

First-Year Writing Requirement Course Preparation Materials

Table of Contents

2-3	First-Year Writing Requirement Course Syllabus Planning Sheet
4-5	First-Year Writing Requirement Course Guidelines
6-7	Edward White, “Writing Clear Essay Questions”
8	Edward White, “Heuristic for the Writer of Writing Assignments”
9-10	Sequencing Writing Assignments — some suggestions and best practices
11-12	Responding to Student Writing — Principles and Practices
13	Teagle Study Structured Commenting Protocol
14-15	Inserting Self-Reflective Comments in Essay Drafts and example
16-27	Using Peer Review to Improve Student Writing
28-31	Peer Review Workshop Guidelines
32-33	Jeremiah Chamberlin, “Workshop Is Not for You”

First-Year Writing Requirement Course Syllabus Planning Sheet

The purpose of this planning sheet is to aid faculty and GSIs preparing syllabi for First-Year Writing Requirement (FYWR) courses (and administrators approving these syllabi) to insure a common experience for students across the university taking these courses through the inclusion of course features that support the FYWR guidelines approved by the College of LS&A and overseen by the Sweetland Center for Writing.

✓	<p>Successful First-Year Writing Requirement courses incorporate the following features, which should be clearly indicated in course syllabi. They will:</p>
	<p>Address the shared learning goals common to all FYWR courses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The course description should make it clear that this is a FYWR course and writing instruction is its primary focus. ▪ The syllabus should speak directly to the FYWR course goals in some way. (See http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/writingrequirements/firstyearwritingrequirement for FYWR course guidelines and learning goals.)
	<p>Assign a substantial amount of polished writing.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Course assignments should add up to 25-30 pages (or the new media equivalent) of polished prose over the course of the semester. “Polished prose” is print or multimodal text that has been thoroughly revised and edited.
	<p>Connect the writing placement process to classroom instruction.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Students’ Directed Self-Placement (DSP) essays should be incorporated into coursework in some way, which is indicated on the syllabus. (See http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/forinstructors/dspinstructorresources for suggested approaches.)
	<p>Provide sequenced opportunities to write in a variety of genres.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ These genres should include, but need not be limited to, evidence-based argument. ▪ These writing assignments should build on each other throughout the term. ▪ Instructors are encouraged to include new media assignments in FYWR courses. ▪ Writing assignment prompts should be included in the syllabus itself.
	<p>Require multiple drafts for at least 50% of writing assignments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Revision should be required and explicitly built into the structure of the course. ▪ The revision process should include structured opportunities for feedback (see below). ▪ The syllabus should indicate the types of feedback students can expect on their writing and when they will receive it.

	<p>Provide at least three structured opportunities for students to receive feedback on their writing-in-progress. These opportunities could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Peer review or workshopping sessions. ▪ Written or recorded feedback from the instructor or GSI. ▪ Individual student conferences with the instructor or GSI.
	<p>Ask students to reflect on their own writing and its connections with the genres in which they write. Such reflection could include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Written or verbal reflection at various stages in the drafting and revising process. ▪ Written or verbal reflection as part of peer review or workshopping. ▪ Written or verbal reflection on assigned and in-class readings.
	<p>Communicate course expectations regarding participation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The criteria for participation and how it will be evaluated should be made clear to students. ▪ Participation should count for no more than 20% of the course grade, and preferably less.
	<p>Familiarize students with resources available to support their writing at the University of Michigan. These resources include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The Sweetland Center for Writing’s workshop and peer tutoring services. (See http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/ for information.) ▪ Sweetland’s web-based writing resources for students. ▪ Any department-specific writing resources. ▪ Relevant library services, including research and technology support.

**FIRST-YEAR WRITING REQUIREMENT
COURSE GUIDELINES**
August 2009

The Sweetland Writing Center approves the departmental curricular offerings that satisfy the LSA First-Year Writing Requirement (FYWR). FYWR courses must be reapproved every five years. Enrollments in all FYWR courses are capped at 18.

Statement of Purpose

The goal of the First-Year Writing Requirement is to prepare students to write in diverse academic contexts. As a broad preparation for the range of writing tasks students will encounter at the University of Michigan and beyond, FYWR courses emphasize evidenced, academic writing in a variety of genres and rhetorical situations. This course is foundational for students to master the kind of analysis and argumentation found in sophisticated academic writing.

A FYWR course is required of all students in the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts; School of Art and Design; School of Business; Division of Kinesiology; School of Music, Theatre, and Dance; and the School of Nursing. A FYWR course also is required of all students transferring into the College of Architecture and Urban Planning and the College of Pharmacy. The College of Engineering offers its own writing program and requirements.

Course Goals

First-Year Writing Requirement courses assign writing tasks designed to help students learn to:

- produce complex, analytic, evidence-based arguments that matter in a range of academic contexts;
- read, summarize, analyze, and synthesize complex texts purposefully in order to generate and support writing;
- practice writing in a variety of genres and demonstrate an awareness of the strategies that writers use in different rhetorical situations;
- develop flexible strategies for organizing, revising, editing, and proofreading writing of varying lengths to improve development of ideas and appropriateness of expression; and
- collaborate with peers and the instructor to define revision strategies for particular pieces of writing, to set goals for improving writing, and to devise effective plans for achieving those goals.

Writing Instruction

- As a general rule, students in First-Year Writing Requirement courses should complete a minimum of four major writing assignments, of varying page lengths, with at least 25 pages of polished writing, no less than half of which should have gone through substantial review and revision.
- Students should understand how and when they will receive feedback on their writing (through conferences about papers, peer review workshops, class discussion of common problems, written comments on preliminary drafts, etc.). Individual conferences with students about their writing will help them to understand audience and reader expectations and will enable dialogue about personal writing goals.
- Students should write regularly throughout the semester and revise their work in response to comments from their instructor and peers, and should work intensively on revising each formal assignment.
- Writing assignments should be *varied* in genre (to advance understanding of audience and purpose), *sequential* (to facilitate the development of ideas and concepts), *dispersed* over the course of a semester (to enhance continuity), and *revised* (to promote reflection and rigor) so that students build their capacity to produce complex, intentional, and sophisticated evidence-based writing.

Students must receive a C- or above to receive credit for the First-Year Writing Requirement. Students who receive a D+, D, or D- will earn course credits, but must elect another First-Year Writing Requirement course.

For more information about the FYWR, please contact the Sweetland Writing Center at 764-0429 or email Patrick Manning at manningp@umich.edu.

Adapted from the University of Michigan English Department Writing Program's *Teaching First-Year Writing: A Guide for New Instructors of English 124 and 125* and the University of Washington Expository Writing Program's *Orientation Manual*.

First-Year Writing Requirement Evidence of Student Learning Goals

Specific attributes of students' writing can serve as evidence that students in your section are attaining the five main learning goals of the course.

1. To produce complex, analytic, evidence-based arguments that matter in a range of academic contexts.
 - The argument is appropriately complex, based in a claim that emerges from and explores a line of inquiry in multiple ways.
 - The stakes of the argument, why what is being argued matters, are articulated and persuasive.
 - The argument involves analysis, which is the close scrutiny and examination of evidence and assumptions in support of a larger set of ideas.
 - The argument is persuasive, taking into consideration counterclaims and multiple points of view as it generates its own perspective and position.
 - The argument utilizes a clear organizational strategy and effective transitions that develop its line of inquiry.
2. To read, summarize, analyze, and synthesize complex texts purposefully in order to generate and support writing.
 - The writing demonstrates an understanding of the readings adequate to the purpose at hand.
 - Readings are used in strategic, focused ways (for examples: summarized, cited, applied, challenged, re-contextualized) to support the goals of the writing.
 - The writing is intertextual, meaning that a "conversation" between texts and ideas is created in support of the writer's goals.
 - The writing demonstrates responsible use of a standard system of documenting sources (MLA, APA, etc.).
3. To practice writing in a variety of genres and demonstrate an awareness of the strategies that writers use in different rhetorical situations.
 - The writing employs style, tone, and conventions appropriate to the demands of a particular genre, rhetorical situation or discipline.
 - The writing has a clear understanding of its audience, and various aspects of the writing (mode of inquiry, content, structure, appeals, tone, sentences, and word choice) address and are strategically pitched to that audience.
4. To develop flexible strategies for organizing, revising, editing, and proofreading writing of varying lengths to improve development of ideas and appropriateness of expression.
 - The writing demonstrates substantial and successful revision.
 - Errors of grammar, punctuation, and mechanics are proofread and edited so as not to interfere with reading and understanding the writing.
5. To collaborate with peers and the instructor to define revision strategies for particular pieces of writing, to set goals for improving writing, and to devise effective plans for achieving those goals.
 - Peer reviews demonstrate critical and constructive engagement with peers' work.
 - Revisions of written work demonstrate serious engagement with feedback from peers and the instructor.
 - Self-evaluations of written work demonstrate an awareness of the student's writing goals and the extent to which those goals have been met in the piece of writing.

