



Highline Writing Center Keys to Peer Reviewing



Reviewing your peers can be intimidating. It’s easy to worry about hurting their feelings or to feel that you have nothing to contribute. Even if peer review doesn’t make you anxious, you might not help the writer as effectively as possible by focusing on less important aspects or taking over their paper. Keeping the following keys to peer reviewing in mind will hopefully help you to give the best possible advice to your classmates.

Avoid Evaluative Language

First and foremost, as a peer reviewer, your role is as a reader. This means that you must leave evaluative language out of the discussion. These comments are not helpful, and can leave the writer feeling unsupported, discouraged, as though there is nothing to be improved, or as though his work is not worth reading or commenting on.

Give Specific Feedback

Giving constructive critique is important but can be difficult to do well. Find examples in the essay as specific as possible. Point to sentences or refer to specific parts of the paper. Think of reasons behind your feelings of it being good or bad. The key to this is being specific—the following table shows the difference between being evaluative and being specific.

Evaluative Language	Specific Feedback
“Your paper is really good.”	“This example made me laugh because I could really relate to this situation.”
“Your paper sucks, man. Shred this and start over!”	“I feel like your thesis is too broad. What would you think of adding a ‘because clause?’”
“Looks fine to me.”	“I think this introduction has a great hook, but I don’t see how it relates to your topic. Why did you choose this way to start?”

But, what if you really did think the paper sucked? This is still not appropriate to tell the writer. Think—did it suck, or was it confusing? What made it confusing? Did it lack a thesis statement, or were the transitions unclear? If you think it was “good,” why? Did you admire his deep thought on the topic, or did you think it was hilarious? Was the paper interesting because you could relate to it?

Do Not Rewrite

All problems should be presented to and discussed with the writer. This can be hard if your critique is written instead of face-to-face, but explaining the problem in specifics and presenting many options for improvement leaves the writing and revising in her hands.

Identify & Discuss Solutions

After you specifically pinpointed what you want to tell the writer, explain it to them. Tell them what you felt about that specific part. Be honest, but not harsh! It's a good idea to give her a few options to fix the issue. Maybe point out places where it was done well in other parts of the essay.

Rewriting	Identifying and Discussing
"Your title is really boring. You need to change it to 'Adventures in English'." Or if it's written feedback, this would look like simply crossing something out and writing what you think is best.	"I think that your title 'My Educational Experience' doesn't really draw me in. Your paper is so rich with examples about you learning English in Japan. Couldn't you have a title that relates more to one of those interesting experiences? Maybe consider taking an image or a feeling you described!"

Discussing solutions with the writer rather than just fixing them may take more time and effort, but it will help your classmate more in the long run because she will know how to fix her own problems. You don't want her to have to come to you every time, right? A little extra thought on both of your parts now will save time and frustration in the future. Also, Look at what the writer is trying to do, and help with that—don't rewrite.

Don't pick out every mistake

Every paper has errors, and some are more minor than others. However, "fixing" your classmates paper often ends in worse confusion of meanings. If you begin to notice errors, think about placing them in categories. Identify if the writer uses confusing words, or if their sentences are too long or too short. Then convey this error pattern to the writer. This will allow them to identify and correct their own mistakes, and you have not touched the integrity of their paper.

Prioritize issues

Prioritizing will help you to avoid overloading the writer with information. Focusing on a few more important errors can help the writer to become progressively better. True improvement takes time. Your chemistry teacher wouldn't come in on the first day and tell you all the information for the whole quarter, expecting you to retain it. In the same way, it's better for you to help the writer focus on a few improvements at once to build up to other ones.

Going through a paper line by line, error by error, can consume your response. If every verb is in a different tense, it can be hard to read, but if you spend time correcting every mistake, you might not be able to go in depth enough on the biggest issues. Some errors make a huge difference in the quality of the paper and how successful it will be. Some errors are trivial. It is important to prioritize so you can spend your response discussing the issues that are most important.

The following is a list of questions to think about to help you prioritize:

- ✓ What did you like?
- ✓ What part did you find interesting?
- ✓ Did you want to see how it ended?
- ✓ Is there an idea you hadn't considered?
- ✓ Do you have questions?
- ✓ Would you like to read more in particular place?
- ✓ Was something confusing?
- ✓ Did you get lost?
- ✓ In the end, do you agree with the thesis? Do you need more proof, or are you unconvinced?

There is a hierarchy of concerns in writing, and sticking to it will make your response focused and helpful. The following are categories of concerns in their order of most influence on the quality of the paper to the least: assignment clarification, thesis, focus and unity, supporting points and development, organization and transitions, documentation and citations, and grammar patterns. (Notice how grammar is very last on your priority list.)



