

English 101

Peer Response Workshop

Most writers like to have someone read a draft of work in progress to get an outsider's opinion of how it is shaping up. Since our writing is intended for an audience, it's helpful to have someone read an essay in progress to tell us if it is sound and readable and to let us know where we might need to work on something or if we've left anything out.

Basically, there are two types of outside readers: general readers and those who have a particular insight into your topic or project. The first group includes friends or family members, anyone who is not familiar with your topic or the constraints of your task. The second group may consist of classmates working on the same topic, co-workers who are familiar with your task, or collaborators in a writing group, such as a creative writing club. Writing center tutors fall somewhere in between these two categories: they are students themselves, and they have been trained to help you with a range of different writing projects and problems.

In this class we'll be doing peer response and revision workshops with each essay. To get the most out of these workshops, keep in mind the following:

FOR WRITERS:

- On days for which we have peer-response work scheduled, you need to bring **two copies** of a legible, complete first draft, one of which you will hand in that day; the other you will keep and turn in with the finished essay. By definition, no working draft is "complete," but it must be more than prewriting, an outline, or a paragraph. Don't worry if there are things added or crossed out, but it should be readable.

- Before the workshop, think about what kinds of assistance you'd like to get: be prepared to explain your goals, to tell your reader what problems you're struggling with, and to ask for advice or help with specific aspects of your paper.

- Don't be defensive or embarrassed about your work. It's always difficult to hold our writing up for critique, especially when it's in rough form, but the purpose of the workshop is to help you revise the essay to make it a better final product. Keep the focus of your discussion on the writing, not the writer.

- Keep in mind that your colleagues' responses are just that: responses. Consider their comments and suggestions carefully, because they have been offered thoughtfully and in the spirit of collaboration, but remember that the final decisions are your own. If, after giving it some thought, you don't agree with someone's opinion, that's OK. On the other hand, if several readers tell you they don't understand your point, to ignore that information is ill-advised. You need to decide what to accept and what to reject.

FOR READERS:

- Your main job is to be a thoughtful, responsive reader in order to offer help to the writer in revision, **not** to judge or evaluate the paper.

•In addition to helping the writer solve problems with a draft, be sure to tell the writer what he or she has done well: identify specific strengths as well as weaknesses. Don't be afraid to tell what you liked and how it affected your reading.

•Keep your comments helpful, specific, and respectful. Specificity is particularly important: telling someone a paragraph or an idea is "good" or "bad" is not helpful. Let the writer know exactly what works and what doesn't by pointing to specific aspects of the paper, using language such as "The example in the third paragraph really makes your earlier point clear," or "I don't understand how _____'s point from the reading relates to your example."

•If there is a sentence or paragraph you don't understand, your job is to communicate your confusion to the writer, not necessarily to tell the writer how to fix it; that's up to the writer. You may make suggestions if you have an idea that may help the writer to clarify something, but usually it's best to put your suggestions in the form of a question. It's best to avoid using language such as "I think you should" Rather, you might say, "I'm not sure what you mean here. Can you give an example?"

•Don't write on someone else's paper **unless** you ask permission to do so, and then limit your writing to check marks or question marks in the margins, **writing nothing in the text itself**. Write comments or questions on a separate sheet, referring to specific paragraphs. I'll provide you with a worksheet to guide your reading and responding.

•Above all, remember that you're looking at a work in progress, so keep the focus on revision of the ideas and organization of the essay, **not** editing or proofreading. For now, you can simply ignore matters of usage and style (punctuation, spelling, sentence structure) unless your understanding of the writer's meaning is affected.

