Stearns Center Course ReDesign Academy:
Peer Review Principles for Design

Designing Peer Review: Four Principles to Remember

1. **Benefit goes to the reviewer**: Reviewers nearly always *engage in the work of the field.* Reviewing is higher-order thinking, requires application and integration of component skills, and exposes the reviewer to diverse ways of problem solving. Reviewers always learn from full engagement in this process, even when they are providing novice-level commentary. So while it is an excellent bonus when the comments help the *reviewee*, the main point of the assignment is to engage and support the *reviewer*.

2. **Reviewers benefit from two levels of guidance**: Even when they have experience in the field, reviewers need support in understanding the criteria of a specific task and the expectations about how to communicate with peers at their level.

   a. Reviewers need ***criteria-based*** coaching on and practice in how to identify high- and low-performing aspects of peers' work. For instance, it helps to provide an annotated model of a "good ___": discussion post, thesis sentence, analysis paragraph. Questions in your peer-review assignment can also help reviewers: "Add one comment to tell the author where he/she/they clearly defined a relevant term such as 'climax community' or 'succession.'"

   b. Reviewers also need coaching on what is socially and academically productive to ***communicate*** about what they say. It can be helpful to provide "comment stems" such as "Your first paragraph _____ [clearly / sort of / vaguely] states your argument about habitat loss, when you say _____." Even brief practice with some models—"See this, say that"—can build reviewers' confidence and reduce the amount of "Good Job Jenny" commentary.

3. **Reflection helps consolidate review-learning**: In order for reviewers to benefit, they may need to be coached on what they've learned. It is highly productive to assign post-review notes: brief reflective writing about what they saw that they could try themselves, what advice they gave that they should take themselves, what they saw that surprised them, and/or what questions they had while reviewing.

4. **Revision extends review-learning, but students may need guidance**: If a further goal of peer review is revision by the reviewee, then additional class time, grade-weight, and/or explanations should be invested in helping students see how and why to alter their first version. Consider providing a Revision Checklist: Select 3-5 common weaknesses of early drafts in this kind of assignment, explain what they look like, and suggest the kind of revision that could improve students' work (e.g., "Try adding a sentence that begins, *For example, one study reports…*, to strengthen your evidence"). You could also create an Editing Checklist to draw students' attention to likely formatting, citation, punctuation, or sentence-level errors or omissions, but try not to overwhelm students.

See the attached page for a handout you can share with your students about using productive review strategies.

For best results, you should treat a peer-review assignment like any other assignment: Assume that students need guidance from you about how to successfully complete the assignment, and build in ways to give them credit for performing well.

A good peer review assignment prompt, like other assignments, should include three parts:

- An explanation of the **goals** of the assignment: what *knowledge* and *skills* will students acquire by completing the review? This is particularly important to help students see the relevance of peer review to the course and the field: it's not "busy work" to catch others' typos, but intensive practice in analysis designed to improve their perception and communication.

- An explanation of the **tasks** of the assignment: what *steps* and *actions* will students need to take to be successful? You can include a separate, more detailed instruction sheet if needed; while advanced students or students working on a third or fourth review for your class may not need as much guidance, it is wise not to underestimate how your important your guide is in instructing students how to *read like a professional*, and thus is instrumental in student learning.

- An explanation of how the assignment will be **evaluated**—along with models, if possible, of what strong performances might look like. Peer review often works well as a completion-based grade. If you wish to acknowledge satisfactory vs. superlative work, consider distinguishing by the number of tasks completed rather than on the quality of the responses. (This approach both lowers the workload for the grader and emphasizes the reviewer's engagement with the process, rather than the accuracy of their comments, as the priority.)

The following assignment prompt represents **one possible** way of providing that information.

Educational Goals for Peer Review #1: Reviewing benefits the reviewer: professionals in this field are frequently called on to evaluate the work of their peers. By completing this assignment, you will improve your ability to

- Identify strong academic writing, especially writing that gives clear arguments and evidence, and explain how/why it works

- Identify academic writing that needs improvement, especially in its clarity and evidence, and recommend strategies to strengthen the writing

- See how your own writing strategies and approaches compare to those of other writers working on a similar task, so you can better assess and improve your own work

Major Tasks for Peer Review #1:

To earn Satisfactory Credit (4/5 points), you will need to complete the following steps.

