

Sample Peer Review Sequence: Active Listening & Supportive Feedback

Peer review refers to a collaborative learning strategy that involves the practice of asking students to share their written work with peers for feedback that will then help them to revisit and revise their own writing. When peer review works it can become an effective way of helping students to learn to read more critically and actively, offer and accept constructive criticism, and see writing as a process that involves regular revision.

In order to ensure that peer review works well, there are a number of specific scaffolding and framing strategies that will help keep students focused and engaged. Setting realistic goals for the peer review process, and being fully transparent about these objectives, is crucial to conveying to students that this activity is one designed to help them to grow as thinkers, and learn to take full control over their writing process.

Before all Peer Review Sessions:

Create Groups: Peer review (in class) is often done in small groups. You might choose to create “**writing groups**” that students meet with regularly, that stay the same all semester. Or, you may choose to have students work in different configurations each time they do peer review. The benefit of writing groups is that students will have a smaller network of peers who know their particular style, voice, and writerly concerns.

Dear Reader Letters: The “Dear Reader Letter” is a self-reflective process note that gives students the opportunity to compose a letter to the person reading their draft, asking for the specific feedback that he/she feels will be most helpful at this point in the writing process. In other words, this is a letter that narrates what the writer thinks his/her paper is accomplishing, what he/she aims to accomplish in this paper, and what specifically he/she needs help with. The letter helps the student take control over the kinds of feedback he/she wants out of the peer review process.

Suggested Steps for Peer Review:

- 1. Active Listening:** Writer reads his/her draft out loud. Listeners just listen.
Principle: Listening is a vital skill that we often forget, so it is important to emphasize to students that they need to really practice listening deeply. This entails listening without speaking (or taking notes).
- 2. Sayback:** Listeners summarize what they hear. Sondra Perl and Mimi Schwartz describe this moment as allowing “for readers to reflect back to the writer what they hear in the piece” (*Writing True* 88). This should be the main idea or gist of the text.
Principle: Sometimes what a writer thinks he or she is writing about differs from what is actually on the page. By hearing another person “sayback” the main idea of the draft, the writer will be able to see if the piece is saying what he/she hopes it is saying, and explore what the piece expresses that may not have been intended.

- 3. Pointing (What Works Well):** After the writer has read his or her writing aloud, listeners identify memorable phrases, passages, even just words and images. These should be moments that stick out in our memories because they are rich, striking, or puzzling.
Principle: This is a chance for the writer to hear their language repeated, and to celebrate the strengths of his/her draft. This practice also ensures that listeners are really listening to the specific language the draft uses and how it works.
- 4. What is Lurking?:** What is almost said? What do you want to hear more about? All feedback in this stage of the peer review process is phrased as a question. The listener aims to help the writer to see spaces in the text that may need to be developed further.
Principle: Instead of offering feedback in the form of judgments about what works and what doesn't, "lurking" offers the writer questions to answer in order to expand and enrich their drafts. These questions are specific and grounded in moments of the text, helping to guide the writer's revision process.
- 5. Writer reads "Dear Reader" Letter. Writer distributes hard copies of his/her draft.** Listeners/readers respond to the drafts by way of answering the "dear reader letter." At this moment, the listeners finally see the draft on paper, but their feedback is shaped and guided by the requests and needs the writer specifies in the letter. The writer uses this moment to take notes about the feedback they've received thus far and begin to make a plan for revision.
Principle: Narrative responses to drafts tend to be more specific and directly useful than generalized comments or marginal notes. By aiming to answer questions posed in a letter, and respond to ideas shared, the reader is less likely to make generic comments like "this is great" or "I don't get it."
- 6. Checking In:** After the writer receives responses to his/her "dear reader" letter (written feedback) from all members of the group, allow a few minutes to check in with the writer about the comments they received. Ask the writer if he/she feels as though they got the feedback they need. Is there anything else the group can do to help you approach revision?
Principle: Since the emphasis in this peer review sequence is on supportive feedback, it is crucial to allow time for the writer to just ask any pressing questions that may have gone unaddressed.

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