Assignment Guidelines

This is the first most important issue to address. If the paper does not answer the assignment question or meet each guideline, there is no way it can receive a good grade. After reading the paper, make this the first thing you check and the first thing you address in your response. Any divergence from the assignment should lead you both to check the assignment sheet or ask the instructor to clarify.

- ✓ Did the writer seem to understand the assignment in the same way you did?
- ✓ Does the paper fit the length requirements?
- ✓ Did they fully address each part of the prompt?



Thesis

Theses are a concise statement or question that includes both your topic and the point you are going to make. Often, in American college papers, the thesis comes at the end of the introduction. All theses have these two components! They are the “road map” or central point of the paper. The thesis will show us where the paper will go by presenting an argument or asking a question to which everything in the paper will refer and support.

- ✓ Is the thesis in the same format that your teacher asked for?
- ✓ Did your teacher tell you where to put the thesis? If so, is the thesis there?
- ✓ Was the thesis specific and complex?
- ✓ Is the writer making a point? Is it clear? Is it valid?



Focus and Unity

Ideas should feel like they have clear connections throughout the paper. No idea should be dropped in the paper without relevance or explanation. Also, no idea should simply cut off abruptly.

- ✓ Do you see how the ideas fit together?
- ✓ Are motifs carried through the whole essay?
 - Motifs are reoccurring themes in a paper. These could be concepts that are talked about several times and connected to a few different supporting points (like the thesis for example), or they could be images used throughout the paper to help unify and illustrate the point.
- ✓ Do the introduction, thesis statement, and conclusion work together?
- ✓ Does each paragraph support the thesis? Is there anything that negates the thesis or is unrelated?
 - As with the thesis itself, each paragraph should be about the topic and argue the point. If there is anything off topic or on topic but not arguing the thesis, this should be addressed to the writer.



Supporting Points

The supporting points often tie into the overall focus and unity, but there are things that should be considered with them exclusively. Supporting points are specific evidence to support the overall claim.

- ✓ Are all quotations integrated and relevant?
 - Many papers require outside support, but these quotations, summaries, or paraphrases must be supporting the thesis and need to have transitions to make them feel essential to the paragraph. Otherwise, they can look thrown in, random, or unimportant.
- ✓ Were examples detailed enough to keep you interested?
 - Examples should have details, such as statistics, quotations from experts, or sensory details, to make them strong and interesting. If you, as a reader, were bored, the paper probably did not have enough details.
- ✓ If necessary, are alternative viewpoints addressed?
 - Often in argumentative papers, a rebuttal is needed to legitimize your own point. If it is appropriate to disprove an alternate claim, be sure that the paper you are reviewing has a rebuttal.
- ✓ Is the logic sound? Are there fallacies in the argument?
- ✓ If necessary, does it have the writer's opinion, or do they rely too heavily on outside sources?
- ✓ If necessary, are outside sources present, or is the paper entirely the writer's opinion?



Organization

Paper can be organized in variety of ways: chronologically, topically, etc. The way that the paper is organized should be logical and build upon itself. Sometimes the introduction can be used as a guide for the reader to see what to expect in the paper.

- ✓ Do the ideas have a logical progression?
- ✓ Did the writer use transitions, or did it seem to jump around?
- ✓ Does the conclusion add more information at the end, or does it feel like a conclusion?
 - Conclusions do not add more information. Their purpose is to summarize the paper and drive their argument home once more. If the writer has new information to add, they should consider putting it in the body of the paper rather than the conclusion.



Citations/Documentation

Documenting or citing sources shows the reader that some of the information in the paper came from somewhere other than the writer's head. If citations are missing in places they should be, this can be plagiarism (even if by accident). You don't want your classmate to accidentally plagiarize and receive a penalty, so gently mentioning that she forgot to cite her source would be a good idea.

- ✓ What style does the teacher require? MLA? APA? Does it follow that style?
 - Look at a guide for this if the writer needs them, and you're not sure the writer's using them correctly.
- ✓ Are the citations in alphabetic order on the works cited page?
- ✓ Are the in-text citations placed correctly? Are any missing?



Grammar Patterns

Grammar sometimes gets the most attention out of any aspect of writing when it comes to mistakes. Grammar mistakes should receive the most attention if they are what are hampering the clarity and effectiveness of the paper the most. Otherwise, the above categories should take priority.

- ✓ If you see any mistakes, are they similar? Can you find a pattern?
- ✓ What are the most predominant patterns? Are they impeding the effectiveness of the paper?



It's important to use all of these keys. Using this handout as a guide when you peer review can help you give more thoughtful and constructive criticism. Asking yourself each of these questions during or after you read your classmates paper will help you to go beyond simple "it's good" or "it's bad" reactions.