

TRADITIONAL PEER REVIEW

What Is It?

Traditional peer review is a widely used part of the writing process that college students often experience in their first year composition courses. Writers use peer review at various times in their writing process to improve the quality of their revisions. It is called “peer” review because reviewers are typically peers of the writer. This holds true regardless of what level of writing is being reviewed. Professionals in a wide variety of fields use peer review as part of their ordinary practice. In academic professions, journal articles are often peer reviewed prior to publication. This means that professional writers often expect that their writing will be reviewed by other professionals with similar areas of expertise.

Most writers hope that peer review will provide them with necessary information about how their writing comes across to its readers. Having some idea of how readers receive a text helps writers develop their writing so that it best communicates what they are trying to say. Learning how to make one piece of writing more effective benefits writers because they can use what they learn about one draft to make the next draft that much better. The more a writer revises the text, the more the writer learns about what she is trying to say. The goal of developing good peer review skills is not to learn how to write perfect first drafts but to acquire the skills necessary to revise texts into more effective second and third drafts.

For students, this means that they read and review each others’ writing. Through that process of reading and responding, students

have the opportunity to see how someone else is trying to get his or her ideas across. By thinking about how to advise a writer to make his or her draft more effective, the reviewer learns something about what kind of writing works better than another.

The traditional practice of peer review has five main steps:

1. Identify peer review partners/participants
2. Exchange drafts to be reviewed
3. List items to be targeted in the review
4. Read drafts/comment
5. Exchange reviewed drafts

Peer review can occur at any stage of the drafting process, but most peer review practices fall into one of two categories:

1. Reviews of early drafts
2. Reviews of developed drafts

Peer Review of Early Drafts

What Is It?

Early drafts, also called invention drafts and discovery drafts, typically represent a writer's first stab at writing about an idea. These drafts may or may not have been carefully proofread. They are often a talking-through of the writer's ideas and may not reflect attention to audience, organization, and/or adequate explanation. What they do reflect is the writer's attempt to convert his or her thoughts and ideas into a written text. This conversion is an important part of the writing process. Ideas do not usually exist in people's minds in carefully organized formats like college essays. Therefore, writers face the challenge of capturing their ideas and transcribing them into a written format that makes sense to others. Like any complicated process, this requires several attempts to achieve the best results possible. Learning how to make each attempt more effective helps students develop strong writing skills that they carry with them even after an assignment is finished. Writers must get their ideas on paper before they can then revise them to take the shape of a college essay or any other professional written text. Peer review can be a useful tool for writers to get their

ideas past that first stage to a more developed, more successful written text.

Common Practices

Once the writer has created a text that represents his or her first attempt at getting ideas on paper, that writer is ready to begin thinking about where she or he wants that text to go. The writer will need to determine the following to successfully revise this early draft:

1. Who is my audience?
2. What is the main idea I want to get across to my reader?
3. What information does my reader need to know about my idea for it to make sense?
4. Do I need examples?
5. Do I need evidence or support for any claims I am making?
6. Have I selected a topic that is appropriate to my writing task? Does it need to be more general? More focused?
7. Are my points organized in a logical way?

These questions are the kind of “big picture” questions a reviewer might try to answer to help the writer develop his/her early draft. Some of these questions might be revisited in a later stage of peer review as ideas get shuffled around and reorganized. Writers should expect responses to these questions to drive a significant reworking of their text. First drafts are called rough drafts for a reason. Writers need to be prepared to completely revise their first drafts after a successful peer review session, because one of the goals of the review is to help writers develop their ideas. Here is a more detailed explanation of each question.

1. Who is the audience?

Audience refers to both the intended and unintended readers of your text. In other words, an essay for a course has an intended audience of the teacher, but it might also have an expected, but unintended, audience of other members of the class. Successful writers target specific audiences to make their writing fit with what the reader can understand while making

their point as effectively as possible. Some assignments ask students to imagine audiences other than the instructor. In these cases, students need to match language usage, tone, amount of explanation, and type of writing to that which will be most effective for their assigned audience.

For example, an assignment might ask a student to write a letter to an elected official, such as a member of Congress or a city mayor, that makes a specific argument for something that the writer wants the official to do. The student needs to construct her text so that it makes the reader want to listen to what she has to say. If the writer uses informal language or doesn't get to the point quickly enough, someone as important as an elected official might stop reading or worse, take offense.

