

Peer Review Strategies and Tips

This handout will (1) explain what peer review is and (2) walk through the basic steps of an engaging and holistic peer review process that focuses on asking questions, building relationships, and paying attention to the writing process. The handout will also provide specific tips for peer review in different disciplines. Lastly, the handout will have an activity to help students prepare for the peer review process.

Peer Review Definition

Peer review is most commonly understood as the the sharing of writing drafts with a partner or small group and the process of generating feedback in response to that writing. Once this process concludes, the writer uses this feedback to revise their writing. Peer review is a common process in academia since it can be informative for the writer, can give the writer an opportunity to talk with fellow students/scholars and ask questions, and can help the writer build a relationship with writing. However, some methods of peer review are more helpful and successful than others. As Oleksiak explains, peer review that focuses on engaging in the writer's whole writing process is the most effective strategy, as it betters their writing process and them as a writer (Oleksiak).

Peer review can be used for many different kinds of projects, and depending on what project is being worked on, the peer review approach may change. Having multiple methods to approach peer review can be helpful and can provide writers with different perspectives and new information (Carillo).

The Basic Process of Peer Review

The following process is adapted from Oleksiak's *Slow Peer Review* strategies, and Carillo's research on *Mindful Reading*. This process is primarily written for the peer reviewers, as the writer usually engages through note taking, answering questions, and engaging in conversation. This entire process can take quite a bit of time; however, successful peer review takes time and practice, just like anything else!

A note for the writer: during this peer review process, the writer's job is to listen to the group's feedback. The writer will learn more about the quality of their writing by listening and taking notes.

1. Have the writer read through the paper aloud with the group.

- This time is meant for the reviewers to absorb the information and notice the structure of the paper.

- The reviewers DO NOT mark up the paper, make comments or corrections, or provide any feedback.

2. *Read through the paper again silently and individually.*

- This time should be used to develop a relationship between the reviewer and the writing.
- The reviewer should highlight/underline places that are unclear, places they have questions, and places that are enjoyable.

3. *Have a conversation with the peer review group.*

- This time should be used to build a relationship with the writer. The reviewers should learn about the writer's writing process and talk about the writer's strengths.
- Only share the places that were strong or enjoyable. This will inform the writer of their strengths and the things to continue doing.
- DO NOT ask questions yet. Questions are often answered by listening to the writer.

4. *Read through the paper one more time.*

- This time is meant for evaluation. Remember that evaluation is not critique, meaning that the reviewer should focus on the material present and not what is wrong or missing. Also, the reviewer should focus on using what has been learned to understand the paper better.
- As the reviewer continues to read, they should check if their questions were answered; if so, erase them; if not, write down the questions for the writer. Some sample questions are listed below:
 - How does this evidence tie back to your thesis?
 - This sentence seems unclear—could it be rephrased?
- The reviewers should focus on the movement of the paper. Ensure that the ideas that the writer has discussed are moving coherently and making sense. Some examples are listed below:
 - Identifying clear transitions between ideas.
 - Taking note of places that may seem misplaced or disconnected to the topic of the section or thesis.

5. Review the paper with the group.

- Now the reviewers should share their questions and converse with the group. It's possible that you've misunderstood something.
- This time can be used to talk about ways the writer can clarify certain areas and brainstorm ways to better communicate ideas or clarify portions of the paper.
- Use the rubric or assignment description to assess where the writer is. If there is something clearly missing, then the reviewer should take note of this.

6. Help the writer structure some next steps for revisions.

- The reviewers should write down remaining questions or comments for the writer. Remember that feedback should be framed as suggestions. As peers, the reviewers are offering feedback, not judgments.
- The whole group should have a conversation with the writer about some next steps. Some sample suggestions are provided below.
 - Having trouble with transitions? Encourage them to read aloud.
 - Having trouble with structure? Suggest ways to outline.
 - Having trouble communicating ideas coherently? Encourage them to talk about their ideas before writing about them.
- The writer should write down their next steps while the reviewers give their written feedback notes to the writer.
- If there are specific content or grammar issues that the reviewers are unsure about, the writer can always schedule a tutoring appointment with the SJSU Writing Center for further writing help.

