English 101 and 102

Why peer review?

Peer review is one of the most loved and most hated features of college writing classes. Here are some reasons some people love it:

- they learn a great deal about their writing
- they get good feedback
- they are able to improve their papers dramatically.

And some reasons other people hate it:

- the reviewer doesn’t offer constructive criticism (just says things like “great job!”)
- they want only the instructor’s opinion
- they don’t want other people to see their work before it’s “finished”

I use peer review extensively. I have tried to set it up to avoid some of the most common complaints. But this explanation of my reasons may help you as well, if you’re the sort of person who doesn’t really like peer review.

Peer review is for the reviewer

The first and most important thing to remember is that peer review is for the reviewer as much as for the author.

*Editing someone else’s work is one of the best ways to learn how to edit your own.*

If you keep this in mind, uncooperative partners who don’t give useful feedback will not faze you. That’ll be their loss, but you’ll get the benefit of practicing on another person’s writing the skills you need to be a better editor of your own work.

Writing is revision

This in turn is based on the basic idea that writing is all about revision. In order to revise successfully, you must be able to read your work objectively. The more you practice reading and critiquing someone else’s work, the stronger your editing skills will be when it’s time to apply them to your own work.

Any skill level works

It doesn’t matter, either, if the paper you’re reading is much
stronger than yours, much weaker, or just has different strengths and weaknesses. You can learn a great deal about the fundamentals of good writing from carefully reading and reviewing poor writing, figuring out why it’s not succeeding and what it needs to succeed. Here’s what one student had to say about this:

“In the past I hadn't seen much value in the act of evaluating and critiquing another person’s writing as it pertained to my own. I found myself surprised by the first peer review. The paper I had to review was absolutely terrible. Yet, it still helped me to see errors in my own work. I was truly surprised at how much I took away from an essay that was in a totally different league from my own.”

On the other hand, if you lack confidence in your skills you can learn a great deal from reading work that is stronger than yours. The effort to critique it will teach you a lot about how good writing is put together, which you can then apply in your own work.

So, again, the most important point is that peer review is for you, the reviewer. If your partner has great things to say about your paper, wonderful—take them and use them. But even if they don’t, your time is not wasted because you are practicing the skills of critical reading, which are fundamental to successful writing.

But what if it’s wrong?

Some people want only the instructor’s feedback, either because they think the instructor’s opinion is the only one that matters, or because they are afraid they’ll get the “wrong” feedback from other students. The first objection, when it’s not really just a disguised version of the second, is simply mistaken. Most writing is for more than one person to read, and you want to know how to reach them all, not just your ideal audience. Getting feedback from your peers will help you learn about readers’ expectations, assumptions and attitudes, all of which affect the way they receive your work and, therefore, will affect how you address them.

OK, but what if the feedback really is wrong? What if your partner’s comments end up making the paper worse? Here are several points to bear in mind:

1. Usually it’s not wrong. Students are surprisingly good at critiquing other people’s work. This goes right back to the main reason for doing peer review in the first place: it’s much easier to see what’s working and what isn’t in someone else’s paper than in your own. So the problem is not very significant to begin with.

2. When the feedback is wrong, the error is usually localized. It usually deals with some specific issue of style or grammar—
technical issues that nonspecialists are more likely to get wrong—and doesn’t affect the rest of the paper. Most of the peer review you will do in this class doesn’t even deal with those matters.

3. The peer review questions provide **objective criteria**. In other words, you can test your partner’s comments against very specific writing standards spelled out ahead of time. This gives your reviewer much less opportunity to go off track. It also means that the review is mostly about pointing out stuff you already know, but have overlooked. It’s not about giving you advice for which you have no independent basis for judgment.

4. Not only that, but **you can usually tell** when it’s mistaken, just based on your own judgment and common sense and your knowledge of what you are trying to say. Peer review provides you with suggestions, not commands. If the suggestions don’t make sense, you’re not required to follow them.

5. Therefore, peer review helps you develop an **ear for what works**. It’s not so much about “right” and “wrong” (there are few right answers in writing) but about better and worse. You take what you already know about writing, and about what you are trying to say, and you test that against what your reviewer is telling you, and you develop better judgment in weeding out good advice from bad. This goes back the main purpose of peer review, which is to develop your ability to edit your own work.

6. What’s more, sometimes **bad advice can still be helpful**. This is because it tells you what’s in the reader’s mind. If they want you to change something it may be because they don’t understand what you’re trying to say—but whose problem is that? Their misunderstanding may be a sign that you need to change something, even if it’s not what they think you should change. Even just figuring out why bad advice is bad will teach you about writing.

7. Finally, if after all this you still get some feedback that you’re not sure about, **check with me**. I’ll be happy to tell you if I think it makes sense.

**Writing is communication**

Some people are just uncomfortable showing others their writing. That’s understandable, but it should not prevent you from taking advantage of the opportunity peer review represents. Writing is communication, after all. Lots of different people, with different skill levels, interests, attitudes and so on, will read what you’ve written. Getting feedback from several different readers greatly enhances your ability to reach a wide audience, because it shows you the expectations and assumptions your readers bring to your writing and helps you reach them.
Most work is collaborative

That’s the general answer. But there’s a specific answer too. More and more jobs require you to work collaboratively. Learning to take constructive criticism, whether it’s on a piece of writing or something else—a design, a proposal, a plan—will greatly enhance your future success in employment.