

# A Guide to Coaching Students for Effective Peer Review

This article will provide you with: A coaching strategy to teach your learners how conduct effective peer review and, a guide for your learners, to help them craft better feedback during their reviews.

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Peer review can be a very useful and helpful tool to use in your class... when done correctly. Too often, learners don't know how to be an effective peer reviewer, and therefore the value of the whole activity is lost.

Do you want to implement a peer review component in your course? Great, but the first time you do, you should consider coaching your learners on how to do a proper review, so they can provide meaningful feedback to their peers and, in turn, receive commentary that will help them improve their work.

This article will provide you with:

- A coaching strategy to teach your learners how to conduct effective peer review and
- A guide for your learners, to help them craft better feedback during their reviews

The strategies presented in this article apply to any form of peer review, whether that is written work, audio/video assignments, or otherwise.

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## Apply a coaching strategy

Here are some strategies to help coach your students on being effective peer reviewers. Putting these strategies into practice in the order they are described can lead to better coaching success.

## Communicate the purpose of peer review

Peer review isn't simply a make-work part of a project. There is good reason for having students conduct peer review, but this is often not made clear to students.

Peer review activities serve real-world purpose that needs to be shared with students.

Peer review can help students learn how to:

- Read through work thoroughly, with attention to detail
- Think critically
- Write for a wider audience, not just their instructor
- Anticipate audience responses and different points of view
- Incorporate feedback to improve their original work

## What peer review is not

Peer review is not proofreading, which is where many students get hung up and lose sight of the more important aspects they should be reviewing for. While it's ok for students to comment that there are few, some, or many grammar and spelling edits, that should not be the primary focus of their attention and comments.

Peer review is also not about asking students to pass judgement or evaluation on their peers' work; it should be about providing insightful commentary from the reader's perspective.

## Guiding questions to focus the review

The first time you give an assignment that requires peer review, don't assume everyone has done peer review in the past and therefore they'll be fine; set learners up for success.

Give students clear guidelines of how to do a peer review, what to look for, and how to perceive their role as the reviewer; remember, they are looking at the assignment from the perspective of the reader or viewer, not the evaluator.

Rubrics and Checklists are two Brightspace tools that can help students stay on task and know what to look for during a review exercise. When using rubrics, don't use the same rubric you'll use when grading, as this requires students to judge their peers work. Instead use Feedback Rubrics that focus on supportive, formative commentary.

Questions that can help students guide their review include:

- Where does the writer need more detail?
- Do sentences with paragraphs and paragraphs within sections track logically? Where do you stumble over gaps in logic? Which headings might be clearer for readers? Where should the writer add headings? Suggest specific revisions for greater coherence.
- Has the writer found an appropriate style and tone for this text? Where might the writer revise to make style and tone more effective?
- The strongest part of this text now is...
- The part of the text that still needs work is...

Peer review is about identifying both strengths and opportunities for improvement\* in someone's work, so they can put forth the best work possible.

*It's more supportive to call them opportunities for improvement, rather than weaknesses or faults.*

## Modelling constructive comments

Learners are often under the impression that if they give constructive feedback, their peers will think they are mean, so they hold back, thus providing ineffective feedback because they are afraid to say what they really think. To avoid this, coach students on writing kind, thoughtful, constructive

comments that has peers focus on sharing their impressions as the reader, in order to help learners reflect on their own work from multiple perspectives.

It needs to be explicitly called out that the point of a peer review is to help peers improve their work, not demoralize them.

When providing constructive criticism, it's important for students to put themselves in their peers' shoes. Teach students to stick to:

- facts rather than personal bias;
- general suggestions rather than nitpick the details;
- quality of feedback rather than quantity.

## **Mock peer review**

If peer review is a significant or graded expectation for the course, consider doing a mock peer review in the first week or two with a sample assignment, so you can guide learners on what to look for and what you would expect them to comment on.