These traits articulate the goals of the course and expectations for students' writing over the course of the term. They are also designed to help instructors generate and evaluate student writing. The instructor can design shorter writing assignments that target the learning goals, each of which will provide students an opportunity to practice one or more of these traits on the way to producing longer papers that combine a significant number of them. Instructors are encouraged to publish these learning goals and highlight which trait(s) their assignments are designed to teach. From assignment design to final evaluation, these learning goals should guide the work of First-Year Writing Requirement courses.

these two quotations are saying similar things and in what ways they are saying different things." The longer version is somewhat cumbersome, but it does not depend on students' knowing the ill-defined meanings of *compare* and *contrast*. But, of course, a student would have to know what *show* means (does it include "use specific detail?") in order to proceed, so there is no way to avoid using some sort of code.

An even more common example of a confusing direction is the overused term *discuss*. Many teachers will use this directive when they mean something as vague as "say something about the subject." For many students, this turns out to be an activity analogous to what in computer talk is called a "file dump": an undifferentiated list of all information available, without organization, coherence, or context. A high grade can be earned for such a file dump — if that was the teacher's intent. But the teacher may well mean — indeed, ought to mean — something much more precise, such as an argument about the strengths and weaknesses of a particular position. In that case, the file dump will elicit a low grade and complaints about student inability to focus and organize. In fact, the teacher has received what was asked for but not what was really sought. The miscommunication that results from imprecise question design leads students into confusion and teachers into frustration.

Students will benefit from practice-reading essay questions with pen in hand. In the first place, they should recognize and circle the key directions and consider what the words mean. Many students interpret all directive words as "say something about" (which is in fact all that many teachers mean) and need to understand that different directions may actually call for different kinds of responses. They should be aware that *describe* usually requires specific detail, that *explain* is likely to call for definitions and analysis, that *analyze* suggests taking something apart to see what it is made of, and so on. Here are some other terms that teachers use in question design, along with what they often mean by them:

List Name one by one, explaining or commenting when appropriate

Enumerate List in a meaningful sequence

Outline Give an overall plan for proceeding in some kind of order

Design Present a more elaborate overall plan than an outline, using descriptions, sketches, drawings, or the like

Summarize State the main points in as concise a way as possible, without commentary

Review Give a quick survey of several positions, using summaries with commentary

Interpret Explain in detail what something means to you and how you came to that understanding

will be able to use a similar process on other writing assignments. While poorly conceived essay tests will reinforce the notion that writing is essentially first-draft writing, better tests can reinforce the need for planning, revising, and editing, which leads to the best student work.

UNDERSTANDING THE ASSIGNMENT

Two problems cloud student understanding of essay questions: teachers often do not make clear what is called for, and even when they do, students do not attend carefully to the demands of the assignment.

Writing Clear Essay Questions

Well-constructed essay questions often use a series of code words that students must understand: describe, discuss, compare, contrast, explain, comment, and others with even less obvious meanings. Some handbooks and manuals define these terms, making clear distinctions among them. Unfortunately, teachers spend little time reading these handbooks, so students must expect considerable overlap and ambiguity — even when the words seem distinct. The problem is not that teachers or students do not understand what the terms mean; the fact is that the terms have no fixed meaning and can mean whatever the teacher expects them to mean.

For example, many teachers will use *compare* as a direction to show similarities between two objects or views and *contrast* as a direction to show differences; most handbooks define the terms in this way. Thus "compare and contrast" will often mean to do both: describe similarities and differences. But other teachers (and handbooks) will take *compare* to include *contrast*, on the logical grounds that comparing two things means placing them side by side and describing what matters. A diligent student who has learned the narrower definition of *compare* and cites only similarities in such a case will receive half credit; a protest that the teacher should have asked specifically for contrasts if differences were to be shown is likely to fall on deaf ears.

Because of the uncertainty of these terms, careful question design is likely to avoid them or explain them, for clarity's sake. The best way to explain them is probably to take class time to define and illustrate the meaning of such terms for a particular class, perhaps referring students to this section in the handbook you assign or keep in a writing lab. An awkward substitute would be to define the terms on the test itself. Another useful way to proceed is to create questions with explicit instructions. Thus instead of directing students to "compare and contrast" two quotations, a question could ask students to "show in what ways

but often what is really required is very much like the analysis in the preceding question. If there are good reasons to believe that the question is in fact basically looking for exposition, the student should decide on the concept first and use the description to illustrate the concept — writing an expository paper, with its evidence drawn from personal experience, not a personal narrative.

Sometimes, particularly on short placement tests, a narrative or a description is all that the question calls for. Though not all students find personal or descriptive writing easier than expository writing, most do; such writing poses few organizational or interpretive problems, for a simple chronology will usually serve quite well and the student is the final expert on the meaning of their own experiences. Such a test will examine a student's ability to marshal memories in reasonably error-free Standard English — useful information for some situations, but hardly information about a student's ability to turn out college-level writing.

The point is to train students to read questions carefully and to gain sufficient experience at writing in different modes so that they can make a rapid, accurate judgment of the kind of writing that may be required on an essay test. As more and more instructors are learning to ask precise questions, students are more and more likely to encounter clear directives. They may not know why the clear test strikes them as a good one or why they feel more capable and successful as they answer it, but they will be pleased with teaching and testing that clarifies rather than confuses.

Responding to Unclear Essay Assignments

Unfortunately, many essay assignments (of whatever scope) are not designed with sufficient care or precision, and students have come to expect vague directions for writing tasks. Even well-trained and experienced students may be surprised to receive low grades on a precise essay question because they have not responded to the question asked; some students are so used to unclear questions that they have become accustomed to ignoring them and writing whatever they choose on the general topic. Writing teachers should prepare students for the unclear questions they will be asked in various courses and should help students differentiate among types of unclear questions. Most of all, students need to know when a question makes precise demands that they must follow and when it requires them to construct their own question.

When a question is not clear, it becomes the student's responsibility to construct a clear question and then answer it. This way of handling the question is never evident, and many students will respond to unclear questions as they do to the ubiquitous *discuss* — by simply dumping everything they know about the topic on the page in the hope that they will somehow hit on whatever the teacher is looking for. Sometimes that works, for a vague question suggests that

Define Present in detail the essential traits or characteristics of something and how it differs from similar things

Prove Provide evidence to establish that something is true

Demonstrate Add to your proof examples of applications of what you have shown to be true

This list is not by any means complete, but we can draw two conclusions from this brief look at examination terminology: teachers who have a clear sense of what they want their students to do on a writing assignment need to use directions beyond the confusing code words, and teachers who do not have a clear sense of the task they are requiring should understand (and perhaps attempt to complete) their own assignments before they ask their students to do so.

Furthermore, students should be taught to note and circle the different parts of the question. A common cause of low grades on essays is simply failing to answer all parts of the question. It is easy to get caught up in responding to the first directive and to forget everything else. If students circle and number the parts (which may be buried in a complex sentence), they are more likely to deal with them. Even advanced students will often miss key parts of complex questions. One question type asks for a single coherent essay in which several topics are addressed. Many students will answer the subquestions in a series of paragraphs, sometimes numbering them diligently, but then fail to connect these parts into the single coherent essay required.

Finally, students need to be aware of the mode of discourse that the question requires. This can be a serious problem for first-year students, who often have little experience with expository writing. We seem, as we enter the twenty-first century in America, to have reversed the findings of James Britton and his team of researchers in the London schools some decades ago. They found very little personal writing and a great deal of rote expository writing. Today many of our students have very little practice with expository writing; personal narratives are all they can produce. It is now common to find personal essays as responses on college placement tests, even when the question specifically asks for exposition or argument. One sure way for a student to fail an institutionally administered expository essay question is to answer it with a personal experience.

