can record a short video), you can prompt students to see the value of peer review and guide them toward effective strategies for giving and receiving feedback. Below are two strategies to try.

So What? Who Cares? Students will want to know why you're asking them to peer review. What's the value of this kind of activity? What will they gain? You can emphasize the bullet points under "Why Incorporate Peer Review into My Class?" Tell students that peer review helps them practice a valuable workplace skill (giving and receiving feedback), lets them see examples of classmates' papers, improves their writing and thinking, and may even improve their grades.

Model Professional Peer Review Practices. You can also set up the activity by sharing your own experience with peer review. For example, you can show them a peer reviewer's feedback on an article you recently submitted for publication. Explain that even (especially!) strong, published writers engage in peer review. Also explain that because your goal is for them to learn, their peer review will not look exactly like the expert example.

Best and Worst Peer Review Experiences. Get students thinking about effective feedback practices by asking them about their prior experiences with peer review. If they've never done feedback, they can talk/write about a time that they received unhelpful feedback. What made the peer review ineffective? What could have been done to improve it? You can ask students to freewrite responses to this prompt, or you could use a poll like Mentimeter (set it up to collect open ended responses from students). In asynchronous courses, this could be posted as an ungraded discussion board (grade as complete/incomplete).

Consider a “No Grammar” Rule

This simple trick encourages students to comment on big ticket items (ideas, organization, content, sources). As a result, their feedback will be more valuable, and the peer review activity will deepen students’ thinking about and comprehension of course concepts.

Plus, if you ask students to comment on grammar, they might feel (and be!) unqualified to do so. They’re still learning about conventional academic writing, so grammar instruction is a better task for instructors. You can always encourage your students to use a grammar checker before submitting papers.

Finally, we don’t want students to feel like they’re grading each other, so let’s do what we can to make peer review about reader response. A no grammar rule helps facilitate this goal.

Practice Peer Review First

Allow students to practice peer review before setting them loose on a “live student.” You can do this as a whole class by projecting an old paper on the screen (de identified, of course). Then, ask students to point out strengths and areas of improvement. It’s also a good idea to ask students to write their responses using the same instructions you’ll use for a real peer review. For instance, have them write letters to the fictional student from the peer review simulation.

Ask students to submit their practice activity. Skim read their responses and provide whole class feedback (ex: in general, you did x well. Keep working on y.). If a particular student offers inappropriate feedback, ask to meet with that student to provide additional instruction.

Ask Students to Reflect

You can encourage metacognition by asking students to reflect on the peer review experience *after they have it*. You can also ask them to explain what kind of feedback they gave their peer and why. Doing so encourages students to be intentional about peer review.

You can do this as a class activity (have a small group or a whole class discussion about the peer review experience), a discussion board, or a reflection letter written to you.

Encourage Students to Use Feedback

Giving and receiving feedback is half the battle. Students then need to know how to use it. Check out our Encouraging Students to Revise tutorial and instructor manual for ideas.

Resources

Below are handouts and videos about peer review to share with students:

[Peer Review Student Tutorial](#)

[Peer Review Letter Activity](#)

[Peer Review Video for Students](#)

[Eberly Writing Studio](#)

[PACT Handouts for Students](#)

[ELI Feedback and Improvement Page](#)

[Peer Review in Academic Publishing](#)