Writing that targets a specific audience is always more successful in communicating ideas to that audience. Reviewers should try to think about what audience is targeted by the text and offer suggestions for ways that the writer might alter the organization of ideas, language, or overall tone to best fit that audience.

2. What is the main idea?

Successful student papers usually have a clearly stated, central organizing idea. One way to think of this is to compare a student essay to a house. The foundation of a house determines its shape as well as its height. A weak foundation will cause the house to fall down or sag in places, making it distorted and strange. The main idea of a text works the same way. If it is not clear to the reader, then the shape of the paper will seem vague and hard to figure out. If the idea is too small to support the length of the paper, then it will seem to flounder like an unsteady wall. Likewise, if the main idea is too large, it may seem unfinished and underdeveloped like a one-story house on a two-story foundation.

The first thing a reviewer should do in answering a question like this is to identify what he thinks is the main idea in the draft. If that does not match what the writer intended, this information alone is valuable to the writer. In a face-to-face peer review, the reviewer can communicate this to the writer to determine what other information the reviewer can provide about the main idea. Once the main idea is identified, the reviewer should consider the topic sentences of the subsequent

paragraphs to determine if they seem to support the main idea identified or if they do not seem to fit.

3. What information does the reader need to know about an idea for it to make sense?

In many ways this question is about understanding the audience of a text. Deciding how much information is enough requires the writer to have some idea of what the reader knows about the topic. To answer this question usefully for the writer, both reviewer and writer need to be in agreement as to who constitutes the audience for the draft. An educated audience can handle more complex ideas and more specific vocabulary, but no amount of general education can prepare a reader for jargon that is outside of his experience. For example, let's say that for his psychology class, a student wanted to write a paper about the history of anti-depressant prescription medication. The instructor may or may not have specific training in biochemistry or pharmaceutical drugs. To be safe, writers should err on the side of caution and explain any drug or medical terminology that they decide to use in their writing. Without this explanation, the reader might not be able to adequately access the ideas that the writer is trying to get across. A good reviewer helps the writer by pointing out language and concepts that they do not understand.

4. Are examples needed?

Answering this question depends on how well the reader understands what the writer is trying to say. If the reader is unclear as to what point or points a writer is trying to make, then more examples that provide detailed explanation are probably needed. Once the reviewer communicates problem spots to the writer, the writer can decide if the lack of understanding can best be solved through the use of examples or if there is another solution. The best course of action on the part of the reviewer is to point out every place where the main idea or supporting ideas are unclear. That way, the writer has enough information to decide how best to address the problem.

5. Is evidence or support needed?

A general rule of thumb says that any fact that is not common knowledge needs to be supported by some kind of external evidence that can be cited. Some claims cannot be proved no matter how much evidence is collected. For example, it is impossible to

prove that all young people like alternative music. It is highly unlikely that any researcher could have access to every young person in order to prove this point. The job of the reviewer is to help the writer determine which claims need to be supported with evidence and which claims simply need to be revised. A writer could probably find evidence to support a claim that states that “Many young people prefer alternative music to other musical styles.”

Having adequate support lends credibility to the writer. If a writer is not credible, then he will have a difficult time communicating his ideas convincingly to the reader. By helping the writer locate areas of the text that need support or revision to function effectively, the reader will develop a similar sensitivity in her own writing. Good reviewers look for:

- Sweeping generalizations (All women are . . . People everywhere agree . . . Everyone knows . . .)
- Unsupported claims that look like facts (Dogs are more violent than cats; Children who read a lot of books do better in school; Crop circles are caused by silent thunderstorms)
- Facts that may not be common knowledge (Children can overdose on vitamins; Solar energy can be expensive to harness; Red wine has positive health benefits)

Getting feedback early in the writing process on what items need more support can help the writer plan what additional research is needed.

6. Is the topic appropriate to the writing task? Does it need to be more general? More focused?

To answer this question, the reviewer needs to be familiar with the assignment. First, the reviewer should look over the assignment and make sure that the writer’s draft matches what the teacher has assigned. Lack of development is usually indicated by an overly short text that does not adequately explain all of its points. By looking over the answers to the previous five questions, the reviewer should be able to communicate what areas of the paper need more development. But, length alone should not be used to answer this question. An early draft is by definition in process, and as such is unfinished. If the paper lacks specific information, then that is a reason to suggest to the writer that she needs more explanation, examples, or a narrower topic that can be explored with greater detail.