Some questions may intentionally mix modes: "Analyze the quotation and then illustrate it by some personal experience." Students need to see that such a question expects the narrative to be subordinate to the discussion of the quotation and connected to it. Sometimes the emphasis seems to be reversed: "Describe an occasion in which you _____, and tell what you learned from it." This question normally elicits a personal narrative with a perfunctory moral tag on the end. Perhaps such a narrative and tag are what the question actually seeks,

ASSIGNING, RESPONDING, EVALUATING

Heuristic for the Writer of Writing Assignments

Erika Lindemann proposes a series of questions for faculty to ask themselves about their writing assignments; the following version of that heuristic (adapted from Lindemann 220–21) exemplifies the kind of thinking that ought to go into the making of assignments that can support constructive writing instruction.

A. Task Definition, Meaning, and Sequencing. What do I want the students to do? Is it worth doing? Why? Is it interesting and appropriate? What will it teach the students specifically? How does it fit my objectives at this point in the course? What can students do before they undertake the assignment, and where do I expect them to be after completing it? What will the assignment tell me? What is being assessed? Does the task have meaning outside as well as inside the class setting? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these goals?

B. Writing Processes. How do I want the students to do the assignment? Are the students working alone or together? In what ways will they practice prewriting, writing, and revising? Have I given enough information about what I want so that students can make effective choices about subject, purpose, form, mode, and tone? Have I given enough information about required length and about the use of sources? Have I prepared and distributed a written assignment with clear directions? Are good examples appropriate? Have I given enough class time to discussion of these procedures?

C. Audience. For whom are the students writing? Who is the audience? If the audience is the teacher, do the students really know who the teacher is and what can be assumed? Are there ways and reasons to expand the audience beyond the teacher? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the audience?

D. Schedule. When will students do the assignment? How does the assignment relate to what comes before and after it in the course? Is the assignment sequenced to give enough time for prewriting, writing, revision, and editing? How much time inside and outside of class will students need? To what extent will I guide and grade the students' work? What deadlines (and penalties) do I want to set for collecting papers or for various stages of the project? Have I given enough class time to discussion of the writing process?

A WRITING TEACHER'S GUIDE

Edward M. White

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

BEDFORD/ST. MARTIN'S

Boston/New York

2007

E. Assessment. What will I do with the assignment? How will I evaluate the work? What constitutes a successful response to the assignment? Will other students or the writer have a say in evaluating the paper? Does the grading system encourage revision? Have I attempted to write the paper myself? What problems did I encounter? How can the assignment be clarified or otherwise improved? Have I discussed evaluation criteria with the students before they began work, and will I discuss what I expect again as the due date approaches?

These guidelines for examining assignments must, of course, be adapted to fit the students, the curriculum, and the assignment. For instance, not every question would be applicable to a typical short writing assignment or an in-class writing assignment. But the heuristic is particularly valuable for longer assignments. For example, if the writing is to be developed over a significant period of time, the questions in point D relate directly to a deadline schedule for submitting stages of the work. Depending on the assignment, this schedule could call for notes, bibliographies, abstracts, plans, outlines, sections, drafts, or whatever is most appropriate. A simple deadline schedule for each assignment has two important benefits: (1) it enforces the need for the student to get going quickly and to work steadily at the task, instead of trying to handle the assignment the night before the due date, and (2) it largely ensures that the work is the student's own, as early stages of a bought or borrowed paper are unlikely to be available.

Sequencing Writing Assignments – some suggestions and best practices Sweetland Writing Center

“Like writing itself, courses usually have a narrative quality of movement that carries students from one level of knowledge and understanding to another.”

—Gottschalk & Hjortshoj (2004), *The Elements of Teaching Writing*, p. 40

A general principle: think about sequencing writing assignments so that they *move from simple to complex tasks*. (N.B. “simple” ≠ easy)

For example, ask students to:

- Write short papers before writing longer ones
- Write about one reading before comparing or synthesizing two or more readings
- Explain a basic concept before applying that concept to new problems or cases
- Summarize a text before analyzing, interpreting, or criticizing a text
- Explain one author’s argument before developing their own argument on the issue
- Write about something in an experiential or concrete way before writing about it in a theoretical or abstract way

Some other ideas to keep in mind:

- More complex writing activities often embed simpler ones within them;
- Consequently, you can use this built-in repetition to measure student progress.
- “Low stakes” writing activities can be used to break down and sequence the parts of more complex writing assignments.

Some examples of “low stakes” writing (a snapshot):

- *Short written assignments* – 1-sentence to 1½-page writing tasks that prepare students for in-class discussion, provide practice for particular writing skills, build material toward longer papers, etc.
- *Journals* – Informal, sometimes personal responses, questions, free associations connected to course readings, writing assignments, etc.
- *Discussion group postings* – the CTools Discussion tool can provide a forum for continuing class discussion outside of class; you can ask students to post a certain number of contributions and responses to others over the course of the term or for each course unit.
- *Wikis* – CTools has a wiki tool that can promote collaborative writing, responses to peers, etc.
- *Blogs* – Students can use a variety of open source blogging sites to reflect on course readings and themes, generate prewriting for longer essays, etc.
- *Discussion questions* – You can assign questions for student response, or you can ask 2-3 students per class to send you and their classmates questions to focus class discussion.
- *In-class writing* – Writing for any length of time during class in response to a prompt from you, student-generated questions, brainstorming, checking in about student concerns, difficulties, etc.
- *Mapping and graphic organizing* – prewriting activities asking students to show visual relationships among ideas, parts of an argument, class texts, etc.

Some sample assignment sequences:

1. For an English 124 class focusing on concepts of time
 - Definition (define a single term, “time”)
 - Close reading (analyze a single passage from a single text)
 - Comparison/contrast (analyze two or more passages from a single text that, together, enable a synthetic statement about an overall theme or argument)
 - Critical analysis/application (summarize a critical article, apply its main ideas to a single text, and critique its strengths and weaknesses for understanding this text)

2. For an LHSP 125 class focusing on visual rhetoric and the museum
 - Definition (define an art history term by finding three examples of it in the UMMA)
 - Description (describe a single artwork in the UMMA)
 - Response (add a personal interpretation to your description)
 - Critique (respond to a single critic’s interpretation of a single work of art)
 - Source-based critical analysis (analyze a single work of art and respond to 2-3 critical interpretations of it)

3. For a History 195 class focusing on comparative slavery in the Americas
 - Summary (of a single primary source)
 - Summary and response (a single primary source, different from the first)
 - Comparison/contrast (of two primary sources, different from the first two)
 - Comparison/contrast (of African and indigenous experiences of slavery in the Americas – a longer, multiple source paper)
 - Response (to a single secondary source)
 - Critical analysis/application (of a single primary source, in reference to a single secondary source)
 - Comparison/contrast/analysis (of two sets of readings from the first half of the course, focused on two types of slavery – a longer paper)
 - Abstract (of topic for final project, a longer, multiple source paper)
 - Source-based critical analysis (of topic of student’s choice drawn from course materials)

Responding to Student Writing – Principles and Practices Sweetland Writing Center

“Though there is much debate these days about the most effective methods of responding to student writing, there is a clear consensus about the least effective ways to handle student papers. Far too much of what teachers do with student writing is picky, arbitrary, unclear, or generally unhelpful.”

—Edward M. White (2007)

Some general principles

- Assessment of student writing really begins with assignment design, because that is the best time to determine what you want students to achieve with the assignment, and what constitutes a good response.
- Students value thoughtful feedback that engages them in dialogue with a reader making an effort to understand what they have to say.
- Reactive commenting and line editing result in fragmented and confusing feedback.
- Some of the most useful forms of commenting include (i) questions stimulating further thought, (ii) brief summaries of what the reader got out of the paper, and (iii) descriptions of difficulties the reader encountered.
- Offering your more detailed feedback on drafts that students will revise puts it to more efficient and effective use.

