

Guidelines for Peer Editing

Few writers can rely on their own judgment to know whether something they've written is clear to someone else. For one thing, by the time we finish writing anything, we usually know a lot about the topic. We know it too well to tell whether it would be clear to someone who is reading about it for the first time. Peer editing sessions give writers an opportunity to find out what their writing looks like to someone else. Reviewers can help you discover whether what you've written is

- appropriate to your purpose and intended reader
- organized so that it's easy to follow
- clear, concise and easy to read

As a peer-review reader, you will have an opportunity to help other writers improve their skills while simultaneously practicing your critical reading skills, which in turn makes you a more astute reviewer of your own writing. Further, in most workplaces it's very common to be asked either to provide your work in draft form for others to review or to review draft documents written by others. It's useful to be familiar with this essential part of the writing process.

When You are the Reader:

Always read through a piece twice

Use your first time through just to get familiar with the piece. Your second reading is your opportunity to really try to understand what is being said and how. If you still aren't sure after two readings, the writer needs to know.

Take the role of the intended reader

What writers need most is someone who will read in the same way as the intended reader will—that is, for content, not errors. Peer editors whose only comments are about punctuation, mechanics or spelling may help the writer write a more correct piece of writing, but it still may not be clear or engaging. Leave the copyediting to the writer, and focus instead on content, organization, style, and helping the reader clarify ideas. Respond as a peer, not an evaluator; you can help by sharing with the writer what effect a section of text has on you.

Avoid “fixing” the problem

Your role as peer editor is not to fix the problems you find or substitute your ideas for the writer's, but to find out what the writer is trying to accomplish and help that writer fulfill his or her intentions. The biggest help you can offer is to point out what works and doesn't work for you as a reader. Bring the writer's attention to any problems in the text. Good reviewers don't need to be grammar experts or even experienced writers; they just need to be honest, thoughtful readers.

Be honest but constructive

It can be hard to say what you really think about a piece of writing. It's often tempting to say “Looks fine to me,” but that's not helpful at all. A good approach is to start by telling the writer what their strengths are, and then mention what doesn't work. Be positive, and be sensitive in how you phrase your criticism (“Could you clarify this statement?” rather than “Your organization is a mess”). Remember that while you should be respectful—not harsh or personal—you should also be honest. You are not

grading or evaluating their writing but helping them make it stronger by being an attentive responsive reader and listener; saying something works when it really doesn't will not help anyone.

Be specific

Try not to make blanket judgments ("You need to work on organization") or vague statements ("The second paragraph is weak"), but rather specific comments that point out a particular problem area of the paper while also offering a reason why the change is needed, as well as a specific suggestion for revision. Rather than simply saying a paragraph is "confusing," for example, try to point to a specific phrase that confuses you, explain why that phrase is problematic, and offer a suggestion for how the writer can fix it.

Ask Questions

Writers often cannot see missing links between ideas in their texts or they would have made the connections themselves. Directives, such as "expand" or "rephrase" do not help. Instead, pose specific questions when you are not clear what a section of the text means, such as "what is the connection between this paragraph and the next one?" This helps the writer clarify their intended meaning.

When You are the Writer:

Take advantage of the opportunity

Writers benefit from the feedback they get from peer editors, even if they don't much like it at the time. When you write, try to think of your work as open to revision. Take advantage of having someone read your work to make what you write clearer and more readable.

Ask when you don't understand

Feel free to ask your editor for clarification if you find the person's comments too vague or otherwise unclear. Similarly, if your peer editor says what you've written "looks fine," ask about specific parts of your draft ("Did you think the purpose was clearly stated in my introduction?").

Don't take it personally

If you feel bruised by the comments of your peer editor, remind yourself that the comments are about your writing, not about you. If someone finds what you've written unclear, confusing, muddled, repetitive or just plain boring, that's one opinion. Accept it and see what you can do to correct it.

Feel free to decline

If you've considered your peer editor's advice and don't feel that it's helpful, you're always free to ignore it. However, you should consider all comments seriously before dismissing any. Usually if a reader says there's a problem, it's worth taking a careful look. Keep an open mind and be prepared for criticism; even the best writers have room for improvement. Ultimately, you must decide for yourself what changes you will make.

"As a peer reviewer, your job is not to provide answers. You raise questions; the writer makes the choices. You act as a mirror, showing the writer how the draft looks to you and pointing out areas which need attention." - Sharon Williams