7. Are the main points of the draft organized in a logical way?

There are many good ways of going about answering this question for a writer. One way asks reviewers to circle the writer’s main point and the topic sentence of each paragraph. After these points are circled, then the reviewer should look at them to see if they seem to occur in a logical order and if the topic sentences fit with the main point of the draft. If the writer is using complex terminology, for example, then the use of those terms should be defined early in the draft rather than later. A good reviewer has two goals in answering this question. First, she needs to identify how the draft is organized from a reader’s perspective. Second, the reviewer needs to let the writer know if his method of organization works or if there might be a better way to organize the main points. Some examples of ways to organize a draft include:

1. Moving from least important to most important
2. Chronological order
3. Order of a process (if it is a process draft, meaning a how-to paper, then the ideas need to follow the order of the process—step one, then step two, etc.)

Answering these questions requires more space than the margins of a student paper provide. Although it is always helpful to connect a comment to the specific paragraph or sentence to which it refers, there just isn’t enough room to adequately explain some responses in small spaces. Reviewers should get in the habit of developing some kind of means of referencing the pieces of a text that they are commenting about. An easy way to do this is to simply number the sentences in each paragraph and then number each paragraph. That way, a reviewer can clearly indicate, for example, that “sentence four in paragraph three” needs more support or explanation. Thoughtful, narrative comments that are specific in nature make the most useful feedback for writers. Reviewers should avoid general language that does not communicate much that the writer can use. For example, telling a writer that a paper is “nice,” or that “the topic seems interesting,” sounds friendly, but doesn’t provide guidance as to how the writer can improve her text. Questions like those discussed previously are intended to help reviewers develop their responses so that they don’t feel “stuck” when trying to figure out what to say.

Reviewers are often instructed to write comments on the drafts they are reviewing. While longer, more thoughtful comments are usually better for an early draft stage, over-commenting on details of language and writing style can be confusing and counterproductive. See Sample #1 in the Additional Resources section. Notice how items are boxed and underlined with comments connected to them. Is it clear what piece of feedback is most important? Notice that several comments relate to the phrasing of sentences and language use. For an early draft peer review, these comments are not as helpful because the language will most likely significantly change when the writer makes his next revision. Figuring out how to organize the ideas needs to happen before the writer makes sure that the words chosen best communicate those ideas.

Purposes

The primary purpose of peer review is usually to help writers improve the effectiveness of their writing by having it “test driven” by a peer. In professional contexts, peer reviews are often conducted to try to help the writer identify areas of her argument or research that have gaps so that the writer can go back and revise her paper with the new knowledge provided by the reviewer. Peer review in college-level courses works much the same way, except it offers an added benefit for the reviewer because both writer and reviewer are usually working toward the same writing goal.

Student writers are usually still developing their writing for academic audiences. As students approach completion of their academic studies, those audiences become more discipline specific. One of the best ways to learn how to write well for an academic audience is to read others’ academic writing. When students engage in peer review, it is not just to help the writer; it helps both writer and reviewer at the same time because both are learning how to make writing for a specific writing task more effective. In discovering suggestions for how a peer review partner might improve her method of organization in a text, the reviewer discovers other ways that he might organize his text.

The other aspect of writing that students do not always recognize is that it is a method of learning just like reading. Most stu-

dents are familiar with the idea that reading chapters in a textbook helps them learn new material. But, many are not aware that writing about a new subject, thinking through ideas and synthesizing information from outside sources into a writing assignment, also helps them learn new things. In providing another perspective through peer review, reviewers’ comments can help writers think about their drafts in new ways. As writers write to take those comments into account, they discover new ways of thinking about and writing about their topics. This experience has the potential to teach both writers and reviewers new things about their topics and about writing.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Conducting peer reviews of early drafts provides both readers and writers with opportunities to get feedback on their writing when it is still early enough in the writing process to fully integrate that feedback into their revisions. By conducting these reviews in person, reviewers can ask questions and provide explanation of their comments at the time of the review.