Some best practices

- To promote student writing as an act of communication, and not simply an exercise in meeting instructor expectations, read each essay as a *reader* first, and as a grader last.
- After you’ve read an essay once through without marking it, choose the two or three most important elements to highlight in a closing comment.
- Finally, insert selective marginal comments, questions, and praise to reinforce the end comment.
- If you are commenting on style, grammar, and punctuation, mark up a single representative paragraph as a model of patterns encountered throughout the essay.
- Distribute rubrics and other grading criteria in advance of assigning grades to a specific set of essays.

Some time-saving strategies

- Invest time in discussing and responding to student writing early in a course to achieve stronger writing throughout the semester.
- Skim a set of essays to identify common problems, and construct a handout addressing them, rather than commenting on them in each essay.
- As you skim the set, note the range of responses, so that you can focus your assessment of individual essays more precisely.
- Design assignments that teach particular skills, and then limit your comments to the success with which those skills are demonstrated.
- Stage assignments in parts, so that students can receive feedback on specific areas (thesis, introduction, topic sentences, e.g.) that will produce more successful completed essays.
- Assign low-stakes writing that reinforces learning, but can be read quickly, or not at all (and/or, use pairs or peer groups to respond, either in class or over CTools).
- Use peer groups to respond to drafts, even in very large classes, where you can distribute essays over email or CTools, and have students discuss the papers in sections, making note only of compliance.
- Ask students to turn in a self-reflective note on their essay's strengths and weaknesses along with their draft.
- When you have responded to student drafts, final essays need only a summative comment noting the success of the revision and the essay's overall strengths and weaknesses.
- If an essay is very confusing, or if the feedback you want to convey is highly complex, make a general note of the issue, and ask the student to schedule an appointment.
- Introduce students to the resources at the Sweetland Writing Center.

Some resources (and sources we've borrowed from here)

Gottschalk, Katherine, and Keith Hjortshoj. The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Hedengren, Beth Finch. A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Simons, Patricia. "Peer Review in a Large Class." Sweetland Writing Center Newsletter (Winter 2008): 8.

White, Edward M. Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide. 4th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007.

Teagle Study Structured Commenting Protocol

Sweetland Center for Writing & Center for Research on Learning and Teaching

The aim of this commenting method is to provide directive, thorough, but also focused advice to students regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their essays, and the means to improve them. It takes a “less is more” approach by identifying a few key elements (strengths and weaknesses) in an essay and structuring a head comment and marginal comment to highlight only those features. This approach is consistent with research that suggests students often become confused and overwhelmed when well-intentioned instructors try to “cover” everything, and also when they don’t fully explain why something is effective or correct or not or model ways of improving.

When you comment on your students’ drafts and final papers this semester, please follow these steps:

1. Read the essay through once, without marking it. It can be helpful to take a few notes while you read.
2. After you’ve done this, identify the two or three most important “higher order” things the student needs to work on within the parameters of the learning objectives of this particular assignment.

[*Note:* “higher order” concerns may include aspects of course content, conceptual understanding, argument, complexity, analysis, use of evidence, development of ideas, organization, understanding of audience, and sometimes diction and tone.]

3. Construct a head comment that does the following: 1) offers a brief but specific summation of general strengths, and 2) explains the two or three things to work on in a way that frames your remarks in terms of techniques and strategies to improve for subsequent drafts and assignments (e.g., “you’ve done an excellent job of..., but two central things to continue to work on are...”). This comment will probably be fairly detailed in presenting and discussing these two or three focus areas. It may be helpful to think of this head comment as a kind of “roadmap” to the marginal comments you will insert.
4. Finally, go back through the paper and, writing in full sentences, insert selective marginal comments and/or praise to reinforce and exemplify your head comment (e.g., “This point is unclear because...” or “You do a nice job here of...”). Give explanation and/or examples when you note both areas to improve *and* areas of strength.

It’s fine if the marginal comments reiterate points made in the head comment; indeed, they might specifically reference a moment in the head comment as a way of reinforcing it (“As I noted in my opening comment, here is a place where...”). Since your head comment will be fairly detailed, you will probably need relatively fewer marginal comments to highlight the relevant examples.

5. If you wish, additionally, to comment on “lower order” concerns (e.g., style, grammar, and/or punctuation), please focus on just one or two patterns encountered throughout the essay, explain these in a separate paragraph of your head comment, and mark up only a single representative paragraph in the essay to model corrections.

Inserting Self-Reflective Comments in Essay Drafts

Adapted from a handout created by Danielle LaVaque-Manty, Sweetland Center for Writing

Asking students to comment on their own writing in progress and identify bottlenecks and areas that are working well promotes the kind of metacognitive self-assessment that supports writing development. Responding directly to student comments promotes focused dialogue about writing, and aids overall writing assessment. This handout is adapted from a study of successful writing strategies being conducted by the Sweetland Writing Center and the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching. The study is funded by the Spencer and Teagle Foundations.

Instructions

Once you've written your draft, take a step back and think about any questions or comments you have about what you've achieved in your writing. Use the "comment" function in Word to insert 3 to 5 questions or comments in the margins of the paper. This is your opportunity to communicate with me "backstage" about the choices you've made. You might note places where:

- you've tried to draw on key concepts from the readings or course materials,
- you think you've expressed an idea or posed an argument particularly well,
- you feel uncertain about whether you've gotten your point across,
- you are struggling with or confused about a particular concept,
- you've incorporated suggestions for revision from me or your peers.

Make sure your questions and comments offer enough information to allow the reader to know how to respond to you—e.g., explain *why* you're confused (not just that you're confused), or why you've used the concepts you've chosen; refer to specific ways you think you've expressed something well; and so on.

Here are two examples – one of a "good" (i.e., appropriately specific) question for this activity and one of a "bad" (i.e., overly broad) question:

"Good" Question

Here's an example of an appropriately specific question: "I'm not sure that the connection I'm making between these two pieces of evidence is clear enough. Can you see here how x relates to y?"

"Bad" Question

Here's one that is too broad: "Do you understand the argument I'm making about this article?" (Since this is the type of thing that I will address in my overall comments to you anyway, asking it here doesn't let me offer you more specific feedback.)

Note: To use the "comment" function in Word, use your mouse to select the portion of your text you want to comment on. Then select "insert" from the menu at the top of your screen. This will open a drop-down menu; select "comment" from the list of options you find there.

Comment: Once you've selected "comment," Word will place a bubble like this one in your margin. Type your comment or question there. When you've finished, use your mouse to click anywhere in your main document; this will allow you to exit the bubble.

Assignment 5 prompt

Applied defense. Could Eichmann have used Walzer's argument to defend himself? If so, how might the argument have gone? Again, remember this is an exercise; the point is *not* to defend Eichmann, but to try to understand the possible implications of Walzer's argument.

Self-reflective comments on Assignment 5

(a) Excerpt from first draft: Peer Reviewer 1

[Furthermore], Walzer's model requires that a political actor who breaks the moral code understands his guilt [and is perceived as guilty]. Although Eichmann does not appeal to the guilt requirement of Walzer's argument, Ardent claims when, "for whatever reasons, even reasons of moral insanity, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been committed" (Ardent 277). This guilt requirement of dirty hands creates a problem when dealing with people like Eichmann who are not truly achieving a greater good for all, but who could either feign guilt under Walzer's model to escape punishment or claim they are only doing what they believe is truly correct. Eichmann could have argued he did not need to feel guilt because dirty hands classify his actions as simply duties of his job.

Sarah: I'm struggling a bit with this second body paragraph. At first I thought I could talk about Eichmann's appeal to Kant and how he was not acting as a free agent, but I think it is better to talk about the second requirement of "guilt" that I mention in my intro. Is my second body paragraph clear enough?

Reviewer 1: I do agree that it is a good idea to talk about the guilt factor because I think it is a very sound argument and is an interesting one at the same time. However, this paragraph's quote is not entirely linked with the argument of guilt, more-so with the belief that one's actions are correct. The two are connected but I believe that there does exist a difference between the two. I think both points are valuable and it is hard to say that one is clearly stronger than the other. As a reader, the argument about guilt drives home a stronger point for me.

Reviewer 1: This phrase is a little vague – perceived by who? Are you talking about public perception or more of self-perception?

