

One Approach to Guiding Peer Response

By Kim Jaxon

For the past few years, I have asked my students to write peer responses to each other's writing, and based on their feedback, we have continued to shape this practice and make it a key component to our revision process. One of the reasons it stays central to our course's work is due to student reflections, as one student commented: **"By far, the most helpful thing we did this semester was peer response. While I feel I got better at writing them, more importantly, they helped me to understand the assignment better by seeing how someone else wrote the same assignment."** My purposes for asking students to engage in this activity vary:

- I organize the task with an understanding that knowledge is created in dialogue with others; students come to understand their work as they talk and write to each other about texts and ideas.
- I also see peer response as offering an immediate audience to the paper, as many students comment that they take care knowing that a peer will be reading the work.
- And finally, as the comment above supports, students tell me that writing the response helps them to reflect on their own approaches to an assignment by seeing how another student handled the same task.

My purpose for writing this essay is to offer some ideas for writing thoughtful comments on a peer's paper. Following this essay, you will notice that there is an example response along with other handouts that may help facilitate giving feedback. I want to highlight some places in the example peer response essay that may be useful to keep in mind when writing comments, but I first want to mention a few tasks that our class does to prepare for writing helpful comments. It is important to keep in mind two practices that weave through the preparation offered below, which I think are key to writing helpful responses:

1. time to read the draft essay, and
2. time to create guiding questions that help to focus the peer response.

Ideas for Preparing to Write a Peer Response

- **Peer to Peer Memo:** On the day a first draft is due in class, students bring two copies of their paper with them. One copy goes home with me and the other copy leaves with a peer. At the beginning of class, the writer completes two memos on the back of each of the two drafts before handing the copies over to me and the peer. One memo is for me and usually asks specific questions about any challenges in working with the assignment, and one memo is for the peer who will be writing the response. A sample "Peer to Peer

Memo” is included in [Appendix A](#). The purpose of the Peer to Peer memo is *to guide the responder to specific places in the essay that the writer is concerned about* and also to give some idea of what the writer is trying to accomplish with the essay.

- **Guiding questions:** Along with the memos, students write to me and each other on the day a draft is due; as a class, we create guiding questions for writing the peer responses. *These questions arise from the assignment.* We look at the assignment together, and in groups, create a series of questions that help guide feedback based on the goals of the assignment. An example assignment and guiding questions for writing the peer response, created by students in class, are included in [Appendix B](#).
- **Take home the first draft and read it carefully:** When I first asked students to give feedback, they were writing immediate feedback in class. Students asked over and over again if they could have more time; based on their request, we started to *give ourselves more time to read and respond thoughtfully*. Now, students take the peer's draft home, read it a few times, and return the next class period to write the response. We still write the response in class, in the computer lab, but we allow sometime in between class sessions to read drafts carefully. Students meet in the computer lab to write and email their peer response: they email one copy of the peer response to me and one to the writer. And due to the importance of timing and revision, no late peer responses are accepted and the response is worth a significant amount of points.
- **Do not comment on grammar:** While students do circle any typos and other errors they find on the draft essay itself, the written peer response is all about the content and ideas of the draft essay, as you will notice from the example response that follows. This way we continue to *focus on revision as opposed to editing* at this point in the draft.
- **Return to the assignment:** One thing to keep in mind when writing a peer response to a first draft is the assignment it was written for. Someone can write a really fabulous essay about teen drinking, but if the assignment was asking students to write about the current war in Iraq, the writer needs help other than revising the paragraphs in the current draft. *The peer response can help the writer to see where their essay and the assignment are not matching up.* The assignment is the ultimate guide to responding to the draft essay.
- **Goal to give 2-3 helpful suggestions:** It is easy to be overwhelmed by what to say to a writer's first effort. My students and I have agreed that our goal is to give 2-3 substantive ideas for revising. It is sometimes very difficult for a writer to address multiple issues in a next draft, but the *responder can focus on a couple of ideas that the writer can do next*, keeping in mind that some essays may need more than one revision to reach their potential. Sometimes the best first drafts are really messy as students work to figure out complicated ideas. We have also agreed that it is okay to be direct with each other. Many times, the response starts by telling the writer what is working, but ultimately, the writer needs ideas for revision; it is helpful and necessary to provide this critical feedback.
- **The responsibility of the writer:** In order for this activity to be successful, the writer needs to come to class the day a draft is due with two copies of a thoughtful, "best first effort" of an essay. And, the writer needs to write a memo that helps the responder to give feedback.
- **The responsibility of the responder:** The peer responder needs to take the time to read the draft a few times before coming to class the next period to write the response. It is a good idea to have a few things in mind to write in the response before arriving in the

computer lab. Bring the peer's essay and a copy of the assignment. Keep in mind the guiding questions created as a class and the Peer to Peer Memo as you write the response.

Looking at an Example

Given this set up for writing a response, it may be helpful to look at the example peer response provided in this handbook in [Appendix C](#).

