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**A Guide to Student Peer Review for Social Sciences Faculty**

This guide is for instructors in the social sciences who incorporate student-to-student feedback as part of writing assignments and who want to improve the quality of peer review. The guide lays out best practices, discusses types of student feedback, and provides sample structured peer review assignments.

The TLC also offers consultations to faculty who want to review their writing assignments. For more information, contact the writing center staff.

**PREMISES OF THIS GUIDE**

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|  | **Writing in social sciences is an inseparable part of the community of practice**  Writing clarifies and shares ideas of practice to benefit the whole community. It is not primarily solo work and needs the same collaboration and feedback as other areas of practice. Members of the community of practice can help each other achieve greater clarity through thoughtful peer review. Establishing a culture of shared practice in the classroom improves peer review. |
|  | **The primary goal of peer feedback is to improve the clarity of ideas**  Readers in the social sciences value clear, evidence-based ideas.To help writers achieve clarity, early rounds of peer review should focus on organization, use of sources, and articulation of ideas. Accented written English reflects the multi-cultural identities of social science practitioners and often will not affect clarity. |
|  | **Every peer reader is qualified to offer meaningful feedback to ever peer writer**  Peers in the same discipline are one another’s audience in class and eventually in their professions. Effective student writers work to ensure that their ideas are clear to their peer readers. Effective peer reviewers feel confident in saying whether or not they understand their peer’s written ideas and work to help their peers clarify ideas. |
|  | **Peer feedback is most effective when instructors model feedback**  Student-to-student feedback becomes more productive when they practice giving feedback on model assignments in instructor-led sessions that introduce genre conventions, show model student papers of varying quality, and provide language students can use in their feedback. |

**PROVIDE MODELS FOR WRITING AND FEEDBACK**

Instructors can set students up for success as writers and peer reviewers by discussing genre samples and modeling feedback. This strategy has the added benefit of providing students language they can use in their own peer feedback.

A few ideas:

* **Show examples:** provide student examples or samples from the field; point out what works and what doesn’t; highlight common elements and concerns; illustrate how different writers address similar assignments in different ways.

Try using multiple samples to show students different writing choices. “Copying” the sample helps some students learn.

I don’t like to show sample papers because students just copy the sample!

* **Deconstruct samples:** have students take apart well-ordered papers to see how they work. This works especially well with literature reviews and other genres that have flexible structures, as students get an idea of the choices writers can make. To deepen this experience, instructors can ask students to work in small groups to recommend changes to a paper that needs to be reordered.
* **Model peer review:** provide sample student writing along with a structured peer review worksheet. Have students work through the peer review point by point, offering model ways to respond, highlighting great student responses and redirecting responses that don’t properly address writing concerns.

**STRUCTURED FEEDBACK HELPS WRITERS PRODUCE CLEAR IDEAS**

When peer reviewers have a structured approach to providing feedback based in the principles of clear communication, they can more confidently review a work and respond in meaningful ways. A structured review session typically includes the clarity concerns below.

* **Genre knowledge**: even if a piece is very well written, it doesn’t work if it violates the genre conventions, yet students may never have written a literature review, policy brief, etc.

A structured peer review asks reviewer to match the writing to the expected genre.

* **Order of ideas:** some assignments are highly structured; others, like literature reviews or research briefs, require a student to determine the order of ideas based on the needs of the topic. Students may struggle to build a coherent, sequenced argument.

A structured peer review prioritizes order of ideas.

* **Clarity of ideas:** when grappling with new disciplinary concepts and vocabulary, students may use abstractions, over-general language, passive constructions and confusing syntax.

A structured peer review asks reviewers to note areas where they become confused or have questions.

* **Grammar and syntax:** while clarity of ideas remains most important, issues of grammar and syntax can sometimes derail clarity. When this is the case, reviewers may need to address it.

A structured peer review asks reviewers to note grammar and syntax only when it interferes with clarity, and then only to note areas for the writer to review.

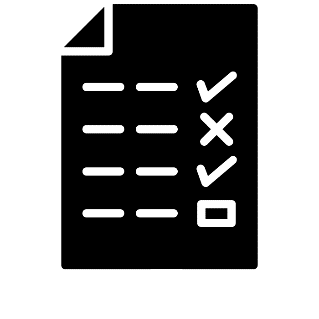
**TWO TYPES OF FEEDBACK**

Composition theorist Peter Elbow describes two types of feedback in his book *Writing with Power.* “Criterion-based feedback” asks how a piece of writing measures up to predetermined standards. This is the most common type of feedback and often comes along with a grading rubric. “Reader-based feedback” asks how a piece of writing works for the reader – where the reader gets confused or intrigued, skeptical or convinced. Both types of feedback provide useful data to writers. The key is to train peer reviewers how to use these types of feedback.