If the reviewers have been instructed to provide comments in the margins of the writer’s text, these comments can be difficult to read and absorb. It is always challenging to read another person’s handwriting. In person, pen-and-paper peer review sessions can put the reviewer at a disadvantage for the following reasons:

1. Time is usually limited to one class period or there is more than one draft to read in a short span of time.
2. Comments and responses have to be written by hand. This takes time to do and makes changing/revising comments difficult to do neatly.
3. Handwriting can be difficult to interpret and takes up a large amount of space on the page.

These disadvantages usually do not outweigh the advantages some people find in being able to discuss a review with the reviewer after it has taken place. Many writers appreciate having the opportunity to ask a reviewer specific questions about the comments and suggestions. Those conversations often spark new ideas and aid the writer in taking her ideas in new directions.

Peer Review of Developed Drafts

What Is It?

A developed draft is one that has been through at least one stage of revision and/or peer review. Typically, students might think that they revise as they compose their drafts on the computer. This kind of “fixing” is really more like editing than true revision. *Revision*, as English teachers typically define it, is a process by which the writer takes another look at his or her writing in order to rethink what he or she is trying to communicate. The best revisions occur when a writer has been exposed to new information. This can happen when a writer participates in peer review and gains another perspective on a topic and/or when a writer encounters additional research or outside information related to the main ideas in his or her draft.

Once a draft is developed to a more complete state, it is ready to be reviewed in a closer, more detailed way. This kind of peer review happens later in the writing process and does not typically result in a significant reworking of the writer’s draft. This kind of fine-grained analysis should not be confused with proofreading. Reviewers of developed drafts are typically instructed to not offer corrections for grammar or spelling errors.

Common Practices

As with peer review of early drafts, reviewers should have a set of questions that they seek to address through their reviews. Some of these questions may seem similar to those from earlier peer review experiences. This is because the reviewer has a slightly different goal in reviewing a developed draft and can answer an earlier question in a different way. For this kind of peer review, students should not expect help generating new ideas so much as refining the main points they wish to emphasize in their drafts. Here are some good questions for reviewers of developed drafts to consider:

1. What is the author’s thesis or central organizing idea?
2. If it is a persuasive paper, what claims is the author making?
3. Is there adequate support?
4. Is source material correctly cited and integrated into the draft?

5. Do some areas of the draft need more explanation and/or definition?
6. Does the writer’s language flow or do some areas seem difficult to understand?
7. Does the tone of the draft match the assignment and/or audience?

In answering these questions, reviewers need to be very specific. It is not enough to tell a writer that there are areas of a paper that are confusing. The reader must point out exactly which parts of the text do not make sense. This can be done in a number of ways (e.g., by circling every word or phrase that seems unclear). The key is to use one consistent method of notation. Sometimes teachers will provide students with instructions as to how all class members are to note problem areas of their review partner’s drafts. If no instructions are given about ways to make notations, then the reviewer and writer should come to an agreement as to how each will make notations on the other’s draft. Circling every unclear word or phrase is only helpful if the writer knows what the circles mean. A more detailed explanation of each question follows.

1. What is the author’s thesis or central organizing idea?

The thesis or central organizing idea is the main point that the author is making in his draft. The thesis is usually comprised of one or two sentences that occur fairly early in the draft, often in the first paragraph. The best way to answer this question is by rephrasing the author’s thesis into the reviewer’s own words. This accomplishes two things for the writer. First, it lets the writer know if the main idea of the draft from the reader’s point of view matches what the author intended. Second, it lets the writer know if the main idea makes sense to the reader.

If a writer discovers that her thesis is weak or unclear, then the overall effectiveness of the draft is likely in jeopardy. As mentioned in the previous section, the main idea of a draft is like the foundation of a house. If that foundation is not adequate to the task of supporting the building, then the building will fall down. If a thesis is not clear to the reader or if the reader’s understanding of the thesis does not match what the writer intends, then the writer’s overall message for the paper could be lost. At worst, the draft could fail completely if a weak thesis causes it to seem unfocused and disorganized. Readers

like to know where writers are taking them and may give up on a text that does not adequately explain the writer's main point.

2. If it is a persuasive paper, what claims is the author making?

Before a reviewer can evaluate a text to see if it needs more support for its ideas, he must identify the claims being made in the draft. A claim is a statement that argues something. Examples of claims are "Cats are harder to train than dogs" and "Baseball is more difficult to master than golf." An argument or persuasive paper will have at least one central claim that it is trying to prove, but all texts typically have smaller claims in them. Every time there is a claim, the author has to decide if she needs specific support for that claim in order for her text to be credible. Statements of fact only require specific support if they are not common knowledge.

