

Peer Reviewing

All writers can benefit from an interested audience, especially one that offers constructive and honest advice during a writing project. And who could make a better audience than your peers? The information on the next four pages will help you respond to others' writing, accept constructive criticism, and improve your writing skills while working in a group.

Valuing Feedback

Your fellow writers can tell you what does and doesn't work for them in your writing. This feedback is valuable throughout the writing process, but it is especially helpful during revising. At this point, you need to find out if your writing makes sense, if it holds the reader's interest, and so on.

Some experts go so far as to say that talking about writing is the most important step in the writing process. By sharing ideas and concerns within the group, writing becomes a meaningful process of learning rather than just another assignment. This enthusiasm is bound to have a positive effect on your final products.

"Comment on what you like in the writing. What you say must be honest, but you don't have to say everything you feel."

—Ken Macrorie

Maintaining Good Relations

To maintain good relations among group members, be specific with your comments or questions about their writing. For example, an observation such as "I'm not sure the closing connects with the thesis of your essay" will mean much more to a writer than a general (negative) comment such as "Your closing is boring" or "Make your closing more relevant." The specific observation helps the writer to deal with a problem in his or her work.

Always base praise on some element or quality in the writing: "The series of questions and answers is an effective way to organize your ideas." (or) "There is an energy in this writing that I really like."

INSIDE INFO

Your ability to make observations will improve with practice. At first, you may comment only on a surprising detail or a point you don't understand. That's fine. Just keep trying and listening.

Guidelines

Peer Reviewing

The guidelines that follow will help you participate in effective group-revising sessions. Work with a group of three to five fellow writers.

THE AUTHOR/WRITER

- **Come prepared with a substantive piece of writing.** Prepare a copy for each group member if this is part of group procedure.
- **Introduce your writing briefly.** Then let your writing stand on its own.
- **Read your copy out loud.** Speak confidently and clearly.
- **As the group reacts to your writing, listen carefully and take brief notes.** Don't be defensive about your writing since this will stop some members from commenting honestly about your work. Answer all questions.
- **Finally, share any specific concerns or problems you have.**

THE GROUP MEMBERS

- **Listen carefully as the writer reads.** Take notes, but make them brief so you don't miss the reading.
- **Imagine yourself to be the audience the writer is addressing in the piece.** If the work is meant for an admissions office, a civic group, or a newspaper, react to the text as if you were that audience.
- **Keep your comments positive, constructive, and concrete.** Instead of "Great job," make a more helpful response: "Countering the opposition early in the argument gives your essay an authoritative tone."
- **Focus on specific observations.** A comment such as "I noticed many 'There are' statements throughout your essay" is more helpful than "Add some style to your writing."
- **Ask questions of the author.** "What do you mean when you say . . . ?" "Where did you get your facts about . . . ?"
- **Listen to other comments and add to them.** Considering everyone's reactions and suggestions can help you and your peers become better writers.

"Keep away from people who try to belittle your ambitions. Small people always do that, but the really great make you feel that you too can become great."

—Mark Twain

Checklist Peer Reviewing

Use the checklist that follows to help you evaluate compositions during peer-reviewing sessions.

- _____ **Purpose:** Is the writer's purpose (to analyze, describe, inform, persuade) evident?
- _____ **Audience:** Does the writing address a specific audience? Will the reader understand and appreciate this topic?
- _____ **Form:** Does the writer present the topic in an effective and appropriate form?
- _____ **Content:** Is the thesis, or focus, of the writing clear? Does the writing cover the topic thoroughly?
- _____ **Conventions:** Does the writing adhere to the basic conventions of formal or informal English? (Consider sentence fluency, structure, usage, and mechanics.)
- _____ **Voice:** Does the writing sound sincere and honest, as if you can "hear" the writer through her or his words?
- _____ **Personal Comments:** Does the writing include personal thoughts that enhance the piece overall?
- _____ **Final Purpose:** Does the writing succeed in enlightening, persuading, or informing the reader?

Reacting to Writing

Peter Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, offers four types of reactions to consider as you participate in a peer-reviewing session: *pointing*, *summarizing*, *telling*, and *showing*.

- **Pointing** refers to "pointing out" words, phrases, or ideas that make a positive or negative impression on you.
- **Summarizing** refers to your general reaction or understanding of the writing.
- **Telling** refers to expressing what happens in the piece: first, then, and later.
- **Showing** refers to expressing your feelings about the piece metaphorically, comparing the writing to a voice quality, a color, a shape, a type of clothing, etc. ("Why do I feel like I've been lectured to in this essay?" [or] "Your writing has a neat, tailored quality to it.")

Using the Traits to Respond

Responders help writers rethink, refocus, and revise their writing. It is especially helpful to base your responses on the traits of writing.

Addressing Ideas, Organization, and Voice

IDEAS: Help the author focus on ideas.

- Can you tell me the main idea of your writing?
- It seems like you're trying to say . . . Is that right?
- Are these points the main ideas in your writing?
- The most convincing details are . . .
- A few details like . . . may make this part more interesting.
- In my opinion, details like . . . may distract from your main idea.
- Your writing left me thinking . . . Is that what you intended?

ORGANIZATION: Help the author focus on organization.

- You got my attention in the beginning by . . .
- This sentence seems to state your focus. Is that correct?
- Are the middle paragraphs organized according to . . . ?
- I wonder if a transition is needed between the second and third paragraphs.
- Why did you place the information about . . . in the fourth paragraph?
- Is the purpose of your ending to . . . ?

VOICE: Help the author focus on voice.

- How would you describe your attitude about this topic?
- What audience did you have in mind when you wrote this?
- The sentences that most clearly show your personality are . . .
- The middle part of your essay may be too subjective.
- The third paragraph sounds very formal. Do you think it fits with the rest of your writing?
- The overall feeling I get from your writing is . . .

Reacting to Criticism

You don't have to incorporate all of your classmates' suggestions.

- Trust your own judgment about your writing.
- Determine which issues are most important.
- Pay attention to comments made by more than one responder.
- Get another opinion if you are not sure about something.