

Peer Reviewing

Peer reviewing: Why? You're probably used to the *teacher* evaluating your work. But how about your fellow students? Why should you want to peer review their work, or have them peer review yours? Consider:

- By seeing another's problems & successes, you can become more aware of your own.
- In the real world, there's no teacher.
 - You'll address complex and diverse audiences—just like your peers.
 - You'll receive diverse and often conflicting feedback, and you'll have to figure out who you need to listen to.
- The more you prepare to speak or write thinking about a real audience, the better you'll do. The worst papers and speeches are the ones prepared only for the teacher.
- *Listening* is at least as important a skill as *speaking* or *writing*. (Why?) And it takes just as much practice.

Peer reviewing: the spirit of the activity. When you're giving feedback, just think through your own experience as a receiver of feedback. Vague praise is sometimes re-assuring, but not really satisfying. You don't learn much from it. In fact, it can be kind of insulting—the person may not have even paid attention to what you said at all! Being lectured, picked at or insulted doesn't work either—it just gets your defenses up. The best feedback is honest and specific but also tactful and sympathetic. It speaks *from* the audience's point of view, *to* the speaker's needs. Remember, your point of view as an audience member *is* important. If you are confused, that's something the speaker/writer may have to do something about!

When you're receiving feedback, there's also some things you should keep in mind. The main point is to learn something. The reviewer isn't giving you orders you have to follow. They're just conveying their perspective; it's up to you what you do with this information. Your speech/paper is ultimately your responsibility, and you make the final choices about what you think is most effective.

Exact details. Here's some ideas on giving critique effectively. These are the rules of thumb the course assistant and I both follow.

1. Start with a *detailed* summary of what you heard/read. What was the main conclusion, and the main arguments in support? What was the support for these arguments? One of the main things you can do to help your peer is just to show him/her where what they said "came through," and where it got lost. Plus if you don't understand the argument, you can't really review it!

2. After the initial summary, say no more than about three things total, good or bad—people have a hard time receiving more information than that. Which three? That is the most important decision you'll have to make in peer reviewing. You need to use your best judgment to select the three (or four, or two) *most important* things *this* peer needs to hear *now*.

3. Of the three things, start with at least one "good" one (even the worst presentation has *something* good about it). End with at least one "bad" one (everything can be improved). The middle one is up to you.

4. As you make your comments, refer back very explicitly to the basic evaluation standards for the argument you're reviewing. For example, the basic standards for C1 arguments are CLARITY, SUPPORT and ELOQUENCE. Use those words when you're writing your review—indeed, use them IN CAPS so everyone can notice what you're doing. Later on in the course, we'll add more standards—for responding to arguments, and for advanced, extended arguments. You will use these also in reviewing your peer's work—which will make it even harder to decide what three things you really need to say!

5. As you make your comments, refer very specifically to what your peer actually did. Be detailed. Give examples. For example:

I really appreciated the CLARITY of your presentation. At the end of the first point, you paused and summarized, and then told me you were moving on to your second point. That really helped me follow your speech easily.

6. As you make your comments, also add in explanations. For example, in the above passage I explained to the peer *why* his/her organization was so important. Alternately, if the comment is a negative one, you can explain what your peer could have done to do better. "Next time, try thinking about...."

7. Feel free to speak in your own voice. Remember, all you are giving is your perspective—although that is an important one. I personally like to write in the first person, and say what *I* heard, *I* noticed, and *I* thought about it. Notice that it's less negative to say:

You were unCLEAR.

Than it is to say:

I wasn't CLEAR where one point stopped and another started.

In the first case, you're labeling the other person or her presentation. In the second, you're merely expressing your point of view. The same is true for positive comments; see the above example again.

8. If you want, you can add a set of "minor points" in at the end of the peer review—things that aren't important in themselves, but which your peer might want to know about (for example, typos or mispronunciations).

Evaluation standards for peer reviews:

- ✓ **A good peer review is accurate.**
 - It starts with a detailed and accurate summary of the argument being reviewed.
 - It discusses specific examples of problems and successes.
 - It explains its comments, including by showing specifically how the work could be better.
- ✓ **A good peer review shows good judgment.**
 - It selects and comments on the features of the work that are the most important for the speaker/writer to hear, both positive and negative.
 - It uses the assessment standards appropriate for the argument being reviewed.
- ✓ **A good peer review is civil.**
 - It speaks from a personal point of view.
 - It respects the feelings of the person to whom it is addressed.