In Class Peer Review of Low Stakes Writing

# Conditions Necessary for Successful Peer Review:

1. Select groups that will work well together. Groups should be preselected by the professor or randomly generated. Generally, when students select their own groups, they pick friends, so they socialize rather than work on the assignment.
2. Provide students with specific roles in the group. Each member of the group should be responsible for a specific task, reducing the tendency for some group members to work hard while others freeride. Examples of tasks for group work include a scribe, who takes notes, a presenter, who shares the group’s work with the whole class, a timekeeper, who ensures that all tasks are completed on time, and an observer, who records the group’s dynamics. Having specific responsibilities keeps students focused on the task at hand. Student focus can also be maintained by requiring that each student complete and hand in individual work based on the peer review.
3. Guide students through the process. Instructors must carefully guide students through the group work by providing specific questions and tasks. Students in groups cannot be provided with vague tasks such as “exchange your papers and provide feedback to your peers.” At each stage of the peer review process, instructors should provide specific guiding instructions and questions for their students.
4. Orient your students to the task. Be sure to identify the key elements of a writing task with the class before group work to orient your students. Your students should know why you have asked them to complete this task and how it connects with their overall learning objectives.

# Example Workshopping Exercise:

This exercise will help students to retain and process information from an article that they read and summarized. Workshopping their summaries in class provides students with critical skills that they can bring to future tasks and gives instructors the opportunity to model effective reading and writing skills. This exercise provides students with an increasingly complex hierarchy of tasks so that they process complex information without feeling overwhelmed or lost.

## Preparation

Before engaging in group work, instructors should review the key learning goals of both the group work and the writing task. Instructors should briefly reminded their students of the important elements of a scholarly text, such as the position of key pieces of information.

## Hierarchy of Tasks

* Read: The first task asks students simply to read their peer’s work.
* Identify: Students often think in overly large terms, rather than focusing on specific, concrete points, leading to comments like “this is good” or “I didn’t like it.” When an instructor asks her students to locate and underline specific sentences that identify important parts of their peer’s work, then students’ group work becomes more focused and relevant. The identification task also allows instructors to focus their students’ thinking on specific parts of the article.
* Write: The writing task forces students to convert their nebulous ideas into concrete constructions. Writing about a question or an article helps students to retain information, identify patterns, and critically analyze. It also provides students with a transactional document for their peers. When presenting this to students, you’ll want to provide a few clear guiding questions. Also, be sure to build on the identification stage of the exercise by asking questions that prompt students to review the previously identified parts of their peer’s work. For example, instructors might ask their students to select the most accurate of the underlined sentences from the identify task and explain how their peer approached the task of summary. Students can also work off of unsuccessful elements of a peer’s work, but instructors should try to balance modeling successful writing and critiquing unsuccessful work. Some prompts for writing tasks include:
  + Of the three sentences you just underlined, select the one that was most successful at representing the original study, and write a few sentences in which you discuss why and how that sentence succeeded.
  + Of the three sentences you just underlined, select the one that was least successful at representing the original study, and write a few sentences in which you discuss how that sentence could have been improved.
  + Review your peer’s discussion of the original study’s sample [you can use any part of the summary here]. Write a few sentences in which you explain what additional information could have been included to improve this part of the summary, what information could have been removed, or how your peer succeeded in writing this section.
* Discuss: Students should bring their individual work back to their group, explaining what they wrote about in the previous task. Depending on how much writing your students completed in the previous task, you may need to provide specific instructions for the group discussion. Some guiding questions for discussion include:
  + Were all the main elements of the study present in the summary you reviewed?
  + In which order do you think the above mentioned elements of the article should be presented? Did your peer’s order help you to follow the overall points of the original study? How could it have been improved?
* Share: Students learn not only from each other within groups but also from other groups, so asking each group to share the most important points of their discussion with the class as a whole brings that knowledge to the entire class and provides the instructor with an opportunity to provide additional feedback. Also, when students know that their group work will be shared publicly, they have an added incentive to take it seriously.