In answering this question, reviewers should simply identify any claims that they see in the writer's draft. The next question asks reviewers to evaluate the claims to see if they need additional support.

3. Is there adequate support?

Because the claims in the draft have already been identified, evaluating them for adequate support should not be too difficult. Reviewers need to ask themselves if the claim being made by the writer has enough support for it to be credible. Credibility does not require that the reader agree with the points being made by the writer, it just means that the writer has provided sufficient support for his claims to be plausible.

This support can take shape in a couple of different ways, the most obvious being outside evidence such as quotations or facts from documented outside sources. The other way the writer can provide support is through logical deduction and explanation. If a writer is writing from personal experience, for example, support takes shape in examples that further explain the author's claims.

Let's say an author was writing an essay about the importance of family vacations. If the author's main idea is that "Family vacations are important for healthy family relationships," then the author is also likely making several smaller claims that support this main idea. One of these might be that "Family members who spend time together away from home often develop closer relationships that result in fewer arguments

once the vacation is over." The author can support this claim with examples of family members spending time together away from home and then presenting his perception of harmony or discord among family members both before and after the vacation takes place. This kind of support is adequate for this example and does not need to take the shape of quotations from expert texts on families. Without these additional examples, the writer's claim would not be supported and readers might not be convinced of the writer's credibility. Good reviewers let writers know if more research or examples are needed for the author to adequately support his claims.

4. Is source material correctly cited and integrated into the draft?

One of the more difficult writing skills to master has to do with appropriately integrating facts and examples from outside source material into a written text. Reviewers can help writers by first locating any "orphan" quotations that are not connected to sentences. Quotations cannot stand alone as self-explanatory points. They need to be introduced and explained if the reader is going to understand how the writer thinks the information contained in the quotations supports the ideas in the draft. Writers cannot assume that readers will see the same relationships between quoted material and the associated text.

After locating any quotations that need to be better connected to the text, reviewers can then evaluate how source information has been referenced to see if it matches the points it is there to support. A quotation indicating that there was an increase in car sales for the month of April does not automatically support a claim that Americans are borrowing more money than ever before. Good reviewers will inform writers of source material that needs to be explained, better integrated, and/or re-thought altogether.

5. Do some areas of the draft need more explanation and/or definition?

The best way to answer this question is for the reviewer to read the draft normally and mark any places that cause him or her to feel unsure or confused about what the author is trying to say. Next, the reviewer should go back to the places marked and try to determine if the writer can eliminate confusion through more examples or explanation. Good reviewers will point out terminology they do not understand so that the writer

will know she needs to work on adding more definitions of terms.

It is key that the reviewer feel confident that his difficulty with the writer's text is a valid response. The reviewer should never worry that it is their lack of specific knowledge of a topic that causes confusion. It is the writer's job to evaluate the feedback offered by the reader to determine if their text assumes too much about the reader's knowledge. It is the reviewer's job to communicate those places of incomprehension so that the writer can make the determination of what to do. Oftentimes, a lack of adequate explanation or definition is accidental. When writers feel knowledgeable about a specific topic, they sometimes forget that their readers may not share their level of familiarity with the subject of the text.

6. Does the writer's language flow or do some areas seem difficult to understand?

Sometimes the best way to answer this question is for the reviewer to read the writer's draft aloud. If peer review situations do not permit this, then the next best thing is for the reviewer to read the draft with a pencil in hand, marking any places that seem awkward. When finished reading, the reviewer can then go back to those marks and decide if the problem has to do with clunky word combinations or grammatical errors. It is important to remember that peer reviewers are usually not grammar experts and therefore should not attempt to correct another student's grammatical mistakes. A better approach is for reviewers to simply point out the awkward passages to writers and communicate if the problem is with usage or if the reviewer thinks there might be a grammar problem that needs to be addressed. It is the writer's job to determine how he can best correct these problems.

7. Does the tone of the draft match the assignment and/or audience?

As with the previous question, the goal here is for the reviewer to point out passages or words in the text that do not seem to fit the writing task. For example, a formal essay should probably not contain slang or other kinds of casual language. Expressions that might be acceptable in everyday speech are often too informal for college writing assignments. Students should always be sure to refer to their assignments and ask their instructors about the intended audience for their texts.