(b) Excerpt from first draft: Peer Reviewer 2

[Furthermore], Walzer's model requires that a political actor who breaks the moral code understands his guilt and is perceived as guilty. Although Eichmann does not appeal to the guilt requirement of Walzer's argument, Ardent claims when, "for whatever reasons, even reasons of moral insanity, the ability to distinguish between right and wrong is impaired, we feel no crime has been committed" (Ardent 277). This guilt requirement of dirty hands creates a problem when dealing with people like Eichmann who are not truly achieving a greater good for all, but who could either feign guilt under Walzer's model to escape punishment or claim they are only doing what they believe is truly correct. Eichmann could have argued he did not need to feel guilt because dirty hands classify his actions as simply duties of his [job].

Sarah: I'm struggling a bit with this second body paragraph. At first I thought I could talk about Eichmann's appeal to Kant and how he was not acting as a free agent, but I think it is better to talk about the second requirement of "guilt" that I mention in my intro. Is my second body paragraph clear enough?

Reviewer 2: If I understand your purpose here correctly I think you would be best served by talking about how the 'greatest good' required by Walzer is subjective, and therefore allows for too much. I think saying something like this more explicitly would help this paragraph.

(c) Excerpt from final draft

Furthermore, Walzer argues it is necessary to have dirty hands to succeed in politics, but "We don't want to be ruled by men who have lost their souls" (Walzer 177), so a moral politician must demonstrate guilt for their immoral actions. Although Eichmann shows little remorse for his deeds, the guilt requirement of dirty hands is so ambiguous that even a man who committed as many wrongs as Eichmann could feign guilt and meet Walzer's requirements for dirty hands. There is no way to distinguish between a truly moral man who feels guilty and one who uses their position as a politician to commit unnecessary [crimes].

Sarah: This paragraph was a huge struggle for me, but I found Reviewer 1's comments extremely helpful. I basically rewrote it and removed the quote he suggested taking out. I'm still not sure if it is perfect, but I can't think of any other way to say that Eichmann could have pretended he felt guilty and appealed to this aspect of dirty hands to feign innocence.

Using Peer Review to Improve Student Writing

Overview

Having students give feedback to one another on their papers can have many advantages: the students get opportunities to develop their ability to give constructive feedback, they receive advice on their drafts, they have a broader audience for their work than just a single instructor, and they see different approaches other students have taken in responding to an assignment. However, peer review has to be carefully managed in order for students to take the process seriously; students tend to be skeptical of the value of receiving feedback from their fellow students rather than instructors, and to regard peer review sessions that provide vague or tangential feedback as “busywork.” This handout first describes general considerations that can help improve the quality of the feedback students offer one another before describing several approaches to peer review.

Table of Contents:

[General Considerations](#)

[Creating an Environment for Useful Feedback](#)

[Forms of Peer Review: Comments Prepared Before Class](#)

[Forms of Peer Review: Comments Prepared During Class](#)

[Peer Review and Students' Experiences](#)

[Evaluating Peer Review as an Instructor](#)

General Considerations

Clarity of Purpose

Students need to know what they are expected to learn from exchanging feedback with their peers. Are you asking them to develop their own analytical skills? To become better proofreaders? To learn how to decide which advice to take as writers? To become more comfortable with the kinds of editorial processes they might encounter in their academic or professional futures? Being explicit about your goals can help them see how the peer review process fits into the larger context of your course.

Group Size

Peer review groups can be large (an entire class could workshop a single student's work, for example) or small (with students working in small groups).

Whole-class workshops can be helpful for developing shared standards about what to focus on in reviewing a paper and what kind of tone to use in delivering feedback. This method of peer review works best when students have read and prepared comments on the paper before class and come ready to discuss the work in detail. It also helps for instructors to have prepared comments on the paper and to be ready to lead discussion. Time constraints may make it impossible to offer a whole-class workshop for every student's paper, but workshopping one or

two sample papers provided by volunteers or drawn from past iterations of the same course can prove very helpful.

Smaller workshop groups can range in size, and your choice of commenting format (see “Forms of Peer Review” below) will affect your choice of that size: students can’t be expected to review many papers for one class session if you want them to write detailed critiques for each of them. Thus, if you are using comment letters, your groups might include only three or four students. Class demographics matter here, too; students will not appreciate having to write three comment letters if some of their peers are only required to write two, so you will need to find a way to divide work evenly.

When using small-group workshops, it can be helpful for the instructor to “float” between groups to offer feedback on whether students are giving one another sufficiently detailed and engaged feedback. For example, if the reviewers in some groups seem too readily inclined to agree with one another, the instructor might point out that it can be valuable to the writer whose work is under review to hear competing perspectives and probe for those.

With almost any approach to peer review, it can be helpful to make sure that students get feedback from more than one peer on any given assignment. This allows them to have a better sense of whether a particular reader’s perceptions of their work is likely to resonate with others. If you use small groups throughout the term, you will need to decide whether to have students work in the same small groups consistently, which can help them develop a sense of camaraderie and investment in one another’s work, or whether to change the membership of the groups from one paper to the next. In any class, some students will be better at giving feedback than others, and these students might be seen as a scarce resource that should be shared as widely as possible.

When to Schedule Peer Review

Students can benefit from peer review at any stage of the writing process. To decide when to schedule peer review for your students, think about what you hope they will get out of it. If you want students to help each other with the formation of thesis statements or thinking about how to structure their papers, a peer review session early on would be most useful. If you want students to work on helping one another develop their points or polish their prose, scheduling peer review later in the process is probably best. Take care in deciding how peer review will work for your students; different kinds of peer review will better serve different goals, as the varieties of peer review explained below make clear.

Pacing

When students engage in peer review in class—whether they have prepared written materials in advance or not—some groups will finish earlier than others. Letting those groups leave as soon as they have finished can create an incentive for everyone to rush through the peer review process in order to leave early. Thus, it can be useful to either schedule the peer review session first, if more than one activity will take place in class that day, or to ask groups that finish early to engage in follow-up work, such as having each member of the group read through the feedback received and start making notes about how he or she might revise the paper.

Make It Count

Whatever approach you take—whether you have students take work home or do all of their peer reviewing in class—making the work they do as reviewers count in some way toward their grade can provide an incentive to do this work well. It can also be helpful to provide students with feedback on their feedback, letting them know, for example, whether the comments they are

giving one another are tracking issues that are truly relevant to the assignments in question and whether their comments are specific enough to be helpful.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Creating an Environment for Useful Feedback

One sure way to make peer review more beneficial for students is to model for them how to give feedback on their peers' writing. You can do this in a number of ways. For example, you might have your class workshop a sample paper from a previous semester and offers suggestions for improving their oral discussion or written comments before asking them to review their current peers' work. You might also show them samples of written student feedback from previous semesters and ask them to discuss the strengths and weakness of that feedback and how they might improve it. Before you model productive peer review for your students, think about what kinds of feedback you want to prime them to give their fellow students.

Additive Comments

Most students equate “peer review” with “criticism,” which can be constructive but is not always so. Having students provide only additive feedback—that is, make suggestions only about what the writer might add to or develop in the paper—is one way to help keep peer review positive.

Reader Response

Encouraging your students to be thoughtful readers of their peers' work and to respond to it based on their own experience of the paper as readers is also useful. For instance: “the topic sentence of this paragraph led me to expect you to focus on X, so I was confused that there was so much of Y and Z in this paragraph instead.”