Tips for Peer Review in Other Disciplines

STEM

- Focus on concise writing. This can be done by noticing where writers/reviewers stumble over multiple words or by marking abnormally long sentences. Repetition is a common issue as well and can harm concise writing. Mark similar sentences to identify potentially redundant areas.
- Work together on in-text citations and reference pages. Sometimes it helps to put examples of citations side-by-side with your own references. Use [Purdue OWL](#) and other resources from the SJSU Writing Center website for assistance and guidance.

- Ensure that everything is clear. STEM papers often explain complicated processes, formulas, and procedures; therefore, sentence structure is crucial. Read sentences slowly to ensure that everything is understandable and easy to follow.

Humanities

- Re-read longer sentences or complicated ideas. Disciplines in the humanities often have to communicate large, abstract ideas in their writing. Therefore, re-reading these sentences may be helpful in making sure that the ideas are clear, coherent, and complete.
- Focus on diction. To ensure that complex and abstract ideas are communicated correctly, check through the writer's diction. Try asking questions and looking up definitions.
- Work together to come up with suggestions. It can be difficult to figure out the best ways to explain things, especially when concepts are more abstract. Help the writer by coming up with suggestions for changes.

Other Tips

- Read aloud. This will help locate text that is unclear or grammatically incorrect.
- Ask questions. The writer usually knows exactly what they're trying to say, but translating that to paper can be hard! Asking questions can give the writer new ways to think about and explain their ideas.
- Provide written suggestions. It can be stressful to take notes during a peer review session. Giving the writer written feedback can remind them about what was discussed.
- Engage in conversation. Peer review is a time to get new perspectives on writing. Ask questions, listen to others, and ask for help when necessary.
- Keep an open mindset. It's easy to be defensive and afraid of receiving feedback, but peer review is about helping every writer in the group. The writer doesn't have to accept or agree with all feedback, but they should be open to listening. The writer may learn something or be inspired by someone else's idea.

Activity: Learning How to Ask Questions

Below is an excerpt from a hypothetical paper on *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë. This passage is specifically analyzing the effects of education on Jane's character. For this activity, pretend you are in a group setting and you are moving into Step 5 of the peer review process (reviewing the paper with the group).

Please read the below excerpt at least two times through.

Hampe's dissertation argument says that Jane's ascension of the academic ladder is fundamental to other successes in life. So Jane gains more than an education, but a method of approaching the world with discipline and determination. In her dissertation, Hampe argues that there are two ways to review Lowood's curriculum, so one says the curriculum's structure creates "identical copies" of governesses, but Hampe also says that Jane's experience provides the option of understanding the Lowood curriculum as a tutorial of ascending the social and academic ladder: Jane's personal experiences as a student reveal the potential for positive individual mobility (Hampe 17). While some may argue that Jane's education creates a stoic Jane, it is clear here that Jane's character is instead actually totally positively influenced by the Lowood education since it provides mobility and a refined look at the world.

There are some problems with this excerpt. However, as a peer reviewer it is not your responsibility to make judgements or corrections, but instead to ask questions and inform the writer where you are as a reader.

Now the group has moved into discussion about this excerpt, and you would like to voice your concerns. Try the following strategies.

1. Ask the writer a question such as, "I'm confused about this sentence here (either state the sentence or show the writer the sentence). Could you explain it to me?"

Ask questions to ensure the reviewer is not misunderstanding the writer's message due to diction or syntax. This also provides the reviewer a moment to evaluate if their suggestion is helpful. Once the writer explains, the reviewer can then mention why they were confused and provide suggestions based upon what the writer has to say.

2. Inform the writer of concerns (show a specific section or explain the confusion) and explain an appropriate way to approach the issue at hand.

This approach is better used if the writer has clear statements, but they are possibly disorganized. By providing a variety of suggestions, such as "try moving this sentence to the introduction," or "provide another example/piece of evidence," the writer is able to consider multiple ways of expanding and bettering their writing process to include alternate avenues of writing.

References

- Carillo, Ellen C. "Creating Mindful Readers in First-Year Composition Courses: A Strategy to Facilitate Transfer." *Pedagogy*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2016, pp. 9-22.
- Oleksiak, Timothy. "A Queer Praxis for Peer Review." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 72, no. 2, 2020, pp. 306-332.