

Peer Review: a student guide

What is peer review?

Student peer review involves students giving and receiving feedback on each other's work. Both writing and receiving reviews will help you to improve your assignment before final assessment. Peer review also helps you develop generic skills and take a more active role in your learning.

How does it work?

Step 1: Each student prepares and submits a draft of their assignment. Draft assignments are anonymously distributed to other students for review.

Step 2: Each student reads and reviews several assignments (normally between 1 and 5).

Step 3: Reviews are returned to students. They can use this feedback to reflect on and improve the assignment and give feedback to their reviewers.

Writing reviews

Writing reviews can seem a little daunting to begin with, and it takes a bit of practice to write a great review. Here are some general **dos** and **don'ts** to consider when writing your reviews:

Helpful reviews are:

- ✓ *Constructive* – provide explanation & example improvements
- ✓ *Specific* – provide examples
- ✓ *Balanced* – highlight strengths & weaknesses
- ✓ *Thorough* – detailed & focused on material
- ✓ *Respectful* – how would you feel if you received the review?

Unhelpful reviews are:

- ✗ *Unspecific* – criticisms are not justified or no examples provided
- ✗ *Unbalanced* – either too much praise, or too much criticism
- ✗ *Disrespectful* – criticism is directed at writer, rather than content
- ✗ *Aggressive* – makes reader feel 'attacked'

When giving peer review, be sure your points are both positive and negative. Give your critiques as suggestions, not commands. When receiving peer review, do not be disenchanted or feel that you did a bad job based on one review. Every review is different, and what one person does not approve of, the next person may find exemplary.

Guidelines for giving comments and suggestions

- Before making any comments, review the entire document and make sure you understand the author's intentions. Or, if being presented work by a author, your first response should be to reiterate the author's purpose, audience, and goals.
- After the author's purpose, audience, and goals are clear, ask questions of the author, make comments, and offer suggestions.
- Point out both the strengths and the weaknesses of the document (design, layout, typography, and so on).
- Offer suggestions, not commands. For instance, do not use "should," as in "You should do this...." Instead, use "I" statements, such as "I see that..." or "I'm confused about..."
- Be respectful and considerate of your peer's feelings. Do not say or write anything you wouldn't want to receive yourself—there is no reason to be rude.
- Make sure your comments are clear and specific so your peer knows what you are referring to. It is important to give specific examples and point to design principles, image composition, layout guidelines, and so on to make your

point. Such comments as “this is unclear” or “this is too vague,” are too general to be helpful. Rather make a comment like, “I’m confused by this image because there is no caption identifying what it is”).

- If you are writing your comments, reread them before passing them on to your peer. Make sure all your comments make sense and are easy to follow.
- To conclude, summarize the reviewer’s suggestions and offer a plan for revision.

A good general format for comments is:

“That was good and it would be even better if....”

Warm Comments

1. Identify the author’s strength - compliment them.
2. Explain explicitly WHAT the author has done well - so they know to do it again in future.
3. Quote them - repeat a phrase or sentiment they have articulated well.
4. Identify something you have learned by reading their work.
5. Explain how the author has changed your perspective or point of view through their writing.
6. Expand upon one of the points by adding information you think might add to or enhance it.
7. Summarise the author’s points to show how effective they have been in conveying them to the reader.
8. Make links between what the author presents and real world examples.

Cool Comments

1. What ideas/concepts challenged you?
2. What do you find difficult to accept?
3. Identify a flaw in the author’s reasoning
4. What did you find difficult to understand/comprehend? Ask for clarification.
5. Identify something that the author may not have considered.
6. Present the author with an alternative viewpoint
7. Comment on the author’s effectiveness in getting their point across
8. Identify the direction you think the author might like to take their thinking from this piece of writing.
9. Suggest a starting point for improvement.
10. Has the author covered all elements of the task/question?
11. Identify anything they may have overlooked.

Receiving reviews

Receiving reviews can be confronting, particularly if a reviewer has been very critical of your work. It's a good idea to take some time between first reading your reviews and responding, as it will give you a chance to gather your thoughts and think about the comments objectively. It's important to understand that reviews will vary in quality, and you need to critically appraise the feedback you have received. If you disagree with a reviewer, don't dismiss the comment completely – think about whether other readers may feel the same way.

Here are some tips for getting the most out of your reviews:

- ✓ Put emotions aside and carefully read and take time to digest all the comments
- ✓ Think critically about the feedback you have received
- ✓ Take notes to help you prepare your response
- ✓ Address the major issues first, then move onto minor points

Common questions

Peer reviews look like a lot of time and effort. Why bother participating?

Participating in peer review can benefit you in many ways:

- Feedback from reviewers will help you improve your assignment
- Reading other students' assignments will give you insight into your own work
- You will take a more active role in the learning process
- Improved understanding of subject content
- Development of generic skills such as problem solving & critical thinking

"Peer review improved my understanding of the subject matter and I learned some important skills like how to give and receive constructive criticism"

I am concerned reviewers will be biased towards giving good reviews to their friends.

The review process is completely anonymous, so any bias in the review process is unlikely. Reviews are double-blind, so you won't know whose work you are reviewing, and they won't know who you are.

How will peer review actually improve my work?

Reviews of your draft assignment will identify its strengths and weaknesses, and likely highlight areas where things could be altered or improved. Reviews tend to focus on the assessment criteria for the subject, so they will help remind you of what really matters. In addition, reading other students' work and writing reviews may help you to identify areas where your own work could be improved, or highlight mistakes you may have overlooked.

"The review highlighted both good points and areas of suggestion...it gave me areas within my work to really think about how to express the particular point"

My reviewers contradict each other. Who should I trust?

When reviewers express differing opinions, it can be confusing and hard to decide who is right. This is where you will need to exercise your own judgement. Getting practice at evaluating feedback critically and working out which point of view you think is best justified is an important part of the peer review process.

"Feedback was extremely helpful as each reviewer saw mistakes that neither I nor other reviewers saw"

All my reviews were really positive. Does that mean I'll get a good mark for my assignment?

Not always. Reviewers are exercising opinions, and these don't always match those of the assessor. There is always scope for improvement, so treat reviews that are glowingly complimentary and offer few suggestions for improvement with healthy scepticism.