1. Use the following steps to access and comment on the peer(s) you have been assigned to review: _____. If your assigned peer has not posted a draft, then _____.

2. **Introductory Comment**: Check the Assignment #1 Rubric that is posted, and select two items from that list that you will focus on as you review Explain why you chose these, and add a note: "Dear Author, as I read I will be holding you to a high standard for how you ___ and how you ___, and offering suggestions on how you can improve."

3. **Specific Comments**: Provide 4-6 comments to the author that are specific to his/her/their writing. Each comment should use complete sentences; be sure to use advanced review strategies from our handout. You should provide praises as well as questions/suggestions, and include some reference to the Rubric Items you selected.

To earn Exceptional Credit (5/5 points) you will need to complete the following steps.

1. Complete Steps 1, 2, and 3 above.

2. Write a **Dear Author** note: Add 5-7 new sentences that summarize the strengths of this draft overall in connecting with you as a reader and meeting the rubric expectations, and identify the top priorities/suggestions for revision.

3. Write a **Lessons Learned** note: Add 2-3 sentences that identify a strong strategy the author used, and explain how you could do (more of) this as you revise your own draft.

	Peer Review: Checklist for Satisfactory Level (4 points out of 5)
	Posted on time: Added to the author's draft by [date].
	Complete: Commentary includes • **Introductory comment:** Explain two rubric criteria you will focus on in your comments, and provide a statement to the author about your intent. • **4-6 comments** that are full sentences
	Uses good reviewing strategies: • Gives some **specific** comments • Identifies **achievements** and suggests **revisions** according to the rubric • Keeps a **supportive** tone
	Peer Review: Checklist for Exceptional Level (5 points out of 5)
	Meets requirements in the "Satisfactory" list above
	Includes a **"Dear Author"** note: 5-7 sentences about strengths/recommendations overall
	Includes a **"Lessons Learned"** note: 2-3 sentences connecting to your own draft

Seven Principles for Peer Reviewers

1. **Respond based on key goals**: Make a list of a few major criteria that this draft or project is expected to meet—these may be indicated on the rubric for the project—and highlight one or two that you want to examine especially carefully. If the author has written a "feedback guide for reviewers" on their draft and asked for help in specific areas, stay aware of these as you comment. Try to comment on one criterion at a time, so that the author can follow your reasoning and meet key expectations. ("This project was supposed to provide four reasons, but you only included three.")

2. **Critique the draft, not the person**: Assume that the author is at least as smart, hard-working, engaged, and committed as you are. Try to frame the problem as a local, temporary issue ("Paragraph four right now is mostly summary rather than analysis") rather than a personal failing ("You clearly didn't think about this much").

3. **Write full, specific sentences**: Instead of "Good job!" and "I don't get it," write sentences that include a "because…" or "for example…" phrase to explain why you think something works or why you think it doesn't. Explain which part exactly has provoked your response, and how. ("I got lost here because you switched to a new topic" or "I am almost persuaded but I need more. For instance, could you provide data on costs?")

4. **Identify highs and lows**: Identify places in the project that seem to you to be stronger and less strong at a particular approach: "Your most persuasive evidence comes in paragraph 2; the evidence in paragraph 4 is less persuasive to me because…." Your judgment helps the author bring all of his or her project up to the highest standard.

5. **Provide specific praise**: Learn to say what you enjoy or admire and to explain why, in more than two or three words: "I am engaged by the example you provide here because it relates to my life and you have great details." Your praise will help the author replicate his or her best work elsewhere in the project, and it will help you learn from what other peers do well.

6. **Be greedy for answers**: Ask for the explanations, evidence, connections, reasoning, beauty, or motivation that you need in order to fully understand and engage with the project: "I can see your general point about price points, but I don't know how that connects to your argument about feasibility." The one main thing an author cannot do is think like completely a different person. Thus it's your job to ask; let the writer decide whether to answer your questions or not.

7. **Suggest improvements generously:** Anyone can click a "Like" or "Dislike" button and walk away; it's much harder work to dig around in your brain to suggest one or two alternatives. Every time you give an explanation or suggestion to a peer, you not only practice generosity, you practice solving problems that you yourself might have some day: "If you gave numbers or a chart here showing how fast the increase was in southern Louisiana, it would be more convincing." And even if the author doesn't take your exact advice, he or she will better understand how or why to make other revisions.