Some "Do's" and "Don'ts" of Peer Evaluations

"Do's"

1. Do treat the writer with courtesy and respect.
2. Do comment on the performance, not the person.
3. Do focus on <u>how</u> the argument is supported (or not), rather than whether you agree or disagree with it.
4. Do aim for balance and completeness in pointing out strengths and problem areas.
5. Do comment on <u>specific</u> examples of strengths and problem areas.
6. Do aim to help the writer see how to improve future work as well as the current draft.

"Don'ts"

1. Don't use snippy marginal comments such as "So what?" or "What's your point?"
2. Don't get into debates over unresolvable questions of individual value and belief (for example, questions relating to religion, gun control, or abortion).
3. Don't argue with the writer. Raise objections or ask for explanations only to clarify and suggest ways of strengthening the argument.
4. Don't confine your comments to mechanical details.
5. Don't make vague, global comments.
6. Don't rewrite for the writer.

http://www.mhhe.com/mayfieldpub/maner/resources/peer5.htm

Helpful Hints for Effective Peer Reviewing
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One of the hardest things about getting started with peer reviewing is dealing with your reluctance to give negative feedback. After all, we're all socialized not to say mean things to people, and purely negative commentary usually doesn't end up helping the writer anyway. The purpose of this document is to help you find ways to get around this problem by:

1) remembering to give positive commentary where a writer has done well, and by,
2) turning negative feedback into productive feedback.

1. When reviewing, it is always important to note a paper's strengths, so that the author will not lose these in the process of revision. Never assume an author will automatically know which parts of a paper work well... remember, they have been immersed in it too long to be objective. While you should provide a general commentary at the end of the text, remember to also provide feedback on the text as you read: whether you write "good paragraph" or "unclear – what exactly are you trying to say (unclear pronoun reference)", make sure to provide feedback as you read.

2. But how to deal with the parts that really do have problems? The key is to make sure the comments you write are substantive comments. As we read, we all have reactions to problematic parts of a paper: "Huh? This is unclear"... "Gosh, this is disorganized!"... "What is this person trying to say here???". But these reactions are only the first step in the process of constructing helpful commentary, and writing down these initial reactions as comments is not usually useful to the writer. How can you turn these unhelpful comments into helpful ones? You need to go a step beyond your initial reaction, and ask yourself why you are reacting negatively to that sentence or paragraph.

Why, for instance, does a paragraph seem disorganized? Are several topics mixed together in one paragraph? Or is a single topic treated, but presented out of logical sequence, so that the reader is constantly grasping for information not yet given? Or does the writer seem to start with one idea or position, but then reverse him/herself later in the paragraph?

You can see that this process will take some work on your part, because you need to reflect on your reactions and read in a very involved way. Below are some examples of unhelpful "reaction-type" comments that have been turned into helpful comments by this process of reflection.

Example 1:
Unhelpful comment: *"This section needs work."*
Helpful Comment: *Combine the related actions into a single sentence in Methods, eg, "Flies were assigned randomly to 5 treatment groups of 25, and were weighed, sexed, and marked with nontoxic paint before behavioral trials began."*

Example 2:
Unhelpful comment*: "Disorganized!"*
Helpful Comment: *"This section discusses both animal-rearing conditions and experimental methods, but the two are mixed together. Could you separate each into its own paragraph?"*

Example 3:
Unhelpful comment: *"How are these references relevant?"*
Helpful Comment: *"The background and references given in paragraph 2 don't seem directly relevant to our hypothesis. I think we need references on how light has been shown to affect flowering (in sunflower or any species), and less on other factors that promote or inhibit flowering."*

Example 4:
Unhelpful comment: *"Unclear."*
Helpful Comment: *"I'm not sure what your interpretation is after these two paragraphs: does the experiment show that mung beans cure cancer, or not? Which are we concluding? If the sample size is too small, we need to discuss that when we suggest future research, but that does not change our results here."*