


# Frame Your Feedback: Making Peer Review Work in Class

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We often hear that peer review is an excellent opportunity for reciprocal student learning. In theory, this makes sense. Since an instructor can only dedicate a certain amount of attention to each student, peer review allows students to receive more feedback and engage more frequently in the content they are learning. Research shows this benefits both the students who receive and provide feedback.

With optimism, many of us dedicate a class period to allowing students to swap writing assignments and leave each other feedback. At the end, we're often underwhelmed. Students end up broadly praising a peer's work and providing surface-level edits or vague recommendations: *Your ideas are great! I really liked this essay. In some areas, I think the flow could be improved a little bit, and there were a couple of run-on sentences. Otherwise, this is terrific!* Little is given or gained, and students ultimately rely on their instructors to provide substantive feedback.

Why does this happen? While students have likely engaged in peer-review activities starting in grade school, it is rare that they are taught how to review student work in helpful, substantive ways that go beyond global praise and word editing (VanDeWeghe 2004, 99). And training a student to give significant, varied feedback requires far more than the semester or two of writing instruction required at the college level (VanDeWeghe 2004; Simmons 2003).

In tackling the problems I saw with peer review in my courses, I started teaching students that peer review is a two-way street. Getting useful feedback depends on how students frame their requests for it. Developing this skill not only teaches students how to receive effective feedback, but also gets them in the habit of reflecting on and analyzing their work.

When introducing peer review activities in class, my first step is to prepare students to frame the type of feedback they need to receive in order to improve their work.

## Preparing Students for Peer Review

Instruct students to include a brief memo of guidance with the work they would like others to review. The memo includes two components: a context paragraph and a list of questions.

A context paragraph explains anything the reviewer should know (i.e., stage of development, purpose, struggles, intentions). Such a paragraph clues the reviewer in to what the student author already knows and needs. For instance, if he knows that a certain portion is incomplete or requires more work, he can save a reviewer the effort of acknowledging this. I have also told students they can give the reviewer an idea of the level of criticism they are comfortable with, which usually helps reviewers feel they have permission to provide constructive criticism rather than surface-level praise.

Direct questions solicit specific feedback and help reviewers focus their attention. Peer review is the art of asking good questions. Have students practice forming effective questions and anticipating ineffective ones. For instance, rather than asking "Does my writing flow?" challenge students to identify a specific area or issue in the paper that could use peer attention: "I am struggling with the transition from my personal experience with gender discrimination (paragraph 2) to research on the topic (paragraph 3). How could I make this connection better?"

## When it is Time for Students to Review a Peer's Work

1. **Give feedback based on the memo.** Instruct student reviewers to direct their feedback to the memo's points and then address two or three additional areas. The additional feedback allows reviewers to attend to areas of necessary revision that the student did not include in their memo. It also allows reviewers to express their questions and interests as peers.

2. **Provide clear actions and suggestions.** Rather than simply stating “At some points, the flow doesn’t quite work. Look into this more carefully,” reviewers should identify examples and provide suggestions for how to revise these examples. This works as a form of peer teaching, a powerful learning strategy for the reviewer.

This basic structure reins in the wide range of feedback—from students who write minimal, vague feedback to students who feel responsible to correct every Oxford comma.

### Recommendations for Revitalizing the Student Peer Review Process

1. **Have a candid discussion about students’ experiences with peer review.** Ask students if they think peer review is useful and under what circumstances. I often have students rate on a 1-to-10 scale the kind of feedback they would like to receive, 1 being praise only and 10 representing a no-holds-barred review. The vast majority pick 6–9. When asked what level they normally receive, students say it’s generally on the 1–5 side. In theory, students want to know how to improve their writing to earn a better grade or to realize concrete evidence of learning. Yet when it is time to review a fellow student’s writing, they don’t feel comfortable criticizing someone else’s work. This discussion is a great way to introduce the peer review practices that help to even out these numbers. By requesting feedback in specific ways, peer reviewers feel less like they are criticizing the writer’s ideas and more like they are helping the writer work through a challenge. Specifically, I note that students can write in the memo their criticism comfort level. (e.g., *I am confident with my primary research section, so I’m ready for a 9-level review. Go gentler on the discussion section, though, as I could use help developing a larger argument.*)
2. **Emphasize the broad range of peer review.** *How can I leave feedback for someone who is a better writer than me? What if I’m not sure how to answer their questions? What if I don’t know what to say?* In my peer review assignment directions, I always remind students that peer review is not solely corrective proofreading. Peer review is used in prewriting to generate ideas and poll opinions or to confirm whether an argument comes through clearly for an audience. Yet, most students’ default approach to peer review is to correct grammar and comment on “flow.”
3. **Make students accountable for accurate, useful feedback.** Grade peer reviewers based on whether they have answered all memo points, followed peer review best practices as you lay them out in the directions, and accurately evaluated work based on class content and rubrics. This shows students whether they are providing useful feedback and makes the peer-reviewed content better for everyone.
4. **Model these practices in your feedback to students.** When you provide feedback on student work, use the same qualities you require for their peer review. Prioritize feedback, keep it brief, and balance usefulness and positivity.
5. **Require students to write memos when they ask for your feedback.** This is especially important for papers. Sometimes students will e-mail you a draft of their paper with the general request that “Any and all feedback is appreciated!” This places on you an expectation to provide the student with an exhaustive checklist of errors to fix when the writer should take ownership of their whole writing process. If this happens to you, respond by asking, “What would you like me to review, specifically?” or “What questions do you have at this point in your draft?” This requires students to take thoughtful inventory of their work and saves you hours of kitchen-sink review.

Every professional needs feedback to succeed in their work. These skills can set the foundation for how to ask for, receive, and provide useful feedback.

### References

- Simmons, J. (May 2003). Responders are taught, not born. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 46(8), 684–693.
- VanDeWeghe, R. (September 2004). “Awesome, dude!”: Responding helpfully to peer writing. *English Journal* 94(1), 95–99.