Constructive Criticism

While modeling useful feedback is key to successful peer review, it's also worthwhile to mention to your students a few categories of less useful comments that are best avoided. One such category is **overly general comments**, such as “I just didn't get it” or “it's great!” The lack of detail in these comments make them unusable to writers looking to improve their work. **Overly specific comments** are similarly unhelpful. If a peer reviewer focuses, say, on the writer's use of commas or comments excessively on a single point or idea to the exclusion of others, that doesn't give the writer the kind of substantive feedback that is most helpful for revision. Finally, and obviously, **personal insults** or feedback that gets too personal really has no place in peer review. Comments like “this is a stupid idea” or “how lame” will not help any writer revise.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Forms of Peer Review: Comments Prepared Before Class

There are many forms of peer review that ask students to study one another's papers carefully outside of class. One advantage to this is that it signals to students that you expect them to invest real time and thought in giving one another feedback. Writing the feedback in advance can help students prepare for face-to-face workshops held in class. A sample prompt for guiding students through in-class workshops based on reviews written in advance can be found in [Supplement 2, “Guidelines for Small Group Workshop.”](#)

Comment Letters

Comment letters are mini-essays that analyze the strengths and weaknesses of a draft and make suggestions for revision. Sample prompts for writing such a letter can be found in [Supplement 1, “How to Write A Peer Critique.”](#)

Overview and Marginal Comments

This approach asks students to replicate a commenting method commonly used by writing instructors. Reviewers write one or two paragraphs at the beginning or end of the paper about what is working well and what needs improvement, and they make notes in the margins throughout the paper that direct the writer’s attention to specific places that are particularly strong or weak. A sample prompt for this approach can be found in [Supplement 3, “Structured Commenting Protocol.”](#)

Commenting Forms

Forms can be used to prompt reviewers to address specific issues in the papers they analyze. These are most effective when they ask open-ended questions about how and why various elements of a paper are or aren’t working well, rather than questions to which a reviewer can simply reply “yes” or “no.” A sample of an effective commenting form can be found in [Supplement 4, “ENG 124 Peer Critiques.”](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Forms of Peer Review: Comments Prepared During Class

Commenting Forms

Often instructors make use of commenting forms for in-class peer review. This is useful to do especially when it is advantageous to have the instructor on hand to provide guidance or feedback to students as they work through peer review, or when it is useful to the student completing the peer review to have the writer on hand to answer questions or discuss feedback. For this kind of peer review, it is essential that students bring hard copies of their papers for each peer reviewer or that electronic access to papers is available to peer reviewers during class. The same commenting forms used for take-home peer review can be used for in-class peer review. (See an example [Supplement 4, “ENG 124 Peer Critiques.”](#))

Self-Evaluation

When students get used to performing peer review on their fellow students’ work and anticipate that doing so will be a regular part of a writing assignment, it is often valuable and interesting to ask them instead to perform a self-evaluation of their own work. This requires students to take a step back from their own writing, read it with a critical eye, and consider it from an outsider’s perspective. While a form that guides students through this process is often helpful, you can also ask students to respond to their own work using a list of criteria they extract from the writing prompt or your grading rubric. It is useful to ask students to perform such self-evaluations in class, so that you can be on hand to offer guidance and feedback.

“Speed” Peer Review

This method of peer review can be a useful tool when many students are struggling with a particular aspect of the assignment or desire feedback at an early stage. It works well with any part or aspect of the paper that can be fairly quickly read and for which the instructor or students can identify correct or desirable components. A good “speed” peer review could be performed, for instance, on thesis statements. For such an exercise, students should bring printed versions

of their thesis statements to class. Chairs should be arranged in a circle, and the class should come to a consensus about how exactly they should respond to the thesis. For instance, students might focus on if the thesis is specific enough, or if it responds to the prompt. The instructor then has students pass papers to the right and gives students three minutes to read and offer written feedback under the thesis in front of them. After three minutes, students pass papers to the right again, and the process is repeated. In this way, in less than ten minutes, students can get several different perspectives on the effectiveness of their theses.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Peer Review and Students' Experiences

While most students greatly appreciate the opportunity to read their peers' papers and receive feedback from peers on their own work, when students resist or complain about peer review, it is often for one of two reasons, both of which are easily addressed.

"I'm getting mixed messages."

Sometimes students have difficulty deciding between conflicting comments from their peers. It can be helpful to acknowledge that choosing which advice to follow is not always easy and to provide opportunities for your students to talk with you, either in writing or in person, before they decide what to do. For example, you might have them complete a simple questionnaire immediately after the review session that includes questions such as, "What is the most important revision you plan to make to this paper?" and "What questions do you still have about how to revise this draft?"

"Who am I to judge?"

Some students are self-conscious about their own adequacy as evaluators of other students' work; they feel that, as peers, they do not have superior experience or knowledge and are in fact so need of help with their own writing that they cannot possibly offer valuable feedback to a fellow student. An easy and honest reply to this kind of trepidation is that peer review is not about making definite pronouncements, but rather about offering suggestions which writers can consider and then take only if it seems helpful. In addition, it is arguable that, as a student in the same class and writing a paper in response to the same prompt as the writer whose paper she is peer reviewing, the peer reviewer knows more about the expectations of the assignment and the challenges it presents than anyone except the instructor. As a peer, the peer reviewer is actually more, not less qualified than an "expert" from outside the class.

"The peers who read my paper never give me helpful feedback."

Occasionally students will complain that the advice and comments about their papers that they receive from peers is unhelpful. Even for students who feel this way, peer review can nevertheless still be a useful process because it is not only the feedback a writer gets that makes peer review valuable, but also the opportunity to read and, more importantly, critique other students' work. The exercise of analyzing and explaining how a peer tackles an assignment—or fails to—should make a writer think more deliberately about her own work. UM instructor Jeremiah Chamberlin has written a helpful short essay about this aspect of peer review available here (<http://www.glimmertrain.com/fmjan09.html>).

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

Evaluating Peer Review as an Instructor

After your students complete peer review, you likely will want to gauge its effectiveness. There are a few ways to go about doing this. One is to collect rough drafts with final drafts and do a quick comparison of them—did peer review inspire the kinds of revision you wanted—substantial revision of ideas, polishing, etc.? You can also ask students to write a brief response to peer review, explaining how they think it went, which advice they took, and what was most useful and why. If you ask them to give you this information, they will likely want to know what you think of their decisions. Finally, if you plan to use peer review multiple times during your course, it will be useful to give your students feedback on the quality of their feedback to help them improve their commenting skills. Ideally, you should offer them written feedback on their feedback to others (details about what they did well and about where their comments might have been made clearer or more specific). In addition, you might choose to grade their feedback as an incentive to help them improve. An example of a simple rubric that could be used to grade peer review letters or forms can be found in [Supplement 5, “Grading Criteria for Peer Critiques.”](#)

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

For further information:

<http://techtv.mit.edu/genres/25-humanities-arts-and-social-sciences/videos/14628-no-one-writes-alone-peer-review-in-the-classroom-a-guide-for-instructors>

And thanks to instructors who contributed sample documents: Hanna Pylväinen, Delia DeCourcy, Lizzie Hutton, Naomi Silver, and Jeremiah Chamberlin.

Read each essay twice. You will be surprised how many things that you don't understand the first time through will become clear on a second read. Mark up the text as you go along.

Your 1 page letter (yes, write, "Dear _____") should look like this:

Paragraph 1: Detail what works in the essay. Avoid using the language "I liked": articulate *how* or *why* something pleases you and thus "works" for the essay. Make use of the vocabulary we use in class. Be as specific as possible. For instance: *The essay opened immediately inside the argument.* Or perhaps: *Organization was strong. I could read through the topic sentences one by one and understand the logical progression of the argument. Best was the topic sentence to paragraph 8, which had the tricky role of transitioning us into counter-argument.*

Paragraph 2: Paraphrase the essay's argument as you believe the author intended it to be. For instance: *In this essay, you argue that while some critics see The Arabian Nights as a completely misogynistic text (the "They Say"), Shahrazad's wit and ability to save herself require us to rethink our perceptions of the role of women (the "I Say").* This should be your shortest paragraph — do NOT provide a detailed summary or critique.

Paragraph 3: Consider the quality of the argument. Again, avoid the language of likes and dislikes. Consider whether someone reasonable could argue with the author, whether there is evidence to support the claims, whether the argument is oversimplified, etcetera. For instance: *Instead of a larger argument, you've written a list of points which simply delineate the way Woody Allen's films use black and white contrast.* Or perhaps: *In claiming that Shane is not a hero, you've written a moralistic argument, and values aren't fair game for argument.*

Paragraph 4: Detail what didn't work in the essay outside the argument. Avoid discussing spelling or grammar issues unless they truly inhibited your comprehension of the essay. **Begin with the most serious problems first.** For instance: *Your choice of organizing the paper by moving from one source to the next source prevents you from ever clearly comparing sources or fully stating your own opinion.*

Paragraph 5: Make suggestions for the rewrite. Here you are prioritizing the problems you have identified: *Find source evidence for every claim you make, especially in paragraph 6, where your argument is the most contentious.* Or: *Add a counter-argument in the penultimate paragraph.* Or: *The ratio of evidence to discussion is highly skewed towards evidence — expand the discussion of your own ideas.*

Paragraph 6: End with a final concluding thought about the essay as a whole. Sign the letter.

