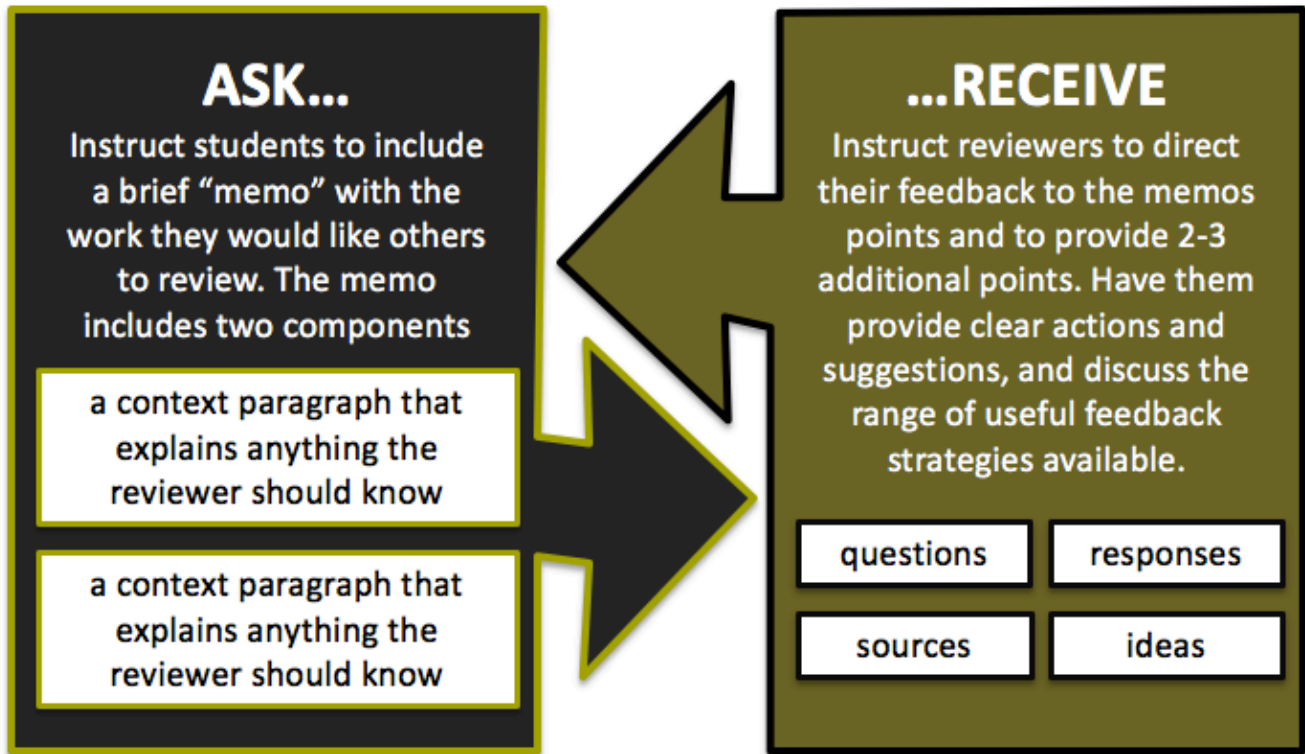


Teaching Peer Review Best Practices

Peer review is a two-way street. Getting useful feedback depends on how you frame the feedback you need. Developing this skill not only teaches students how to receive effective feedback, but gets them in the habit of reflecting on and analyzing their work, critical thinking practices that help them better learn skills and retain knowledge.



When you introduce peer review activities in class, prepare students to frame the feedback they want to receive. While I teach freshmen composition, this model can work with any type of peer review process.

1. Instruct students to include a brief “memo” with the work they would like others to review. The memo includes two components:
 - a. a context paragraph that explains anything the reviewer should know (stage of development, purpose, struggles, intentions). Such a paragraph clues the reviewer into what you already know and need. For instance, if you know that a certain portion is incomplete or requires more work, you can save the reviewer the effort of acknowledging this. I have also told students they can give the review an idea of the level of criticism they are comfortable with, which usually works to give reviewers permission to provide constructive criticism rather than surface-level praise.
 - b. Pointed questions to solicit feedback. Peer review is the art of asking good questions. Asking questions guides specific feedback.

2. Instruct reviewers to direct their feedback to the memos points and to provide 2-3 additional points. The additional points allow reviewers to attend to areas of revision needed that the student did not include in their memo. It also allows the reviewer to express their questions and interests as peers.
3. Instruct reviewers to provide clear actions and suggestions. Rather than simply stating “At some points, the flow doesn’t quite work. Look into this more carefully,” they should identify examples and provide suggestions for how to revise these examples.

This basic structure stabilized the wide range of feedback, from students who normally write minimal, vague feedback to students who feel responsible to correct every Oxford comma. This structure can do wonders to the peer review experience in your class, but the recommendations are key to oiling the gears of this activity.

Recommendations:

1. Have a candid discussion about students’ experiences with peer review. Ask students if they think it’s useful, and under what circumstances. I often have students rate on a 1-to-10 scale the kind of feedback they would like to receive 1 being praise only and 10 representing a no-holds-barred review. The vast majority pick 6-9. When asked what level they normally receive, it is on the 1-5 side. This discussion is a great way to introduce the peer review “rules” that even out these numbers. Specifically, I note that students can write in the memo their criticism comfort level.
2. Emphasize the broad range of peer review. *How can I leave feedback for someone who is further ahead than I am? What if I’m not sure how to answer their questions? What if I don’t know what to say?* In my peer review assignment directions, I always remind students that peer review is not solely corrective proofreading. Peer review is used in prewriting to generate ideas and poll opinions; it’s used to confirm whether an argument comes through clearly to an audience. Most students’ default peer review process when it comes to writing is to correct grammar and comment on “flow.” This isn’t the best practice for projects still putting together the structure of their work.
3. Make students accountable for accurate feedback. Grade peer reviewers based on whether they have answered all memo points, followed peer review best practices as you lay them out in the directions, and accurately evaluated work based on class content and rubrics. This provides feedback to students on whether they are providing useful feedback and makes the peer review content better for everyone.
4. Model these practices in your feedback to students. When you provide feedback on student work, use the same qualities you require for their peer review. Prioritize feedback, keep it brief, and balance usefulness and positivity. Along those lines...

5. Require students to write memos when they ask for your feedback. This especially goes for papers. Do not let students email you a paper asking them to broadly leave any feedback possible. You are not their editor! Ask them “What would you like me to review specifically?” “What questions do you have at this point in your draft?” This requires students to take thoughtful inventory of their work and saves you hours of kitchen-sink review.

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