Guidelines for Peer Review

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English 125-64

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As I said in the syllabus, we're going to be doing lots of groupwork in this class. We're doing this for two reasons. In part, this is because throughout college and in the real world, you'll be working in groups all the time, so it's important to develop the skills to work effectively in teams. The main reason we're doing groupwork, though, is because it helps you learn. You've already seen this, I hope, in the in-class groupwork we've done in the logic section. Now, as we shift towards more writing activities, our groupwork will focus on peer revision.

There are several key benefits of peer revision:

- Peer revision emphasizes the importance of *revision* as part of the writing process. As you continue to write outside this class, I hope you'll see the advantages of revising your writing, both alone and with others.
- Peer revision gives you the opportunity to *practice* critically reading and editing writing, as you review your peers' papers. These are crucial skills to develop as writers!
- Peer revision will help improve *your own* papers, as you address suggestions from your peers.

As Jeremiah Chamberlin pointed out in his essay "Workshop is not for you!" the second of these is really important. Even more so than in math groupwork—where the student explaining an idea benefits as much as the student listening—in writing, the person who is helping (the editor) is benefiting as much as the one who is ostensibly[1] being helped. Note that this critical reading involves not only learning to see what doesn't work in someone else's writing but also seeing and learning from what does work.

How Peer Review Works

Depending on whether we do peer review in class or outside of class, and how many peers you are matched up with, the logistics might vary slightly, but the basic process is this:

- (Optional) You might want to ask your peer if there's anything in particular they want you to look out for.
- Read your peer's paper. You'll almost definitely want to do this a few times. Perhaps the first time you should read it just to get an overall sense of the paper. Then the next time you might want to look more carefully at the structure and the argument. A third time you

[1] *Ostensibly*: apparently or purportedly, but perhaps not actually.

might look closer at the nitty-gritty of the language: are there awkward phrases? Typos? Confusing sentences? Does it flow naturally?

- Take notes with your comments. This happens over the course of reading the paper multiple times. (For this *only*, you are welcome to use your laptops in class, if you prefer taking notes on a computer.)

- Communicate your ideas to your peer. Some of these ideas you might want to communicate *orally* and others in *writing*. How you do this will depend, of course, on the context: if you're doing it in class, you can explain things in person, but if you're doing it by email, it will have to be in writing.[2] You might use different methods for different types of suggestions. For example, you might write a paragraph about your overall impressions, and then suggest specific revisions of language on the printed draft.

Remember, of course, that your criticism should (probably) include both *positive* and *negative* feedback: which things did your peer do well, and which things need more work?

A key aspect of this process is working effectively with other people. When you have suggestions for improvement, you'll want to offer them in a way that doesn't offend them—but that doesn't mean that you should just say "great job!" without offering feedback, since that's not helping anyone.[3] Think about what methods are effective for doing this. Does explaining things in person help? (Often it does; email can be a much too impersonal medium.) How does this change depending on how well you know your peer? What way should you frame your suggestions? Might it make sense to focus first on something the author did effectively?

Over the course of the semester, we'll be talking a lot about specific aspects of writing that you might want to work on improving, and your peer reviews should reflect this attention. For this first peer review assignment, focus especially on the general guidelines from the assignment: "clear and concise explanation" and "natural-sounding writing." (You should probably take a careful look at the assignment again.) Some things to think about (this is a *non-exhaustive* list):

- Is the paper clear?

- Any mathematical steps missing?

- Is the math correct?

- Are all of the relevant terms explained?

- Is the organization and structure of the paper effective?

- Is the paper written appropriately for the specified *audience*? In particular, you should *imagine* you are a member of the specified audience. Is everything clear? Does there need to be more explanation?

[2] If you're getting an explanation in person, make sure to take notes, so you can consult them later. Also, you should definitely ask clarifying questions! This should be a conversation.

[3] Note: This doesn't at all mean that you shouldn't be critical *inside your own head* as you read the work. After all, you should read your own writing that way. The key is to modulate your criticism in a way to be a decent and effective human being when you communicate with them. (Also, don't forget: you should be looking also for what the writer did well, and you should selfishly make note of that for your own work as a writer.)

- Is the presentation effective? For example: are the mathematical equations written in a way that's easy to read?
- Are there any issues with the writing? Typos? Awkward phrases? Phrases that could be improved?

For this assignment, if you have time, you can and should start talking about your comments during class. Whether you have time for this or not, you should send your peer review partner an email with all of your comments, by Wednesday at 2:30, and you should cc me on this email.

After the Peer Review

Once you receive your peer's suggestion, it is *up to you* to determine whether or not to listen to their advice and suggestions. As with many academic tasks, part of your job is to weigh the quality of the information you are given. What do you think of your peer's suggestions? Certainly, you should think about and respect their suggestions. If they say that something isn't clear, there's a good chance they're right—even if perhaps the suggestion they have for improving things doesn't help. In the end, it's your work, so you make the final decisions. Feel free to address in your post-paper reflection how you did or did not incorporate the peer review in your final draft.

Remember: This doesn't have to be the only time someone other than you looks at your writing. Feel free to have others take a look at your writing as well, whether it's friends, classmates and peers or a tutor at Sweetland.[4] (Remember to acknowledge their help at the end of your paper.) As you get their advice, you should continue to take it critically.

A Note on This Assignment

We're in a slightly unusual situation for this assignment, because many of you will be peer-reviewing someone who's writing about the *same exact thing as you*: a proof of the irrationality of $\sqrt{7}$. There's no way to prevent the possibility of you being influenced by what your peer has written, and wanting to learn from and adopt some of their explanatory methods. The way we're going to handle this situation is the following:

- You should consider yourselves in some sense as a team: if your peer learns from things you've done, that reflects well on both of you![5]
- If you see things that your peer did in their paper that you thought were effective and that you would like to adopt in your own work, that's fine, so long as you are not copying verbatim[6] phrases from your peer. (A good way to ensure that you don't do this is *not* to look at your peer's writing at any time when you're doing your own writing, just as you shouldn't look at Hardy's or Devlin's writing about $\sqrt{2}$ as you do your own writing.)

[4] If you were used to doing this a lot in high school—perhaps if you had a family member or tutor read and critique your work for every essay—remember not to let this become a crutch: you should develop on your own many of these revision skills. But most of you probably veer too far on the side of not asking for enough help. If you have any questions about this, ask me!

[5] Don't worry, this assignment is a small part of your grade, so this won't introduce any significant unfair advantages.

[6] *verbatim*: in exactly the same words as were used originally

- If your peer's draft influenced how you edited your final draft, you should note this in your acknowledgments and give precise details. (For example, you might say, "I really liked how Bob introduced his paper, and I thought his introduction was more effective than mine, so I decided to revise my introduction by talking a bit more about the method of proof by contradiction" or "Bob had a much clearer explanation of why p^2 being divisible by 7 means that p is divisible by 7, so I decided to add to my explanation using his ideas.")