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# 🖻 Peer Feedback on Written Assignments (Peer-Review)

*Barbara Louis*

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**Overview**

Peer review is a form of peer feedback. Typically, it means that students provide written (or oral) comments on their colleagues' written assignments. Students take on the roles of both authors and reviewers, which is an experience that research has identified as highly valuable for the learning process. [1] However, it can be difficult, especially for inexperienced students, to engage critically with their colleagues' written work while they may have to learn the peer review procedure itself at the same time. Therefore, we recommend providing clearly structured objectives, procedures, and criteria to help students to learn and accomplish these goals simultaneously.

# 1. Benefits: Why use peer review?

## 1.1. For teachers

> - Peer review provides an opportunity to **engage** students during the course.
> - Teachers can use peer review comments to find out to what degree students have **understood disciplinary or professional standards and quality criteria**, **and whether they are able to apply them**.
> - Peer review does not entirely replace teacher feedback, but it can be integrated as a significant part of the feedback process during the semester. It broadens the **range of feedback students receive without creating too much of an additional workload** for the teacher.
> - Finally, using peer review signals to students that the teacher **values their points of view**.

## 1.2. For students

> - When it works well, peer review benefits both the recipients of comments and feedback providers. Evidence suggests that **feedback providers often learn even more** than recipients do. Peer review requires complex reflective and evaluative processes that have a positive effect on peer reviewers' writing skills as a consequence. Writing critical comments requires nuanced thought and writing abilities that students can use to reflect on their own work.[2,3,4]
> - Peer review helps to increase the **awareness of feedback as a form of dialogue and to encourage more active student participation** in the classroom. This can help to overcome the common, limited notion of teachers as active feedback providers, and students as passive feedback recipients.[5,6]
> - Peer review provides students **additional perspectives**, as not only teachers but also colleagues comment on their work over the course of a semester. Moreover, students often find the language used by their peers more familiar and comprehensible.[7]
> - Peer review has proven beneficial for the development of the following aspects: **social and communication skills** such as **articulating and accepting critical comments, having structured and objective conversations**, as well as developing **a sense of responsibility and self-esteem**.[8]

# 2. Tips for using peer review in class

Good preparation is crucial for designing effective peer feedback. The following list includes possible points to consider:

## 2.1. Establish an acceptance for peer review

Students are more likely to participate in an activity if they perceive it as **beneficial and useful** for achieving a good grade or for their future work. At the same time, inexperienced students in particular have to get used to receiving and integrating feedback from teachers, as well as fellow students into their

learning processes. One way of communicating the significance of peer feedback in a course is to make it **a class assignment** and to grade its quality. Over time, **positive experiences with peer review** and the **learning stimulated** by the process will help **increase student motivation**.

## 2.2. Choose the appropriate kind of peer review

Teachers' professional authority, as well as students' own insecurities, and their desire to be told what is right and wrong by this authority are common reasons why some students do not take peer reviews seriously. Inexperienced students who have yet to internalise disciplinary standards and expectations, are likely to have troubles in identifying problems in a text, articulating these problems and suggesting concrete ways for improvement, all of which is necessary for providing fellow students with effective feedback.[9]

Using variations of peer review, perhaps building on each other throughout the semester, can counter **initial difficulties students may experience**. Here are two kinds of peer review:

- **Response-centred feedback**: The reader provides the author feedback on how he/she understands the text **without judgment or formulating suggestions for improvement**. The feedback is **descriptive** (see: table of examples). It helps authors find out what impression the text makes on readers, and whether readers understand it as intended. Reviewers practise reading their peers' texts, identifying central topics, and putting their own subjective impressions into words. Response-centred feedback can be a stand-alone activity or a preliminary step to "advice-centred feedback."

- **Advice-centred feedback**: This is the most common type of peer review. It includes **evaluations** (see: table of examples) of the degree to which a text fulfils the predefined criteria and standards, as well as reviewers' suggestions for improving the text.[10,11]

Some students tend to provide spontaneous evaluations, but they are unable to explain their reasoning. As teacher, you can guide your students by providing feedback forms and questions for peer review. The table below offers some example prompts and questions for both types of peer review:[12]

| Descriptive | Evaluative |
|---|---|
| In one or two sentences, describe the author's position. Mark the passage that you consider to be the thesis. | Does the paper contain a hypothesis? Has it been clearly expressed? |
| On the back of this page, create a rough outline of the paper. | Is the paper clearly structured? |
| What evidence does the author cite to support his/her position? What evidence is the weakest? | Does the author provide evidence to support his or her position? Is it sufficient? |
| Underline any passages that you had to read repeatedly to understand its meaning. | Is the language of the paper clear and coherent? |
| Do you agree with the author overall? Why? Why not? | How convincingly is the paper argued? |

## 2.3. Clarify objectives, tasks, and process

We recommend you provide the objectives, tasks (i.e. what your students have to do), and the process of the peer review in written form, and also discuss these elements with your students. The following list includes questions you may want to address:

- **What** should peer review **accomplish**?

