

# Peer Pressure, Peer Power: Toward Systematic Collaborative Peer Review in the Writing Classroom

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## What Is Peer Review and Why Do It?

Peer review is more than just having students read and comment on each other's papers. The idea of peer review extends into what academics do—to the idea of disciplinarity. We research and write. Then we submit our writing to “peer reviewers” who comment on our essays in different ways, and either accept or reject our attempts at publication. I believe that for students, we should think of peer review in similar ways. Peer review can be “sold” to students for what it really is—the process through which academic writing and communication gets done.

Peer review can get the power of student-student/student-teacher reciprocal teaching and learning moving full steam ahead. Rather than having the teacher play the role of all-wise, all-knowing, systematic collaborative peer review can send a loud and clear message to students that they have much to teach as well as learn—that the processes of teaching and learning go together quite well and make each other, and everyone involved, much stronger. By conducting peer review in a systematic and collaborative way—by making it central to our curriculum—students and teachers can learn to *internalize* the writing strategies and moves they wish to continue using and developing (and avoid less-desired strategies and moves) so they can *externalize* these writing techniques in other composing and communicative situations.

## Some Things to Consider

- The huge variety of ways/methods of peer review

I think the way to approach peer review (as with most teaching) is with an *experimental attitude*. Start having students read and comment on each other's papers, and soon you will begin to make adjustments that suit your—and your students'—needs and desires. There is much choice involved in the art of systematic collaborative peer review.

- How to form groups/partners

An important initial choice involves how to form groups. Experts debate on the optimal size of groups, but a good working group should be between 3-5 students. Again, you can experiment

with groups of 2, 3, 5. Groups should be formed early in the term. Group members should exchange contact information. These group partnerships can also be utilized for other collaborative learning endeavors and projects.

➤ How to give comments/feedback

You will want to explore and develop the many ways students can give each other feedback. Do you want to have students give feedback during class or out of class? Do you want students to talk about their essays before giving written feedback or after? How much *conversation* should be included in peer review? (For example, having the reviewer read the essay and supply verbal suggestions while the *reviewee* writes commentary can work quite well.) Should commentary be hand-written or digital/typed?

➤ How to train students

Importantly, students must be provided with ongoing, iterated training in peer review. Experts encourage students to focus on higher-order concerns (HOCs) like claim, structure, and evidence first in early drafts and later-order concerns (LOCs) like grammar and spelling in later more final drafts. It is also a good idea to encourage a mix of praise and constructive criticism. Many students feel they don't have the authority or expertise to give constructive criticism. But ALL students can be taught the value of giving substantial, detailed, and specific *analytic praise* to work they feel they have nothing to "criticize."

➤ How to access

You will need to develop methods of accessing peer review in order for students to truly take it seriously. In my writing courses, peer review counts as 20% of their overall grade. Assessment (as all good assessment should) then becomes integral to how you are training students to tutor each other with their writing and writing processes.

➤ Teaching while Learning

Finally, peer review is a truly reciprocal learning experience—we will learn as much if not more than our students. We can learn to be better responders to student writing. We can learn to be better at, and perhaps conduct more frequent, one-to-one conferences. We can learn the value of multi-draft (even portfolio) writing instruction. And we can learn just how much students have to teach (and learn from) us and one another.