For example, this can be done by having the class look at a sample excerpt together and facilitating a group activity via Discussions where learners can provide feedback as if they were conducting a true peer review; you, as the course facilitator, can oversee the activity and intervene with positive reinforcement and corrective suggestions where necessary.

There is even opportunity here to collaboratively create that aforementioned feedback rubric as a class, which helps students develop a greater appreciation for the review process and results in more buy-in.

## **Interpreting and applying feedback**

One of student's biggest reservations when it comes to peer review is that they are worried they won't receive good advice, or that they will incorporate bad advice and wind up making their assignment worse as a result.

Teaching students how to interpret, thoughtfully consider, and apply feedback is a very crucial part of the coaching strategy. It's important to stress that peer review is about collaboration, not correction.

Therefore, let students know that they do not need to incorporate every piece of feedback their peers provide; rather they should weigh each piece of advice carefully, and decide for themselves if it merits action (this step also helps students develop their critical thinking).

Again, students must remember that they are reviewing their peers' work as a reader, not an evaluator. The feedback they receive should help the author improve their work so that it appeals to and is understandable for a larger audience, not just the person grading it.

## **Developing comfort with peer review**

Where possible:

- Create a collaborative class environment so peers are more trusting of one another.
- Allow peer review to remain anonymous; students will provide more authentic feedback if peers don't know who wrote the feedback.
- Use two or more strategies to teach students how to conduct peer review; the more direction students are given, the more confident they will be in conducting and receiving feedback from peers.
- Give students a chance to provide feedback on the feedback, so they can see how their comments are perceived and, as a result, hone their skills of giving feedback.
- Have 2-3 students provide peer review for each assignment, so students can receive diverse feedback, which can help them identify the most significant areas of improvement.

## **Student Guide**

Below are some instructions you can provide to your students to guide them through the peer review process.

### **Before starting a peer review:**

- Read the whole document at least once before writing your first comment. You'll be tempted to start commenting on your initial pass but resist the urge! You might end up causing yourself more work in editing, deleting, and rewriting comments when you start commenting before you've read or watched the whole thing.
- Give yourself enough time to thoroughly read and provide feedback but also account for enough time for your peer to review your comments and make edits before the deadline; give yourself a few hours for the review and give your peer a few days before the deadline. [Instructors, it is recommended to set a deadline for the peer review to be completed, in advance of the assignment deadline.]
- Don't let your own bias affect your ability to review objectively; evaluate the strength of the arguments and the clarity of their communication, not whether you agree with their point of view.

## What to look for and comment on:

- Make comments in spirit of helpfulness and from the reader's perspective, not an evaluator.
- Identify whether the assignment is communicated in an understandable way - Does the author have a clear objective or goal and have they provided sufficient explanation, support, or examples that you fully understand the argument?
  - For a written assignment: Spelling, grammar, and sentence structure mistakes can be glaring, but keep in mind that everyone has their own writing style and tone. Limit these types of comments to places where it impedes your understanding of the argument.
  - For a video assignment: keeping in mind everyone has an accent; focus on whether the presentation is audible, organized, coherent, and clearly spoken?
- Point out both strengths and opportunities for improvement in the assignment; everyone likes praise where they deserve it, but there is no magic ratio of positive to constructive comments, though there should be a balance.
- Identify perspectives that the author might not have considered that could be seen as gaps or oversights in their arguments.

## Tips for writing constructive comments:

- Indicate which parts of the assignment you find most and least effective, and why
- Offer suggestions – start your comments with 'I recommend...' or 'You might consider...' Suggestions come across as more supportive, encouraging, and collaborative, which your peers will appreciate.
- Be clear and specific – explain why you feel an idea is vague or unclear; identify the exact part that confused you or left you hung up.

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## Sources

[Five Ways to Make Peer Feedback Effective in Your Classroom](#) (EdSurge)

[Guidelines for Students – Peer Review](#) (Carleton University)

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[Planning and Guiding In-Class Peer Review](#) (The Teaching Centre at Washington University in St. Louis)