- What **role** does peer review play in your overall **course design**? How does it relate to other assignments?

- What are the **responsibilities** of authors and peer reviewers? What exactly should they **do**? (e.g. should authors request feedback on particular parts of a paper?)

- **Where** will the peer review take place? In class? Outside of class, on paper? On Moodle? During a tutorial? In writing groups?

**Tip**

For inexperienced students we recommend peer review in class, as the teacher is present to help if necessary.

- **How** will texts be **assigned** to reviewers? By the teacher? Will students organise independently? Will texts be exchanged, or will they be rotated among the group? Will each student read one or more texts?

- **How much time** will be available for peer reviews?

- What will happen **after reviewers have worked through the texts**? Will authors get back their texts with comments? Will there be a discussion between authors and reviewers, or perhaps a plenary discussion? Will authors be required to reference reviewers' comments in any way? For instance, in a reflection on an extra page? Will students be required to hand in the peer review form together with the final draft of the paper?

## 2.4. Establish rules of conduct

Expressing comments constructively and respectfully requires practice. We recommend establishing fundamental rules of conduct prior to conducting a peer review, providing them to students in written form and discussing them in class. Alternatively, you can establish these rules together with your students. Rules for peer review typically include instructions like the following (please adapt and expand them as needed):[13,14]

- ■ Use first person ("I have noticed that …").

- ■ Use description rather than judgment in your comments.

- ■ Be constructive, i.e. provide specific suggestions that support your colleague as he/she continues working on the text.

- ■ Highlight positives aspects (What turned out well? Why?).

- ■ Relate your comments to specific passages in the text and avoid generalised (and personal) statements.

- ■ Identify the element of the text you are addressing for each comment (argument, structure, evidence, choice of words, etc.).

If a peer review activity is succeeded by a **conversation** between authors and reviewers, you should also provide rules of conduct for feedback recipients.

## 3. Example: Guided advice-centred feedback on the first draft of a term paper[15]

This scenario works best with advanced students, i.e. those who have internalised disciplinary standards to some degree. Furthermore, they should be able to evaluate texts based on criteria, and offer constructive suggestions for revision and further work on the paper. In this example, students collaborate as reviewers in pairs, which typically increases the quality of feedback.

**Preparation:**

Provide a handout of the criteria and rules of conduct for peer reviews, and discuss them with your students. In addition, we recommend using a sample text to practise applying the criteria together in class to prepare for the review process.

**Implementation:**

1  Divide the group of student into pairs.

2  Distribute the peer review handouts with the evaluation criteria.

3  Each pair of students exchanges their texts with another pair.

   - **TIP:** To save time, this step can be done before class on Moodle, which allows students to read the texts before coming class.

4  Jointly, each pair of students conducts a peer review of the two texts according to the criteria at hand. In a next step, they write a short review summary, for example along the lines of the following prompts (again, please adapt and expand as needed):

   - Describe two or more aspects of the draft that you consider particularly strong.
   - Identify two or three aspects that require more work or are problematic (and state the reason why they are problematic).
   - Suggest two or three concrete revisions that you consider the most important for the author to make in the next draft.

5  The reviewers return the texts and reviews to the authors, perhaps followed by a discussion in groups of four.

## References

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[4] Nicol, Thomson and Breslin, "Rethinking Feedback Practices" [1].

[5] *Ibid*., 103.

[6] Nicol, David. "From Monologue to Dialogue: Improving Written Feedback Processes in Mass Higher Education". *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 35, Nr. 5 (August 2010), 501–517.

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[8] Crossman, Joanne M, and Stacey L Kite. "Facilitating improved writing among students through directed peer review". *Active Learning in Higher Education* 13, Nr. 3 (2012), 219–229.

[9] Ladyshewsky, Richard K. "The role of peers in feedback processes". In *Feedback in Higher and Professional Education. Understanding it and doing it well*, edited by David Boud and Elizabeth Molloy (London: Routledge, 2013), 174-189.

[10] Frank, Andrea, Stefanie Haacke, and Swantje Lahm. *Schlüsselkompetenzen: Schreiben in Studium und Beruf*. 2. Aufl. (Stuttgart u.a.: Metzler, 2013), 99-100.

[11] Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2. Aufl. (San Francisco: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2011).

[12] Selection adapted from Linda B. Nilson, "Improving Student Peer Feedback" *College Teaching* 51, Nr. 1 (2003), 34–38.

[13] See e.g. Frank, Haacke, Lahm. *Schlüsselkompetenzen: Schreiben in Studium und Beruf*. S. 101 [10].

[14] Kruse, Otto. *Lesen und Schreiben. Der richtige Umgang mit Texten im Studium*. (Konstanz: UVK, 2010), 166.

[15] Adapted from Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas* [11].

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# ⓘ Contact

T (Telephone): +43-1-4277-120 60
infopool@univie.ac.at

University of Vienna | Universitätsring 1 | 1010 Vienna | T (Telephone) +43-1-4277-0

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