

## Classroom Peer Review: Cultivating Better Writing

Effective writing requires “reflective thinking” which is, as Kenneth A. Bruffee explains, “something we learn to do, and we learn to do it from and with other people.”<sup>1</sup> Given that learning is a social act, then collaboration is essential to increasing independent understanding of any subject. Further, “writing is at once both two steps away from conversation and a return to conversation,” meaning that writing simultaneously influences and is influenced by conversation.<sup>2</sup> Thus, writing is a type of collaboration, with collaboration being, in fact, a form of communication. But as compelling as this theoretical groundwork may be, the question of application remains.

In response, one exemplar connective strategy emerges: *Classroom Peer Review*. Though there are numerous peer review approaches—which are discussed at length below—peer review is, at its core, *a collaborative process of students* giving feedback to and receiving feedback from their peers in class. Then, based on the feedback received on their work, students make their desired revisions to their piece, leading to more polished, confident submissions. Essentially, peer reviews are collaboration about communication; so, in participating in peer review conversations, students practice engaging with ideas through a critical lens which transfers to their culminating ability to *confidently analyze, critique, and consequently revise* their own writing pieces and overarching concepts as well.

Additionally, despite its necessity within the writing process, students frequently forego revising their paper drafts before completing their final submission. While there are a myriad of possible reasons for this trend, one likely cause is student uncertainty of what revisions they should make in their paper. Although many professors and instructors provide their students with *summative feedback* on their writing, this feedback is typically centered on justifying the given-grade for a paper submission and is sometimes difficult to apply to future papers.

Conversely, a successful peer review process benefits both the reviewer and the writer and leads to genuine, substantial revision. Because the peer review process expectedly occurs before the final draft of a paper, *feedback is more formative*, meaning that the feedback assesses current levels of mastery and provides concrete suggestions for improvement that are both specific to the piece as well as transferable to general writing practice. In essence, integrating formative feedback into the writing process through peer review transforms revision into an exercise in applying new learning.

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## **Peer Review Methodology**

*There are various ways to make peer reviews work effectively, and this document will serve to help you decide which method is most appropriate for your students. These peer review techniques are categorized into two types: in-class and electronic. In considering the objectives, outcomes, advantages, and setbacks of each mode of peer review included in this survey, you can determine which approach is most appropriate for your circumstance. Also, refer to this [Peer Review Strategies](#) guide for more information.*

### **In-Class Peer Reviews**

*There are a number of advantages to conducting Peer Reviews within the classroom setting, most of which focus on interpersonal development of ideas and communication. The professor generally rescinds their authority to the students themselves to offer valuable comments and feedback in order to improve the overall quality of their writing. The first three types of peer reviews follow this format.*

### **Electronic Peer Reviews**

*Out-of-Class Peer Reviews would be necessary for a zoom-conducted class, but can also be a very favorable option to optimize instruction time during class. Though some of these strategies require the use of a third-party application, you would have a greater idea of your students' performance and attention to the revision process. The last two types of peer review follow this format.*

## Workshop Advice-Centered Reviews

### Theory

This product-oriented approach is the most directive of the in-person approaches and focuses on applying collaborative suggestions. Through conversation, the author can receive helpful ideas in order to further develop their paper. This approach is especially helpful if writers are stuck, or are struggling with a certain principle of writing.

Advantages: Student comments may stimulate both idea and logic development, and can be particularly helpful for newer or weaker writers.

Disadvantages: Requires internalized criteria for an assignment through norming sessions or teacher-provided rubrics, and takes the longest to execute of all types of peer review.

### Procedure

1. Instructors choose paragraphs from their students' drafts, or ask the writers to supply a representative paragraph from their draft.
2. The instructor displays the paragraph for the entire class to see, and the writer reads their paragraph out loud. The instructor may then focus their students' advice in two ways:
  - Paragraph-Centered (how well the student's Introduction, Body Paragraph, or Conclusion matches the rubric/expectations).
  - Conceptual-Centered (Whether the paragraph has mechanical errors, lack of idea development, topic sentences issues, poor transitions, etc.)
3. While receiving feedback, the writer notes down the specific advice from their peers on how to remedy certain parts of their paragraph to then implement throughout their paper.

## Focused Response-Centered Reviews

### Theory

The instructor prepares a list of focus points to direct the students after exchanging drafts in this approach. The assumption in this model is that descriptions and reactions are more effective than evaluations, opinions, or judgements. This approach is the most collaborative in that the students determine what feedback they want and their degree of engagement with their group members. For more information, see [General Peer Review Strategies and an Example Checklist](#). In addition, if your students need more clarification on what to focus on, refer to this [Procedural Guide](#).

Advantages: Students engage in helpful conversation which helps them reinforce ideas and strengthen arguments. Having an alternate point of view allows the students to look beyond their perspective and internalize valuable feedback from a reader.

Disadvantages: This approach can be more time-consuming, and might be difficult to execute if the students are not familiar with the approach or do not have a certain “guide” to coach them through the most important elements of revision.

