

Peer Editing 101

No. 44 in the Writing Center Handout Series

One day in class, your instructor informs you that you will be responsible for reading and commenting on your peers' papers. You join a peer editing group of three students, each with a rough draft of a paper. What do you do?

Peer editing is a way for students to help each other with writing. You've probably done it or had someone do it for you. Each time you've asked a friend to look over your paper, and each time a friend has asked you to look over her paper, you've participated in peer editing. Here are some questions to ask when looking at a thesis-driven essay, the most common type of college writing assignment.

Does the paper fit the instructor's assignment?

No matter how good the paper is, if it's not the one assigned, the student will be in trouble. Find out what the instructor expects from this assignment; ask for clarification of any points you may not understand.

Does the paper have a clear, arguable thesis?

The thesis should go well beyond the obvious. It should make an argument that can be contested by reasonable people. For more information about clear thesis statements, see Handouts 25 and 26.

- ✗ Not a thesis: Shakespeare uses images of death in *Macbeth*. *Yes, but so what?*
- ✓ Thesis: Through *Macbeth*'s selfish grab for might, which sacrifices numerous innocent lives in the process, Shakespeare warns theatergoers of the dangers of individualism.

How well is the paper organized? Does it stay on track throughout or meander from thought to thought?

A paper that contains too many ideas unrelated to the thesis lacks focus. Each paragraph in a paper should be built around one main idea and should support the thesis. The writer does not need to explain everything there is to know on the subject; the paper should focus on the points that best support the thesis.

Do the introduction and conclusion pack a punch? If not, why not?

The introduction's job is to tell the reader what to expect out of the paper. If you don't know what to expect after reading the introduction, it's not serving its purpose. Watch out for broad generalizations and dictionary definitions; both are overused in introductions. A good conclusion should tie the paper together without rehashing the main points or restating the introduction. For more information on introductions and conclusions, see Handouts 1 and 10.

Does the writer seem to over-use passive voice?

Passive voice allows a writer to create a sentence with a verb and an object but no subject, and it can be confusing for the reader. Active voice is more direct and preferable because it shows both the subject and what the subject's acting on, the object.

- ✗ Passive: The king is murdered. *Who did it? Who knows? There's no subject.*
- ✓ Active: Macbeth murders the king. *Who did it? Macbeth.*

(continued on reverse)

For more information on peer editing, see

<http://www.drc.utexas.edu/e306web/sg.cfm?chapter=7.6>
<http://writing.richmond.edu/writing/wweb/peeredit.html>
The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed), 85-93



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Are the words your peer has chosen suited to an academic paper?

Everyday words and slang are not always appropriate for an academic paper. Some words can be too general, such as “bad” or “good.” Some words may not convey the degree of professionalism students need to show in their writing. At the same time, papers shouldn’t be overloaded with big words that you have to look up; the student should use her own vocabulary.

- ✗ Nonacademic: Lady Macbeth feels bad because she helped her husband kill the king.
- ✓ Academic: Lady Macbeth’s assistance in the murder of the king troubles her deeply.

Quick tips for peer editing:

1. Be respectful. Give the sort of helpful comments that you would like to receive.
2. Comment with questions, such as “Is this your thesis?” or “What do you mean by this?”
3. Be specific about strengths and weaknesses. “Work on your transitions” is less clear than “What sentence connects your first and second paragraphs?” “I like this” is not as helpful as “This sentence shows me exactly what the main idea of this paragraph is.”
4. Write a list of comments or suggestions at the end of the paper in order of importance. If a student has a problem with subject-verb agreement but also doesn’t have a thesis, the thesis is the more important issue for her to address.
5. Remember, grammar isn’t everything. The main focus of a peer editing session is to see that the student has a clear, readable, and logical argument. Without that, no degree of grammatical sophistication will make a paper successful.
6. Approach each other as sailors in the same boat. You’re here to help each other, so relax!



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