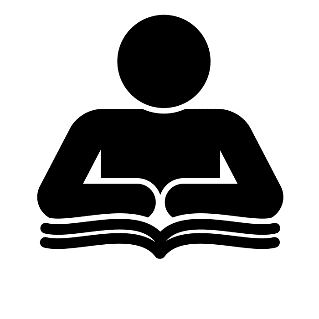
**Criterion-Based Feedback**

Peer reviewers are most familiar with criterion-based feedback that asks how a paper matches a set of standards for organization, use of evidence, format, and grammar conventions. Yet students may not feel competent to judge or “grade” another student’s writing, or may not know where to focus their attention. They easily default to abstractions about paper “flow” or pointing out simple typos or grammar errors (sometimes incorrectly) at the expense of larger clarity issues.

To guide students to give criterion-based feedback, provide guided questions for a reviewer to address that reflect the most important elements of the assignment. Elbow provides 22 such questions in *Writing with Power.* Examples for a literature review might include:

* Does the writer provide an introduction that clearly describes the problem of practice?
* Does the writer incorporate at least 5 sources that all relate to the problem of practice stated in the introduction? If not, what is missing?
* Does each paragraph have one guiding idea? Identify the main idea of each paragraph by underlining it or writing it on the side of the paper.

**Reader-Based Feedback**

****Peer reviewers may have limited or no experience with reader-based feedback, though it is the type of feedback they can most easily give. Reader-based feedback provides nonjudgmental narrations of how readers interact with a piece of writing. When a student engages in good faith reader-based feedback, the results can be very useful to writers, letting the writer know where they have successfully translated meaning to their reader and where they need to clarify their ideas.

Examples of reader-based questions for a literature review include:

* After reading only the introduction, what is the topic of this paper?
* Does anything in this paper confuse you? Underline any words or sentences where you get lost or have to read more than once.
* Does anything surprise you?
* What do you find most interesting or intriguing in this paper?

Reader-based feedback encourages readers to give feedback such as “I had to read this sentence a few times.” “I’m not sure I understand this paragraph.” “This surprised me because I thought your paper was focused on adult patients – but this source is about children.” Once students get the hang of this type of feedback, they can become more confident peer reviewers.

**SAMPLE PEER REVIEW ASSIGNMENTS**

**Setting the Stage Option 1: Mock Peer Review**

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| **1st draft** | **60 – 90 minutes** | * **Pairs** * **Whole Class** | * **Peer review sheet** * **Assignment rubric** * **Sample student paper** |

Students benefit when the instructor conducts a mock peer review together on a typical example of student writing. This mock review allows writers to practice giving meaningful feedback and allows instructors to point out those items that are most crucial to the assignment, reveal any typical writing problems, and highlight the process of feedback and revising.

*Sample Lesson Outline*

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| **WHO** | **WHAT** |
| **Whole Class** | * Hand out the peer review sheet students will use for their first peer review * Read the instructions and clarify the steps * Discuss reader-based and criterion-based feedback [See page 3] |
| **Whole Class** | * Hand out the sample peer draft, along with assignment and rubrics * Review and answer any questions |
| **Pair-Share**  Students read individually  Discuss in pairs  Share with class | Using the Research Brief peer review sample on page 6 of this guide, the pair-share format might look like this:   * Each student reads the paper’s introduction on their own * Student pairs discuss the main argument of the piece and collaborate to write a summary * Pairs share their summary with the group and the class compares notes * The instructor clarifies any points the students should note * The class then moves on to the next part of the peer review, maintaining the pair-share/class discussion format throughout, with the instructor highlighting essential points * If students use language that is especially helpful, the instructor can note that language on the board or ask students to write it down for use in their future peer reviews. This is a great opportunity to teach the language of professional peer review! |

**Setting the Stage Option 2: Teach Genre Conventions Rhetorically**

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| **1st draft or before drafting** | **60 – 90 minutes** | * **Whole Class** | * **Assignment rubric** * **Exemplar papers, preferably multiple samples** * **Highlighters, if available** |

A variation on the idea above uses genre samples to show students the rhetorical moves that a successful author makes. For example, with a literature review, the instructor hands out one or more strong literature reviews and has students read for specific language and structural elements, such as the way the author introduces sources or the uses of subheadings to signal meaning.

