Peer review: an introduction and guidelines

Peer reviewing is tough – you have to read something, quickly figure out its most important strengths and weakness, and then formulate specific comments (written or verbal) that will help the writer improve the paper. You need **reading skills** (to discern a writer's main point, figure out what evidence is missing, etc.), **writing skills** (to provide clear, specific feedback), and **communication skills** (to phrase your critique in a constructive way). You may still be working on these skills, or at least on combining them all in one go. This is a chance to ask questions about peer review and practice. If you feel comfortable, challenge yourself and try responding to the paper in multiple ways: in the margins of the text, in a longer set of comments, or through discussion.

Don't just be vaguely positive about your classmate's paper! If you truly want to help create an environment of mutual support, you need to provide honest and helpful feedback. Of course, responding to your classmate's work is not the same as just criticizing it: you should include positive comments and personal responses alongside your suggestions for improvement. Writers can learn from praise as well as from constructive comments for change. But if you're being too nice, you're probably not being helpful. By the same token, try not to feel anxious about having a peer read and judge your work – we all recognize that these are drafts, and that we are learning together. Try not to be discouraged, defensive, or dismissive of your classmate's comments.

Instructions

1. **Check in** with each other briefly. Don't waste your time making excuses for what shape the draft is in – but do tell your reviewer what stage the draft is in, whether anything's missing right now, or if you plan to change anything. If there is anything specific that you want your reviewer to address, say so.
2. **Read your classmate's draft carefully**. Mark it up as you read it, with comments, corrections, questions, whatever. Then take a step back and think about what they have so far. Can you pull out the main arguments? Can you outline the structure? How do the parts fit together with the whole? Focus on substantive, higher-order issues (thesis, organization), not lower-order concerns (grammar, mechanics). It's a waste of time to line-edit a paragraph that's going to be deleted anyway.
3. **List the main points** made in the draft, in order of presentation. Number them in order of interest to you, noting parts that were not as well developed, interesting, or useful. Do any points need to be explained more fully or less fully? Do any seem out of order? If so, where should they be moved? Should any be eliminated? Are any confusing to you? How well are the main points supported by evidence, examples or details? Note any that need more support.
4. Prepare answers for the relevant questions below. Given the time limitations, you should probably just think them through, rather than writing anything down.
5. Together, figure out how much time you have left to discuss each paper.

6. **Take turns focusing on each essay**. Start by briefly summarizing the main parts of the paper, spend a minute describing the paper's strengths, and then use the rest of time to offer specific ideas for improvement, based on the following questions.

Questions for peer review

Overall argument: has the writer put forth an interesting intellectual problem or question? The paper should not be making claims that are obvious and incontestable, or simply a reiteration of someone else's ideas, but synthesizes what others have written, making new connections, highlighting important themes, etc. As a reviewer, focus on *how* the argument is supported (or not), rather than whether you agree or disagree.

Introduction: does the introduction place the writer's thesis or question within a larger, ongoing discussion about the topic? Does the introduction engage you? Why or why not?

Theory and concepts: does the writer use a theoretical framework to connect the readings to his/her thesis, or larger conversations about the topics at hand? Are any key words important for understanding the argument correctly defined (with citations, if necessary)?

Structure and organization: does the structure make sense? Does each paragraph limit itself to a single argument, which is clearly developed and related to the overall paper? Note places where the argument loses you or where it might be stronger. Are paragraphs and subsections in a logical order? Are there organizing markers (e.g., subheadings)? Try drawing a "picture" or diagram of the essay to see how all the parts fit together.

Evidence and examples: does the writer have enough evidence to support the paper's idea, or conversely, too much evidence (story-telling) and not enough analysis? Are the examples appropriate and relevant? Are all of the main points relevant to the thesis? If not, should the writer omit the irrelevant points or rewrite the thesis to accommodate the ideas? Do you see any clichés?

Conclusion: does the draft actually conclude, or does it end abruptly or vaguely trail off?

Citations: does the writer correctly use in-text citations and a reference page? These need to be in the APA style. See: https://www.library.cornell.edu/resrch/citmanage/apa for guidance on in-text citations and the correct formatting for the references.

Mechanics: are the sentences clearly written? Are they grammatically correct? Does the paper look and sound like a scholarly paper appropriate for a college level course? There's no need to line-edit, but please be kind to your classmate (and the TAs who will read the papers!), by pointing out any glaring mistakes or patterns that should be corrected.