

Giving Feedback to Other Writers

Throughout your college career, you may be asked to give feedback on other students' writing. This is sometimes referred to as **peer review** or **workshopping**. This resource provides some general tips for conducting peer review; however, your instructor may have specific requirements or expectations for the peer review they ask you to do. Always follow your instructor's guidelines.

What is the purpose of peer review?

The purpose of peer review is to help you and your classmates get **feedback** on a draft of writing so you can revise it before you submit the final draft. It is a collaborative process designed to help writers improve a specific piece of writing, though it's even better if peer review can give writers strategies and insights they can apply to future writing projects they do, too. Therefore, you should think of peer review as part of the **process** of writing—as well as the process of becoming a better writer.

Many students may only be used to getting feedback directly from their instructors. While instructor feedback is valuable in its own way, a distinct advantage of peer feedback is that it comes from students who are relatively closer to your own experience level. Also, your classmates are in the process of working on the same writing project as you are, so they can speak from their own experiences working on the project. They might be using strategies or approaches that you never would have thought of!

How do we give good feedback?

First, a good feedback comment is **specific**. Vague feedback may leave the writer confused about what they should do. Rather than give broad, general statements of praise OR criticism, point to specific areas of the draft that you think are particularly strong or that need improvement. Consider even quoting from the writer's draft!

Weak feedback comment: Great job! I really liked your paper!

Stronger feedback comment: I really enjoyed how clearly you stated your thesis. I immediately knew what you were going to be discussing throughout the rest of the paper.

A good feedback comment is also **constructive**. Remember, your goal is to help other students improve. Harsh, critical comments are counterproductive. This is not a competition; it's a collaboration!

Weak feedback comment: Overall, your paper is not very good.

Stronger feedback comment: As a reader, I noticed a few opportunities to improve the structure.

Hint: Reader-response comments like "As a reader" can help soften your tone AND remind the writer that their writing has an audience.

That said, a good feedback comment is also **candid** and not afraid to give critiques where they are warranted. There is a balance between being too critical and so soft that the writer doesn't register your comment as criticism.

Weak feedback comment: You could maybe try to vary your sentence structure, but it's perfectly fine the way it is!

Stronger feedback comment: I noticed that you start a lot of your sentences the same way, and I think it would help to vary it up a bit. For example, you could say...

Hint: Give the writer examples and point to specific parts in the paper.

What should I focus on when reading someone's draft?

Here in the Writing Center, we differentiate between **higher-order concerns (HOC's)** and **lower-order concerns (LOC's)**. In general, when you do peer review, you should focus mostly on the HOC's in a writer's draft, though there are sometimes exceptions to this.

HOC's are "big picture" concerns more likely to affect the overall effectiveness of a text. Examples:

- how well the text is organized
- how clearly the text articulates and develops its thesis
- how well the text follows its intended purpose
- how well the text adapts to its **rhetorical situation** (see our resource on that!)
- how well the text adheres to the conventions of its genre
- how well the text provides evidence and analyzes that evidence
- how well the text logically transitions from one idea to the next
- how well the text attempts to document source material

LOC's, in contrast, are usually more sentence-level concerns that—while important—are less likely to affect the overall effectiveness of a text. Examples:

- sentence-level grammatical or mechanical errors like fragments and run-ons
- misspellings
- typos
- formatting errors
- repetitive sentence structure
- weak or repetitive word choice
- minor errors in citation formatting

Again, it is not that these issues are unimportant; they are just usually less important than the HOC's. There are also times where a LOC might be enough of an issue that it becomes an HOC. For example, if a paper has so many sentence-level errors that its overall clarity begins to suffer, then a typical lower-order concern has become a higher-order concern. As the peer reviewer, you will have to determine what sort of feedback would be most helpful to this writer at this point in time.

What are some other strategies for peer review?

-Read the draft out loud. You might have noticed that our tutors usually either read your paper out loud or ask you to read it out loud. This is because reading writing out loud is an excellent way to (1) draw the writer's attention to errors and (2) clue the writer into how their writing sounds. Have you ever thought something you wrote just didn't "sound" right? Hearing it said out loud might help you figure out why!

-Remember to give praise, too. Writers need to know what they're doing well just as much as what they need to work on. But again, be more specific than just "Good job!" Point to specific things you wish to praise about their writing.

-If you are writing your feedback, make it clear and easy for the writer to understand. Even if your feedback comment is not going to be graded, consider that your comment needs to actually help the writer. It won't help if they can't understand it!

This resource was prepared by the Cottey College Writing Center.

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