*Sample Lesson Outline*

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| **WHO** | **WHAT** |
| **Whole Class**  **Optional Pair-Share** | * Have students review the assignment prompt and any grading rubrics. If students have already started their papers, ask about student questions. * **Optional:** Use a pair-share format where students discuss their questions about the assignment in pairs then write them on notes and hand them in. At the end of the lesson, check that student concerns and fill in gaps. |
| **Pairs**  Students read individually  Discuss in pairs | * Give students copies of successful sample papers that reflect the genre norms they need to master. These can be student examples or examples from the field. Two-three samples that achieve the stated goals using different structures can be especially helpful to students. * If using multiple samples, give each pair only one, and follow up by posting all samples online. * Each student should read the genre sample silently, reflecting on how it meets the assignment. * Using your assignment prompt, ask pairs to highlight how their assigned sample accomplishes the goals of the assignment. To make this activity meaningful, point out specific rhetorical moves students should look for and highlight – introducing the problem, use of subheadings, introducing authors and studies, showing agreement and disagreement, etc. |
| **Whole Class**  Pairs share notes with class  Instructor fills in gaps | * Project samples for the whole class to view or give copies of all samples to all students. * Assign pairs to specific parts of their sample to present to the class depending on the number of pairs and samples. For example, one pair can discuss how a sample shows authors agreeing and disagreeing while another pair can discuss use of headings and subheadings. * Each pair points out specific ways in which their assigned sample and section accomplishes its goal. Other pairs with the same sample can contribute and the instructor can fill in gaps. * Go through each sample in this way. |
| **Whole Class** | * Return to student questions and answer additional questions. * If time and if students already have drafts, they can exchange for feedback that asks peers to point out or recommend specific rhetorical moves they just discussed. |

**Problem Statement Peer Review**

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| **After writing only the problem statement** | **30-45 minutes** | * **Ideally, groups of 3 (allot more time for 4)** | * **Each student brings one hard copy of thir draft** * **Optional feedback form** |

If the assignment involves defining a research problem or problem of practice, students benefit from writing and reviewing their problem statement before moving on to the next step.

*Sample Lesson Outline. All Completed in Groups.*

* Distribute feedback forms: give enough feedback forms for each review or write feedback questions on the board (or project questions, etc.) for students to address on their own paper
* Students hand the clean draft copy to the groupmate on their left
* Students **do not write** on their peer’s problem statement (at least not at first)
* Students read the problem statement, then answer prompts on a feedback form or on their own sheet of paper (see below for example questions)
* Students hand the feedback form or paper to the author and pass the draft to the next person in the group (the idea is to get feedback from more than one peer). Each round takes about 10-15 minutes.
* After the final round of feedback, students read their feedback and discuss with the group ways to clarify their drafts.
* If more time in class, students can mark papers for surface or APA errors

*Sample questions for feedback:*

* In your own words, *what* is the problem, *why* is it a problem, and *for whom* is it a problem?
* What possible solutions would you expect to read about in the rest of this paper?
* Does the author cite data or experts to *show* why this issue is a problem?
* Has the author used APA format correctly and consistently?
* Can you make one suggestion to improve this draft and make the problem clearer for the reader?

**Peer Review for Grammar and Style**

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| **2nd or 3rd draft** | **30-45 minutes** | * **Pairs** | * **Each student brings one hard copy of thir draft** |

This peer review works best after students have had a chance to revise their papers based on ideas and order, added additional research, and gotten their paper in near-final form.

*Sample Lesson Outline*

Students can work side-by-side in pairs, or in anonymous pairs randomly or intentionally assigned. Have students place their peer’s hard copy paper face down in front of them and let them know they will review the draft in three rounds, using specific instructions for each round.

**Round 1: Read slowly and out loud (10-15 minutes)**

Yes, this can get noisy! If possible, invite students to spread out into the hall or adjacent rooms. They can even plug their ears if this helps. Students should:

* Read the paper aloud, slowly. For any word, phrase or sentence that causes the reader to stumble or read more than once, mark a small “x” next to the problem area.
* For any mistake (grammar, spelling, etc.), simply circle the word or phrase. No need to correct yet.

**Round 2: Identify the subject and main verb**

For the second round, instructors may need to write a simple sentence on the board and make sure students can identify the subject and main verb, reminding students that each sentence has a main noun paired with a main verb. After this, students should:

* Focus only on the first paragraph, the final paragraph, and the first two sentences of all other paragraphs. This is where readers expect clear meaning.
* For each sentence in these sections, underline the sentence subject. If there are more than 6 words before the subject, place a small “x” by the sentence. If the reader cannot identify the subject, place a small “x” by the sentence. In these cases, the subject may be unclear or buried in the sentence.
* For each sentence, place two lines under the main verb. If there are more than 4 words between the subject and verb, place a small “x” by the sentence. If the writer uses “is, am, are, was, were, be, being or been” as the verb or part of the main verb, place a small “x” by the sentence. In these cases, the main action may be hidden or confusing.
* After marking all sentences, count the “x” markings from rounds one and two. Put the number at the end of the paper. The writer’s goal is to address half of these issues in a revision.