Audience determines the level of written language that should be employed. An argument paper, for example, should not seek to antagonize its reader. A text that seeks to persuade cannot succeed if it alienates its intended audience. It is easy for some writers to become passionate about their subjects and to get carried away with the expression of that passion in their writing. It is always a good idea to try to help a writer see how he or she might not be achieving the balanced, academic tone expected of some college-level writing assignments.

Going along with tone is the voice implied through the use of pronouns in a text. Students often overuse *you*, *our*, *we*, and *I* in essays they write for classes. Some instructors will prohibit the use of some pronouns for this reason. Regardless of whether a teacher has stated a rule about this, the voice of the text needs to match its rhetorical purpose. For example, if a student were writing an essay on her summer vacation, it would make sense for her to use *I*, because she is writing about her personal experiences. On the other hand, a research paper about global warming should probably not contain *I* or *you*. Good reviewers will point out excessive or inappropriate pronoun use.

Once a reviewer has responded to questions like these, the writer will be able to revise his text into a more complete document. Because writing is always in process, texts can always be revised into new and often better pieces of writing.

Every writing situation is different. If peer feedback indicates that an idea is unworkable, then it is the writer's job to rework that idea to fit the assignment. Likewise, if a student knows that she struggles with certain grammatical and stylistic issues in writing, it is her responsibility, and not that of the peer reviewer, to solve this kind of writing challenge. Students should talk to their instructors about what resources are available to them on campus.

Purposes

Peer review of developed drafts helps writers achieve a more thoughtful version of their texts. The more developed the draft before peer review, the more helpful the responses will be. After writers use their peer reviewers' responses to revise, writers often get help proofreading their revised texts before they have to be

turned in. This process results in more polished pieces of writing that have a much better chance of effectively communicating the intended message.

The process of reviewing developed drafts does not just benefit the writer. Reviewers see ways that their peers are organizing their ideas, citing sources, making arguments, and expressing opinions. As readers, reviewers see firsthand why using *you* over and over again gets confusing. After all, who is the *you* referring to? Reviewers also see why quotations that are left unattached to surrounding sentences seem not to be incorporated into the author's points. In working to offer possible solutions to these writing problems, reviewers develop strategies that they can take back to their own writing tasks. Over time, both as writers and reviewers, students develop a palette of writing tools that they can utilize to create successful pieces of writing, in school and in the workplace.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The kind of fine-grained analysis sought in the review of a developed draft is time consuming. Students engaging in this kind of peer review may find that they require significant time outside of class to complete their reviews. If students feel rushed, they may not provide the same quality of response as they would if they had adequate time to complete the task.

In addition, if student writers do not provide fully developed drafts for the peer review session, the reviewers may be severely limited in their ability to provide useful feedback. It is impossible to comment on the need for support in a paper if it is only half finished, for example. Likewise, a reviewer cannot evaluate the writer's use of source material if the writer has not done any research yet. Successful peer review of developed drafts requires time and commitment.

If done well, this kind of peer review offers wonderful benefits to both writers and reviewers that cannot be duplicated through any other kind of writing exercise. Being able to see how other student writers cope with similar writing tasks helps students develop different ways of approaching writing assignments. Having a fellow student see a draft in process can be less intimidating than giving it to an instructor.

Group Dynamics in Traditional Peer Review Situations

What Is It?

Peer review can occur between just two students or it can occur in groups of any size. The most common configuration is two or three students in a group in which each group member responds to each member's writing. But, peer review can also occur in a round-robin style with the entire class as one large peer group. Peer review groups may be chosen at random by the instructor, may be specifically chosen by the instructor, or may be chosen by students. Groups are often given instructions as to how to review each others' writing assignments, but may not always be provided with guidelines for how to conduct the peer review process. This section aims to provide some guidelines for students who want to know more about selecting peer review partners or group members, strategies for talking to other students about their writing, and how to cope with content that is difficult to encounter.

How to Select Peer Reviewers

A general rule of thumb for selecting peer reviewers says that friends do not always make the best peer review partners. It makes sense that a good peer reviewer is someone who can be honest in giving feedback to fellow student writers. A review that is not honest just isn't helpful. But, what does it mean to give an honest review?

