

# Comp Quickreads

CSULA Department of English

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## Peer Review Reviewed

### Core Questions to Consider about Peer Review

- What do I think is most important about peer review? The quality of feedback the writer receives? Or the conversation about writing and the topic that might emerge?
- How much control do I want to exert over the process? Do I want to dictate who works with whom? Do I want to specify in detail what reviewers are supposed to do?
- How much am I willing to trust the reviewers? Do I feel the need to “train” them as reviewers? Do I feel the need to review their comments?

### Staying Focused on Peer Review

In general, instructors felt that peer review should be a regular part of the composition classroom, but some noted how then it risked becoming routine. Instructors mentioned the following strategies for keeping students committed to peer review:

- If peer review is the last activity of the day, make sure students know that no one will be allowed to leave early.
- Tell students that if they finish early, they can use the remaining time to begin revising their essays.
- Have students vote on their favorite peer reviewer for the quarter.

While long a staple of the composition classroom, the recent Composition Conversation on peer review revealed a range of opinions about when and how it should be incorporated, as well as what it brought to the classroom. For example, ENGL 101 and 102 instructors saw peer response as an essential part of invention. One instructor described how students would give oral presentations on their research topics and arguments early in the research process. The resulting discussion would help writers focus their research and anticipate counter-claims and the rest of the class would benefit as well from the opportunity to learn about other people’s interests and thinking.

This initial discussion focused attention on the key benefits of peer response:

1. Writers benefit from early intervention in the process.
2. Readers benefit from exposure to other ways of thinking.
3. All benefit from being part of a community of writers and readers.

These benefits also, of course, define the composition classroom. The differences that emerged in discussion can be traced to whether one emphasizes the benefit to the writer or whether one emphasizes the benefit to the reader and community.

Out of the discussion emerged the following common concerns.

**When?** All agreed that early intervention was best, but most participants also believed that peer review prior to students receiving their first instructor-commented paper was “meaningless.”

**How many?** Pairs or groups of three were the most common configurations for peer review. Some instructors created peer review groups based on common essay topics, while some

attempted to group students with a range of abilities (“low” student with a “high” student and so on). Some instructors preferred to let students find their own partners or groups, perhaps only asking students to work with different partners later.

**How often?** In general, most agreed that peer review or some kind of peer response should be part of every assignment. Instructors might try different kinds of peer response throughout the quarter. Students might peer review in pairs on an early assignment. They might later work in small groups with peer review worksheets. Later they might work in small groups with scoring guides.

**How involved?** On this question there was the greatest variation. While students might be familiar with the idea of peer review and even comfortable with it, they still need direction and guidance. Minimally, everyone agreed that instructors needed to communicate “ground rules” prior to peer review: what kinds of response were appropriate and what were inappropriate. Some instructors gave students written instructions for peer review during a prior class meeting. Others “trained” students to become better reviewers by having students look at sample essays and providing them with “tutor” training materials. Most used worksheets to focus the responses of reviewers. Some tailored peer review worksheets to specific assignments, while others used generic worksheets that focused the reviewer on rhetorical questions.

Eventually, two key questions emerged. How much control should an instructor exert over the peer review process? And what do we as instructors hope to realize from peer review? Unsurprisingly, the answer to the second question helps to determine how one answers the first.