

Comp Quickreads

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Peer Review and Scoring Guides

What is a RAG?

A Read-Around Group (RAG) is a small-group activity commonly used in composition classes.

Students in small groups read and respond to one another's essays. Besides gaining feedback on their own writing, students gain insight into the assignment and learn useful strategies from other writers.

Helpful Hints

- Have students identify their papers with their initials or a code instead of with their name.
- Have each group select a group member to serve as note-taker.
- Give the groups a specific task to perform; don't overload them with multiple tasks.
- Set time limits for the reading and stick to them.
- Consider having the groups read the papers aloud. (You will need to plan for the added noise.)
- Consider how comfortable you are with having students score, grade, or select the best paper. If you are uncomfortable with these tasks, consider having students select papers that best exemplify specific criteria in the scoring guide.
- Be sure to allow enough time for a whole class discussion.

Scoring guides can ensure consistency in grading practices and transparency in the grading process by serving as a shared understanding of both the requirements of an assignment and the expectations of the instructor. Made available to students early in the term the scoring guide helps students understand what is expected of them and how they will be evaluated. But a scoring guide is not merely a convenience for students and teachers. It represents the expectations of the discourse community towards which students are moving. True members don't merely join, they define what it means to belong.

While we might want to believe that once we distribute the scoring guide for a course and perhaps discuss it in class, students will know what to expect and perform accordingly, the reality is very different. As experienced writing teachers know, inexperienced writers (and sometimes experienced writers too!) often struggle to see problems in their own writing, though, they are usually able to see the same problems in other people's writing.

This inability to see the log in our own eye is the basis for peer review and forms the foundation for an effective class activity that uses small groups to peer review essays, an activity commonly known as read around groups, or RAGs. The innovation is that the peer review groups are first subjected to the "norming" process familiar to holistic scorers and then are asked to score or grade the anonymous essays that they read. Here's an overview of the process:

1. On the first day, students are "normed" using the scoring guide and sample essays that represent the range of the scoring guide.

2. On the second day, students are placed in small groups (three or four students per group).
3. Each group collects the essay drafts written by the group members and passes them to another group.
4. Each group member then reads each essay and assigns it a score or grade based on the scoring guide. Each group member is also encouraged to take brief notes that justify the score or grade assigned.
5. When each member in the group has read each essay, the group discusses each essay and the score or grade it should be given.
6. After the score or grade has been assigned, the group passes its essays to the next group, receives a new set of essays, and repeats steps 3 and 4.

This combined peer review/scoring guide "norming" activity usually requires parts of two class periods and many variations are possible. Students might be asked to bring multiple copies of their draft to facilitate group reading. The groups might read the essays aloud. Group scores and comments might be recorded and returned to the writer. Instead of scoring or grading, the group might vote on the best essay in each set, justifying their choice by referring to specific language in the scoring guide.

While students might focus on the voting and scoring, as any participant in holistic scoring knows the real benefit is the discussion of how writing is valued. The scoring guide provides students with language to talk about what makes writing interesting and effective. As they apply this language to the writing of others, the silent work of incorporation moves them closer to the academic discourse community.