

Composition I: Join the Conversation

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PART I

WORKING WITH PEERS

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WORKING WITH PEERS

Revision doesn't have to happen by yourself. You can (and should!) call upon your peers to help you develop and clarify your draft.



Figure 1. Getting input from others about your writing can be intimidating at first, but feedback from others is invaluable and worth every bit of effort or humility it takes on your part.

Writers often find that letting other writers review their work is tremendously helpful. Most schools have writing centers, where students can have their essays reviewed by experienced student writers or tutors. These tutors can work with you one-on-one to help you improve your writing and earn better grades.

You should realize that reviewing your work, like planning, drafting, or revising, is a recursive process. Remember that a recursive practice is one where you return to your ideas to improve them. For instance, you may want to write an introduction to an essay and have it reviewed by a teacher or classmate before trudging forward. If you're on the wrong track, you'd be better off knowing about it sooner rather than later — especially if a deadline or due date is looming. Some writers wait to write their introduction after they have a draft of their essay. The writing process is

not linear where you move from concrete steps to the next. It's circular and full of time for reflection.

When In Doubt, Talk it Out

Even if it is optional, it's a good idea to have a conversation about your piece of writing with someone else. First, you could ask a friend to read through your draft, and mark places where difficult or complicated ideas do not seem to be coming through clearly. Then, look at each passage and explain to your friend what you meant to say in that passage. Sometimes verbally articulating an idea helps you clarify your ideas for your readers. Take note of what you said more clearly in the conversation than you wrote in the draft. What did you not say that needs to be included in your draft? What kinds of questions or points did your listeners make that could be included in your draft? Talking through your ideas will make you more aware of any shortcomings or weaknesses in your paper.

Watch It

Some classes may require a peer review as part of an essay project. Even when not strictly required, though, peer review can be valuable for many reasons, as the video below explains.



One or more interactive elements has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view them online here: <https://open.ocollearnok.org/lstuck-eycomp1/?p=123#oembed-1>

You can view the transcript for “Otis College: Peer Writing Review Process” here (download).

Who better to ask if your essay is meeting its goals than someone else working on the same task? Consider reaching out to a classmate to offer to exchange insights on drafts before the due date.

The Need for Specific Feedback

“There are two kinds of editors, those who correct your copy and those who say it’s wonderful.”— Theodore H. White

Let’s suppose you just gave your paper to your roommate and asked her to look it over. You explain that you’ve been working on the paper for three days and that you really want to earn an A. “I want your honest opinion,” you say. “Don’t worry about hurting my feelings. What do you think?” You watch your roommate’s face as she reads your paper. She grimaces. Laughs. Yawns.

Finally, she hands you the paper back and says, “This is terrible.”

This may be the type of “review” you are accustomed to receiving — overly critical and not very helpful. Perhaps you agree that your paper is in trouble and you need help, but without a better understanding of what is wrong, you are not likely to be able to do much about it. Furthermore, how can you trust your roommate’s judgment of your paper? What if it just so happens that your roommate strongly dislikes sentences that start with “However,” and, seeing such sentences in your paper, she decided right there that the paper was terrible?

Ultimately, what makes an evaluation worthwhile is the soundness of its criteria. In other words, as a writer, you want to know whether someone likes your paper, but also what factors they are taking into consideration when they review your paper. Both the reviewer and the person being reviewed need to be as clear as possible about the criteria that will be used to evaluate the work. Are your reviewers only looking at your grammar, or are they also determining the rationality of your arguments? Does a comma splice make a bigger difference than a rough transition between paragraphs?

All of these matters should be spelled out clearly beforehand, either by the writer or the reviewer. As a writer, what are you personally working on? It’s not a bad idea to think about your strengths and challenges as a writer before handing over your paper to a reviewer, or to use work that has been returned to you in the past with feedback. For example, if you’re writing a paper for a professor you’ve had before, and who has made comments on your past work, use those comments to provide your reviewer with a focus. If you are the reviewer in this situation, ask to see the assignment and rubric. You can also ask the writer for specific guidelines, areas of greatest need, or even anything s/he might know about the grader.