### Procedure

1. Divide the class into groups of two or three.
2. The group members will print out and exchange drafts with their group members.
3. Group members will take several minutes to read and give marginal feedback while following an instructor-guided list of questions.
4. If time permits, each reader can discuss or explain their answers to the instructor-guided list of questions with the writer to clarify and give depth to their responses.
5. Each writer brings home two peer-reviewed drafts with marginal comments to focus their revisions.

## Authorless Response-Centered Reviews

### Theory

In this approach, the author is unable to refute reader-response criticism (where the reader offers their interpretations and understanding of the text they are reading) given to them from their group members. Because the class members do not give advice or suggestions, the author is removed from the scenario, leaving the author out of the process. Simple responses and observations in turn give maximum responsibility to the writer for revision-making decisions based on the responses of their peers.

Advantages: The author has total control over the revision process, as a process-oriented approach is completely nonintrusive, meaning that they themselves will be ultimately responsible for how they decide to implement the feedback they receive. This can be helpful for strong writers who simply need to hear how their work is received.

Disadvantages: No advice is given to the writer, just descriptions of reaction. This may not be favorable for students who need more direction with their writing, or are not as experienced.

### Procedure

1. Divide the class into groups of four or five.
2. The reader reads the draft out loud (or could provide photocopies for group members to read silently)
3. Group members will take several minutes to take notes on their responses while the student is reading their paper out loud (including positive and negative reactions, as well as any questions they had while listening to/reading the paper)
4. Each group member then explains to the writer what they found effective (or ineffective), what parts were clear or confusing, etc. Group members **do not give advice**; they simply describe their reader-response to the draft as it was written.
5. The writer takes notes during each response but does not enter into a discussion (the writer listens and does not try to defend their writing or explain “what I meant.”)
6. After each member of the group responds to the first writer’s essay, move on to the next writer in the group and cycle until completion.

## Exchanges on Course Discussion Boards

### Theory

In this approach, students share their papers online (through LearningSuite, Digital Dialog, or Google Docs), and they provide marginal feedback to their classmates. (See [General Peer Review Strategies and an Example Checklist](#)).

Advantages: Allows for remote participation, unlimited student interaction, and measurable comments (where the instructor can view all of the feedback given, and determine how valuable the comments are for the author)

Disadvantages: Students lose the interpersonal connection that is found in the classroom, and being distant can oftentimes lead to less valuable comments.

### Procedure

1. Much like the [Focused Response-Centered Reviews](#), divide the class into groups of two or three.
2. The group members will exchange their drafts (ideally a separate draft for every reader) through Learning Suite, preferably using Google Docs.
3. Group members will take several minutes to read and give marginal feedback while following an instructor guided list of questions.
4. The author then utilizes the comments based on their classmates feedback in order to make appropriate revisions.

# Calibrated Peer Review

## Theory

This science-based peer review permits students to review their classmate's drafts in a guided learning environment. The professor first uploads three calibration essays (exemplary, middling, weak), with professor grading attached as well as a set of yes/no questions for the students to answer. This method "provides an opportunity to teach students using the higher-order thinking skills required in writing and reviewing processes. In a Calibrated Peer Review assignment, students not only learn their discipline by writing, they also learn and practice critical thinking by evaluating calibration submissions and authentic submissions from their peers. Throughout each part of an assignment they gain a deeper understanding of the topic." For more detailed information and to begin this type of peer review, see: [Calibrated Peer Review: Home](#).

Advantages: Promotes criteria-focused peer review and objective revisions, and there are very useful resources that come with the program. Emphasizes writing to learn rather than global revision and the payoff is increased understanding of subject matter content as measured in exams, and a more authentic audience.

Disadvantages: Increases the distance between students and instructors which promotes alienation from writing, teacherless approach. Requires substantial professor preparation.

## Procedure

1. The instructor will design the assignment and create the calibration submissions and the grading rubric. The calibration submissions must be carefully chosen to allow students to learn to identify potential errors.
2. The instructor will provide a grading criteria for the assignment, weighting the various components in a way that is consistent with the goals of the course.
3. After the module is set up, students first write and submit an essay on a topic and in a format specified by the instructor.
4. Students assess three 'calibration' submissions against a detailed set of questions that address the criteria on which the assignment is based. Students individually evaluate each of these calibration submissions according to the questions specified by the rubric and then assign them a rating out of 10.
5. After the deadline, each student is given anonymous submissions by three other students. They use the same rubric to evaluate their peers' work, this time providing comments to justify their evaluation and rating. Poor calibration performance decreases the impact of the grades they give to their peers' work.
6. After they've done all three they evaluate their own submission.
7. Once all the reviews are done, each student gets their grade, which includes the peer reviewers' evaluation and comments, their own performance on the calibration training, and the quality of the reviews of their peers' work and their own submission. Students also get to see the reviews submitted by the two other reviews of the submissions they reviewed, giving them a better sense of how good their evaluations were.