Guidelines for Small Group Workshop

Purpose:

To help the writer see what aspects of the essay still need work and to suggest possible approaches to the essay's revision. This is a time for the writer to work directly with the audience to make the essay as effective as possible.

Readers:

As the audience, your goal is to help the writer achieve her or his desired reaction to the essay. This is not a time for you to read your critique letter verbatim; it's a time to discuss your reaction, the writer's concerns, areas for development, points of confusion in the writing and strategies for revision. Ask yourself what you can discuss that will help the essay the most in terms of purpose, tone, perspective, macro organization, and logic.

Writers:

Most of us have trouble responding well to criticism of our own writing. Writing is such a personal act, so it can be difficult to separate criticism of the essay from criticism of our ideas and of ourselves. Approach the workshop with a positive mindset. You're all in the same boat and working toward improving your writing. The session is for your benefit and will help you improve the essay before it is graded. You can set the tone for the workshop by asking a few key questions of your critiquers before they begin discussing your work. Create a situation in which you feel your readers are working *with* you on the paper, not against you. Try to avoid becoming defensive. If you argue away all the readers' reactions and suggestions, you defeat the purpose of the workshop. Do not, however, feel that you must accept every suggestion from your readers. Sometimes you'll get contradictory or confusing reactions. Ask for explanation and elaboration. Your readers can help you see where you've gone astray if you explain the goals of your essay to them.

The Group:

Don't work from your written critique. Instead, use your copy of the draft with margin comments as the basis for discussion. It often works well for the writer to control the discussion, but if he or she isn't comfortable doing so, another member of the group can get the ball rolling. The group should allow about ten minutes for each paper.

Structured Commenting Protocol

When you comment on your peers' drafts this semester, please follow these steps:

1. Read the essay through once, without marking it. It can be helpful to take a few notes while you read.
2. After you've done this, identify the two or three most important "higher order" things you think your peer needs could improve.

[*Note:* "higher order" concerns may include aspects of course content, conceptual understanding, argument, complexity, analysis, use of evidence, development of ideas, organization, understanding of audience, and sometimes diction and tone.]

3. Construct a head comment—a comment that you will paste at the beginning of your peer's paper—that does the following: 1) offers a brief but specific description of general strengths, and 2) explains the two or three things to work on in a way that frames your remarks in terms of techniques and strategies to improve for subsequent drafts and assignments (e.g., "you've done an excellent job of..., but two central things to continue to work on are..."). This comment will probably be fairly detailed in presenting and discussing these two or three focus areas. It may be helpful to think of this head comment as a kind of "roadmap" to the marginal comments you will insert.
4. Finally, go back through the paper and, writing in full sentences, insert selective marginal comments and/or praise to reinforce and exemplify your head comment (e.g., "This point is unclear because..." or "You do a nice job here of..."). Give explanation and/or examples when you note both areas to improve *and* areas of strength.

It's fine if the marginal comments reiterate points made in the head comment; indeed, they might specifically reference a moment in the head comment as a way of reinforcing it ("As I noted in my opening comment, here is a place where..."). Since your head comment will be fairly detailed, you will probably need relatively fewer marginal comments to highlight the relevant examples.

5. If you wish, additionally, to comment on "lower order" concerns (e.g., style, grammar, and/or punctuation), please focus on just one or two patterns encountered throughout the essay, explain these in a separate paragraph of your head comment, and mark up only a single representative paragraph in the essay to model corrections.

ENG 124 * Peer Critiques Hand Out

Write out a full outline of the essay's **main points**, skipping the introduction and conclusion.

What do you see as the essay's main **topic or topics** (What all the above paragraphs have in common, subject-wise)?

What do you see as the essay's main **thesis** (how all the paragraphs compare, contrast and come together to form an argument)?

Does this agree with the author's stated thesis? In what ways might the paper need to change so that its thesis and structure are accurate reflections of each other?

Where is more **evidence** needed?

Where are more **interpretations** needed?

Where do more **connections or explicit contrasts** need to be made between points?

Does the essay **open** in an appealing, purposeful way?

How else might the essay begin, to better capture and direct our attention?

Does the essay draw a thought-provoking **conclusion**, that puts its argument in a larger context?

What else might the conclusion explore?

Grading Criteria for Peer Critiques

A: The peer critique shows evidence of exceptional effort, insight, and detail. It closely analyzes the essay's argumentation and organization and provides concrete revision recommendations.

B: The peer critique is thoughtful and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, occasionally providing suggestions for revision.

C: The assignment was completed. The critique attempts to point out strengths and weaknesses but does so in a general way.

D: The peer critique was attempted but not successfully completed. It is either too brief and/or lacks enough content to be helpful to the writer.

E: The critique was not turned in or was turned in late.

Please note: an "A" will be reserved for truly outstanding work. Pluses and minuses will be awarded in accordance with the degree to which the assignment possesses characteristics associated with the grades above and below the base grade.

Peer Review Workshop Guidelines

Adapted from a handout created by Jennifer Metsker, Sweetland Center for Writing

These guidelines contain principles and instructions for students as they engage in small-group (3-4 students) peer review workshops. Essays may be exchanged prior to the workshop via CTools or email (as in the sample assignment reproduced here), or they may be exchanged on the spot as the workshop commences.

General Workshop Principles

- 1. Start with Concerns of the Highest Order.** All parts of writing contribute to the overall meaning and effectiveness of an essay, from main argument to word choice to use of the semi-colon, but because of the limited time of workshop, focus on the elements considered to be of higher concern first. For example, don't begin by critiquing comma use; begin with the main argument. Focus on depth of analysis or use of evidence, not typos or punctuation. Once larger issues have been discussed, then look at lower order concerns such as grammar and mechanics.
- 2. Use specific examples.** Avoid general blanket statements. Don't just say "there is lots of evidence," say which evidence is successful, which isn't and why. Point to specific paragraphs (I can't follow the argument from paragraph 5 to 6) or sentences (I feel like the second sentence in paragraph 5 makes a generalization). If the writer needs to go deeper, point to the place that left you too much on the surface.
- 3. Offer critique, not summary.** It might seem like summarizing what the essay does makes apparent the problems inherent within it, but workshop doesn't offer enough time for summary. Jump right into specific points and use well-chosen details as a means of evidence. No need to offer a play by play.
- 4. Be kind.** It is generally true that people will be more likely to listen to critique when it is paired with positive feedback. Take a moment at the outset or during the workshop to say something positive about the writer's work—what impressed or surprised you? Also, be considerate when offering critique. Put yourself in the writer's shoes.
- 5. But, seriously, offer critique.** Writing is an act of discovery, and there is no end to discovery. Aside from a few kudos you feel should be pointed out, the workshop should be focused on what can be improved or explored further. Even if you love an essay, consider further questions you have about the writer's ideas in order to offer him or her a new way of seeing their work (thought this doesn't mean being nit-picky!) and developing it.

Questions to Consider for Workshop

- **Argument** – Is it difficult to tell what the main argument is? Are there competing arguments? Is the argument coherent or do greater connections need to be made? Does the argument examine the question at hand with depth and complexity? How could it go further?
- **Support** – Is there enough evidence to support the main argument? Does the writer use enough specific details from the lecture? Are there any general statements that need to be explored further or further qualified with more evidence or analysis?

- **Organization** – Are the sentences and paragraphs ordered effectively? Does each paragraph have a clear purpose? Does the essay make good use transitions to create relationships? Are there disconnections between sentences or do paragraphs lose focus?
- **Style** – Is the language clear, concise, and sophisticated? Are there any awkward words or phrases that made the argument less clear? Does the tone or voice match the writer’s purpose?

General Workshop Policies

- The writer should remain silent for the majority of the workshop and ask questions at the end.
- Exceptions can be made if the workshop is going too far off topic or a group member needs to ask the writer a question.
- A workshop should last at least twenty minutes. Please push yourselves to generate substantial discussions.

The following prompts may be given to groups that are “done early,” or as additional in-class work for individual writers after the workshops.

After Workshop

Once your workshop is over, there are still many ways to keep thinking about your writing or your writing self or creativity in general.