Being a Good Peer Reviewer

Sooner or later, someone is going to hand you a piece of writing and ask for your opinion. You may be asked to review another student’s essay as part of your classwork. Perhaps a friend or a younger brother or sister has come to you for help. If you develop a reputation for being a good writer, then the chances are good that even your boss might ask you to look over letters or policy statements and offer your professional opinion.

In any case, if you really want to do a good job in these situations, you’re going to need reviewing skills. You’re going to need to be able to identify problems, suggest alternatives, and, more importantly, support everything you write with reasonable claims. Furthermore, you must do all this in a convincing way that makes the writer want to make the changes you suggest. You must know what’s wrong with a document, why it’s wrong, and how to fix it. One way you can get better at self-reviewing is to spend time reviewing other

people's work. Eventually, you'll develop a knack for spotting errors that will serve you well as you edit and revise your own work.

Reviewing Criteria

In the example above, you were not able to gain any insights or knowledge from your roommate letting you know that your "terrible" paper. What you need is some feedback that would help you improve your paper. You don't know if your paper is "terrible" because it lacks a strong thesis, strayed from the assignment, or if it contains too many grammatical errors. When you are reviewing your own paper or the paper of a friend or classmate, ask yourself three questions about its organization, focus, style, development and grammatical conventions:

Organization

1. What strengths and weaknesses does the paper have?
2. What's the most important thing that the writer is trying to say?
3. Does the writer employ transitions effectively from beginning to end?

Focus

1. Is the paper focused on the assignment throughout the paper without jumping from subject to subject?
2. Does the writer fulfill the obligation stated in the thesis?
3. What's the writer's position on the issue?

Style

1. Which style is the paper written?
2. Does it work for the subject matter and assignment?
3. Is the writing at an appropriate level for the target audience?

Development

1. Does the title indicate what the paper is about?
2. Does the opening paragraph draw you in?
3. Does the concluding sentence draw the argument of the paper to a close by bringing together the main points provided in the paper, or does it just end?

Grammatical Conventions

1. Are common or appropriate writing conventions followed?
2. Are grammar, spelling, punctuation and other mechanics observed?
3. What is your advice on how to improve the paper's grammatical mistakes.

While reviewing the paper, make notes in the margins of any problems you find. If you believe that developing a paragraph a little bit more would be helpful to the argument, write <more>. If you are unclear of something, write <? not sure>. If you notice a missing comma, insert it in the correct spot, but be sure to set it off somehow so that you or your friend will notice the correction. If another word might work better, write <WC> to indicate inappropriate word choice.

Please note: It is important not to overwhelm your writer with comments. As much as possible, try to avoid repeating similar comments (e.g. don't correct every single comma error you find). Also, although it can be tempting to make some of the changes you suggest yourself, you never want to rewrite the work you are reviewing.

CARES Peer Review

The least helpful comment to receive from a peer reviewer is, “Looks good to me.” The CARES method helps you to articulate useful things that can benefit the author when they revisit their draft. Keep in mind that as a reviewer or as the writer being reviewed, you want to make and take comments in the spirit of helpfulness.

- **C: Congratulate.** What does the writer do well in this assignment? (List one or more aspects.) Also, please write the writer’s main claim or focus (thesis) according to what you have read. (It may not be the last sentence of the first paragraph – the traditional place for the thesis.)
- **A: Ask clarifying questions.** What part(s) of the essay were a bit confusing? Why? What specific suggestions (3 or fewer) do you have for revising the unclear parts of this writing?
- **R: Request more.** What would you like to know more about the topic that can enhance the essay and that supports the thesis?
- **E: Evaluate** its value. What specific detail(s) do not work with the essay (e.g. doesn’t support the thesis) or can be moved within the essay?
- **S: Summarize.** Overall, what new information have you learned or how are you thinking differently after this reading?

Visit the Excelsior Online Writing Lab to watch a video of students using the CARES method.

Contribute!

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