The three Cs of good reviews are:

1. Critical
2. Constructive
3. Considerate

Although friends and dating partners are probably pretty good at being considerate, they might find it difficult to be critical in their reviews. It is hard to tell someone whose opinion matters a great deal that their facts are unsupported or that their thesis is weak or that they need to reorganize their ideas in order for them to make sense. On the other hand, friends may see being considerate as their

primary task. They are responding to the writing of a friend, after all, and do not want to hurt their friend's feelings. That desire to be considerate can actually blind a reviewer to some of the problems in the writer's text that need help. Instead of offering constructive advice, the friend says nothing or that everything seems "fine."

So, the bottom line in selecting peer review partners is to look for students who can perform the three Cs, are dependable, and are thoughtful. In this case, trying to get the "smart" student in your group is less advisable than trying to find a sincere and reliable student. If reviews extend outside of class, the best peer groups will be those whose members feel responsible for completing the peer review, even if it infringes on their TV time.

Things to Remember About Responding to Others' Writing

Writing can sometimes be quite personal to the writer. Many writers feel attached to the content of their texts and may feel hurt if their text is not well received. In addition, writing often reflects a writer's thoughts and opinions about issues that she might not be ready to question. The reviewer's role is to help the writer get her point across in the most effective way possible. The reviewer's role is not to agree or disagree with the writer, convert the writer to any particular viewpoint, or argue with the writer about points in the text. Good reviewers learn to separate their opinions and feelings about the writer's topic from the points that the writer is attempting to make. The old adage that the world would be a boring place if everyone thought alike is true. When responding to a writer's text, the reviewer needs to always show respect for that writer's ideas. Remember, reviewers are to comment on the writing, not the writer.

In constructing comments, reviewers need to think about how easily what they are saying will be understood. Comments need to be specific and they need to target one thing at a time. Imagining oneself in the place of the writer might be helpful in deciding how much to say and when to say it. Typos and other obvious surface errors should not be the focus of any peer review. A reviewer might offer to help a writer proofread his or her next revision, but should not take time away from his response to edit a student's paper.

It is also a good idea to not cover the paper with so many lines, circles, and comments that it becomes a map of responses that is impossible to navigate. See the first sample draft at the end of this book for an example of such a review. First, notice the number of different marks on the page. There are underlines, squares, and written comments. Getting a paper like this back must feel a bit overwhelming at first. For writers to successfully absorb all the comments a reviewer must make, these comments need to be clear and easy to follow. Rather than filling up the margins, reviewers can write their responses on another sheet. Or, reviewers might decide that one kind of comment, such as that on the author's system of organization, needs to occur in the margins to be most effective; the rest of the response can be written on a separate sheet of paper.

Negotiating Difficult Content

Some students are surprised by some of the ideas they encounter in their classmates' writing. Certain topics, especially those that tend to be rather provocative in political arenas, can inspire passionate debate. When reviewers are asked to comment on text that contains attitudes and opinions that are very different from their own, they can sometimes feel uncomfortable responding. Students must remember to focus on the writing and the way the author expresses his ideas, not on the author or on ways the author's beliefs differ. Part of the benefit of peer review is that students will be exposed to new ideas. It is not necessary for students to agree on a particular point to be able to provide each other with useful feedback.

Encountering material that puts individuals outside of their comfort zones is part of living in the world today. Every issue has many sides, and it is essential that reviewers do not react to ideas that they find objectionable. If a reviewer encounters something that he believes crosses the line from different to hateful, then he should speak to his instructor. The challenge of encountering alternate views can be exacerbated by students who write in ways that display insensitivity to the beliefs of others. As mentioned in the section on traditional peer review, the audience must be the determining factor in choosing the tone and language used in a piece of

writing. If writing is to be visible to others in a class, then it is essentially public writing.

Writing for a public audience requires authors to be sensitive in their treatment of subjects that some students might find offensive. The rights of writers and readers to express themselves must be equally balanced. A writer is entitled to her opinion on a given issue, but she must consider the feelings of classmates and teachers when composing texts that address sensitive or controversial subjects. This does not mean that all ideas are ok to write about for a college course or that a writer must sacrifice her opinions. Students who consciously seek to not cause hurt feelings and who genuinely respect others will usually not create a text that is a problem. In contrast, negative and harmful attitudes about race, gender, ethnicity, religion, and other similar subjects have no place in a student paper that will be read by another student or by a teacher.