**Round 3: Edit for typos, misspellings, grammar issues**

Here the student can make corrections if they find mistakes. They should read the paper with a specific agenda to find mistakes. IF they spot any, they should make one of two moves:

* If the student knows the mistake and how to correct it, they can do so on the paper.
* If the student suspects a mistake, but isn’t sure, they can circle it and make a note to look up the word or check the spelling.

**SAMPLE PEER REVIEW HANDOUTS**

**Early Peer Review Sample for Research Brief: 1+ hour, in or out of class**

You will give your peer targeted **criterion-based** and **reader-based** feedback using the questions below as a guide. For this assignment, focus on: a narrow and clear argument, a structure that supports that argument, and sentence-level issues that keep you from understanding the paper’s ideas.

1. Read the introduction and stop. In one sentence, repeat the main argument/idea in your own words.

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1. Prepare to comment on the paper by reviewing the guided questions below. After you read the draft, choose the 3-5 issues you feel are *most pressing* to achieve the writer’s goal of a clear, well-supported argument that meets the assignment requirements.

**Criterion-based questions:**

* Does the draft reflect the assignment prompt? Does it seem to fit with the samples we reviewed?
* How well is the draft organized? Are the parts arranged in a logical order?
* Does each paragraph have one central idea that supports the central idea of the brief as a whole?
* Does the writer use credible sources and explain those sources well?
* Is the introduction effective and accurate?
* Is the conclusion a logical extension of the brief without merely repeating?
* Is it easy to skim for the main points?

**Reader-based questions:**

* Can you tell who the audience is? Do you think the writer met their needs?
* What beliefs or underlying ideas do you think inform the piece?
* Were you convinced? Why or why not?
* Were you confused or surprised by anything?
* Did you need to reread anything in order to understand it?
* What more do you want to know, understand, or see in the writing?

1. With the above questions in mind, finish reading the draft. Read it slowly and out loud if possible. This will help you better identify areas that cause you to stumble or pause. Feel free to make notes as you read – but avoid focusing on grammar or typos unless they cause the paper to be unclear.
2. When you finish reading, revisit your answer to question #1. Did you get what you expected from the paper? Why or why not?

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1. Choose 3-5 questions from the list above to address with the reader. On the back of this sheet or on a separate sheet of paper (or face-to-face if in class), provide feedback aimed at clarifying the ideas and strengthening the argument for readers.

**Sample Peer Review Conversation for Literature Review: 1+ hour in class**

For this peer review, you and your review partner will give each other targeted **criterion-based** and **reader-based** feedback at the global and paragraph/sentence levels. Choose from the feedback starters below or use your own. Make sure to highlight global issues first and then sentence-level issues.

Before reading each other’s drafts, review the assignment prompt. As you go through the draft, if you have questions about how the draft meets areas of the assignment, be sure to ask your peer.

1. **Read slowly and carefully**, with minimal or no marking on the first read-through.
2. **Restate the main question.** What is your sense of the main question the literature review asks? Take turns verbally summarizing each other’s main problem or question. Discuss any areas where the summary does not match the author’s intended question or problem.
3. **Review for global revisions.** Review the questions below regarding global feedback then skim back through the paper with these questions in mind.When you’re both ready, choose the 1-2 areas that you feel are most important to the paper’s message or clarity.

**Reader-based questions:**

* Did you understand the background? Do you have questions about the research topic?
* Did you understand the arguments made/methods used by the studies or research described in the review? Note any places that surprised or confused you.
* Do you feel you understand the similarities and differences in the research?
* What did you learn from this literature review?
* What more do you want to know, understand, or see in the writing?

**Criterion-based questions:**

* How well is the literature review organized? Are the parts arranged in a logical order?
* Does the author include an appropriate level of background or context?
* Is the review easy to skim for the main points?
* Does the paper include a conclusion that makes logical arguments about the research and the topic based on the information in the paper?

1. **Review for paragraph/sentence-level revisions.** After reviewing the questions below, give the paper one last look. You can use your pen for this one, but avoid correcting or rewording. Simply point out the most important issues with notes in the margin or circled/underlined areas.

**Reader-based questions:**

* After reading the first part of a paragraph, are you surprised or confused by what came next?
* Did you need to reread anything in order to understand it?
* Is it clear how each paragraph relates to the topic of the literature review? If not, note areas that seem disconnected.
* When you read out loud, do you stumble over any sentences or lose your breath?
* Are any sentences particularly well phrased or particularly difficult to get through?

**Criterion-based questions:**

* Does each paragraph have one central idea that in turn supports the central idea of the review?
* Does each idea transition logically to the next?
* Does the writer repeat certain words or phrases within the paragraph, especially in consecutive sentences?
* Are the sentences readable and clear?