Prompts for Further Group Discussion

1. Were there any unexpected or interesting threads that ran through all of the group members’ essays? Or some of the essays? Any coincidences or simultaneities? Discuss these moments in greater depth. Where can you take these connections?
2. What are the subtle differences between your arguments that make each writer’s perspective unique? What are the similarities? Are the perspectives still unique?
3. Did someone write something that another group member might respectfully disagree with? Discuss any differences in opinion you might have.

Individual Draft Exercises

Issues of Argument

1. Write the main argument of your essay on a separate sheet of paper and play devil’s advocate. Come up with a list several conflicting points that challenge your argument. Choose one or two significant conflicts and then freewrite about why your argument is still true. Could some of these points be incorporated into your argument to make it stronger or more complex?

2. Read your thesis then read your conclusion. Has your thesis evolved beyond its initial ideas? If there isn't a clear sense of evolution, freewrite about the difference between the thesis and the conclusion. If there is no evolution, repeat step one.

Logical Organization (Flow)

3. Once you arrive at an argument that seems stable, write your thesis on the top of a sheet of paper. Then go through the essay and write the main argument/topic of each paragraph below the main argument, leaving a space between each statement.

4. Between each topic sentence, write the relationship to the next paragraph. What is the nature of the transitions? If there is no clear relationship go back to the essay and figure out if the paragraph is needed or is in the right place. Does a disconnect between paragraphs signal an unresolved argument?

5. Examine the nature of your transitions. If the transitions are mostly "Also" or "Another" statements, reconsider your main argument. Is it more like a list than a discussion? Is it complex enough that the essay must offer many points of view on the argument?

7. Read through each paragraph paying close attention to how one sentence relates to the next. Focusing on a single paragraph, cover up the sentence following the first one and ask yourself where that sentence should naturally lead. Now look at the next sentence. Does it take you where you expect? Does it connect to the final idea in the last sentence or use transitional elements to move to a new idea?

Evidence and Analysis

6. Go through the essay and find the examples you have provided. Underline them. Then underline the analysis that follows with a wavy line. Are there any examples provided with no analysis? Is there too little analysis or not enough evidence?

Intros and Conclusions

8. Look at the intro to make sure it isn't too broad. Can you cut out the first sentence without losing the overall sense of the paragraph? The next sentence? How many sentences can you remove without affecting the meaning, voice, or clarity?

9. Move to the conclusion. Put a bracket around the parts of the conclusion that offer merely summary or information that has already been stated in the essay. How much summary is there compared to new ideas? If the conclusion is merely summary, see how much summary you can remove without affecting the cohesiveness of the essay.

10. Freewrite about what you learned from your own argument. How did your argument change you? What new ideas do you have about the world? Use specific examples to discuss this change. Can any of these ideas be incorporated into your conclusion to make it stronger?

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT

Workshops on Weds, Sept 30 & Oct 14 – CTools Posting and Peer Critique Letter

For these two workshops, you will post your essay on CTools by 12 midnight on the Sunday before class. Then you will download the essays belonging to those students in your group and critique them before coming to class. In addition to reading the essays carefully and making margin comments, you will also *write a short letter to the writer*.

Step 1. Post your essay on the ctools discussion page under the appropriate topic. Use a user-friendly format like .doc (no .docx).

Step 2. Download and print the essays belonging to the other members of your assigned group from the first day of workshop as soon as you can (don't wait until the last minute in case you can't download).

Step 3. Read the essays thoroughly. Number each paragraph in the essay and make margin comments based on your reactions. Mark the places where you feel the writer has done something praiseworthy as well as places where you stumble.

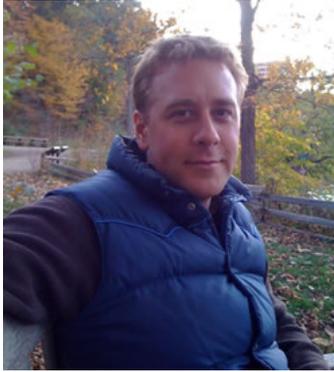
Examples: "This thesis uses the idea of 'inspiration' in an interesting way!" "This sentence confuses me." "Can you offer more evidence that atmosphere affects creativity?"

Step 4. On a separate sheet of paper (typed, single-spaced, with well organized paragraphs), write a short letter to the writer (a couple of paragraphs will do) consisting of two positive points you notice in the essay and two things you feel should be improved. In your letter, focus on points of analysis and avoid summary. Also, be sure your comments are well written and easy for the reader to follow. Print out this letter and bring the marked up essays and letters to class.

Start the letter by restating the main idea of the essay in a sentence or two.

Example: I believe this essay shows how Coors Light ads maintain stereotypes despite the self-conscious approach to advertising methods they use to appeal to wise consumers.

Step 5. In class, take turns discussing each writer's essay based on your letters and margin comments, and following our workshop principles, questions and policies. Return the marked up essays and letters to the writer at the end of the workshop.



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Workshop Is Not for You

Whenever my students complain about workshop, their gripes invariably have to do with issues of reciprocity. Or, rather, the lack thereof—they have spent a great deal of time carefully reading and writing thoughtful comments on the work of their peers, only to receive the vaguest feedback in return. They are angry because they feel that workshop is a social contract. Specifically, one predicated on The Golden Rule: *Do Unto Others As You Would Have Them Do Unto You*. They've spent months "putting in their time" writing critiques and commentary with the understanding that the "payoff" for this diligence would be receiving the same level of attention to and suggestions for their work. Sometimes they are so angry about this violation of community trust that they can barely resist naming names. And even if they are mature enough to look past the issues of betrayal and fairness, there is still the practical matter of lacking direction for their revisions. So they come to me seeking retribution. Justice.

Needless to say, they aren't pleased when I tell them it doesn't matter. "Workshop isn't about your work," I say. "In fact, in a perfect workshop you might never have your writing read by your peers."

Now their anger has turned to confusion. "Then what's the point?" they ask. To them, this is the whole bargain—you read someone else's work so they'll read yours.

"The point of workshop is to make you a better writer."

"That's what I mean," they reply. (They think I've misunderstood them.) "How am I supposed to get better if I don't know what's wrong with my writing?"

"You become a strong writer by *writing* critiques, not reading them," I say. Being forced to analyze the effectiveness of other writers' stories and to then provide them with clear, concise, specific suggestions for improvement will do more to develop a writer's craft than almost anything else. Through this process writers develop a stronger objectivity about their own work, sharpen their critical thinking skills, and hone their language. A writer can't always recognize flat dialogue or abrupt scenes or uneven pacing in her own work, but she can sure as hell see it in someone else's. And the more adept she becomes at identifying it elsewhere, the more easily that skill becomes adapted into her own writing—it becomes second nature.

At this point in the conversation, most students will begrudgingly admit that commenting on the work of others has benefits for their own writing. But they will still grumble that writing critiques feels like busywork, that the same task could be accomplished by reading the work of their peers and then simply discussing it in the open forum of the class (after all, part of their complaint—whether voiced or not—has to do with the amount of time they spent on the other person's writing). What I try to explain, however, is that the effort required to articulate *why* and *how* the components of a story are working will not only force them to think more deeply about their understanding of the story's central concerns, but might also challenge their initial reading of the piece. This takes time.

Now, I know it's not much of a consolation to tell ourselves "They're only hurting themselves" when we don't receive the thoughtful feedback we'd hoped for on our work. Nor am I arguing that constructive criticism isn't helpful; there are real benefits to having our stories read closely by our peers. After all, simply understanding the physics of force, inertia, and angle of impact that govern the game of pool doesn't necessarily mean I'll be able to sink the ball when I lean over the felt with my cue; it takes years of practice before these skills become engrained, and even then it still takes a mixture of focus, concentration, and luck to pull off a difficult bank shot. So having someone who can comment on our form, our follow-through, even our choice of shots as we learn can be tremendously helpful and instructive.

But at the same time, by mistakenly believing that the most beneficial aspect of the workshop experience in terms of our artistic development is what takes place when it's "our day" to have our writing critiqued, we do ourselves—and our work—an enormous disservice. Understanding, instead, that one of the best opportunities for personal growth as an author comes from the sustained, close reading and articulate analysis of someone else's writing will have the effect of shifting the workshop model from one of social contracts, fairness, and duty to that of true learning and mutual respect. More importantly, we might come to realize that the most selfish thing we can do for our own work is to be altruistic. Perhaps *that's* the point.

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