I'd like to highlight some of the things I appreciate about this response. First of all, keep in mind that the responder did not have any insider knowledge of the topic; since everyone in the class wrote their own inquiry projects, the reader was not researching the same issue as the writer of this draft. I mention this because I want to alleviate any concerns that you need to be an expert of the subject in order to write a thoughtful peer response. In writing the response, the writer was able to ask thoughtful questions because she engaged as a reader with the text. Even though she is not an expert of Needle Exchange Programs, she still has questions about the issue and ideas about how the writer can be more convincing.

You'll notice, and as I just mentioned, the responder does a nice job of **asking thoughtful questions** throughout the response that will help the writer push her thinking further. The responder offers a range of questions for the writer: she asks about the writer's understanding of opposing viewpoints, the history of the program, and asks the writer to consider further the writer's own views about the topic. Through this questioning, the response gives the writer ideas to consider in the next draft.

In addition, the response does a nice job of **saying why addressing these questions will be helpful to the draft**. For example, the peer writes:

Do you know when Needle Exchange programs began in the Netherlands? What other countries have adopted such programs? When did the U.S. first consider a Needle Exchange Program? *Addressing small details like these would provide not only more background on the issue for the reader, but would also help him or her to understand how recent the problem really is.* (emphasis mine, par. 3)

This attention to what the writer will gain by considering the questions is a smart way to help the writer to understand why particular suggestions or questions are being posed.

Finally, I appreciate this response for the way in which **it respects and values what the writer has done so far** in the draft. She tells the writer what *is* working throughout the response, but further, it is clear that the peer responder has taken the time to carefully consider the draft and ways in which it can be even better. It demonstrates a thoughtful conversation about ideas among peers, which ultimately is the goal of the response.

What I've learned by reading the peer responses is that students are excellent readers of each other's work. I am often struck as I read my written comments along with the peer response; it is easy to notice that my feedback is simply an echo of the peer's response. The peer commentator and I are both readers and we tend to applaud similar places in a draft essay and stumble and question similar places in a draft. Hopefully, the writer benefits by having a variety of people engaged with his/her work.

Appendix A: Peer to Peer Memo

On the back of the paper that is going home with a peer:

- Write your e-mail address clearly.
- Explain to your peer the goals/purposes of this paper. What is your paper trying to do?
- Explain to your peer your ideas for revision you may have already. Are there places that you already know need more work?
- Let the responder know if you would like him or her to focus on specific feedback--are there particular places in the paper that you are more concerned with or are stuck?
- Develop a couple of questions to guide the feedback you need given your goals for the paper.

Appendix B: Assignment—Proposal for Inquiry Paper

You will write a proposal for your inquiry project paper that should define the inquiry paper and help you to plan the paper itself and do the inquiry. The proposal should include these sections:

Background –

- Why are you interested in this topic?
- Who else is interested and why?
- What is the history of this issue? How has it been talked about previously?
- What is the variety of perspectives on the issue?

Research –

- What is your research question(s)?
- Briefly summarize the research you are already familiar with from your annotated bibliography and the research you still need to do: what do you want to find out about and where and how will you find this information?

Proposal –

- What will the paper you write look like and what will it do?

- How will you organize it?
- Who do you imagine the audience to be?
- What is your purpose for writing this piece?

Time line –

- What is your plan for writing the inquiry paper?

Benefits –

- What do you hope to get out of doing this paper?
- What might a reader get out of reading it?

Guiding Peer Response Questions for the draft Proposal (created in class when the first draft of the Proposal for Inquiry is turned in):

1. How does the author talk about important events/debates that influenced the current conversation about his or her issue?
2. Does the writer use support in the background that helps you to understand how people have discussed the issue?
3. Are you clear as to the variety of perspectives on the issue?
4. Do you understand why the topic is important to research?
5. Is the research question narrow enough to explore? How so or why not?
6. Do you understand what they paper will look like that the writer is proposing? Does it sound interesting or compelling? Can you imagine other ways that the subject could be approached in a paper?
7. What else does the writer need to do or read to understand the issue?

Appendix C

Responder's Name
 Instructor Jaxon
 English 130
 8 February 2005

Peer Response—Writer's Name and Title of Essay ("Needle Exchange Program")

I like the way that you started your paper off with an epigraph. Using the quote up front definitely gets the reader interested in the paper. I also like the way that your paper is factual throughout. With this topic, it would be very simple to just insert your own opinion without sources to back it up, but you seemed to do a fairly good job of avoiding that.

Once I reached the third page of the paper, I was pretty sure what the claim was. However, it might be a good idea to state your claim more toward the beginning of the paper. For instance, in the first or even second paragraph, you could explain that what the protesters were supporting in New Jersey is the program most beneficial to the United States if we want to curb the spread of

HIV and other drug injection related diseases. Also, you could make your claim more clear and complex. Are there any gray areas that should be considered in implementing such a program? Do you take into consideration *why* the opposition opposes Needle Exchange Programs?

The way that you introduced the history was great. Being presented with background for such a controversial issue gives more validity to the argument. Do you know when Needle Exchange programs began in the Netherlands? What other countries have adopted such programs? When did the U.S. first consider a Needle Exchange Program? Addressing details like these would provide not only more background on the issue for the reader, but would help him or her understand how recent the problem really is.

You state that current U.S. laws regarding drug use prohibits the manufacture and sale of drug paraphernalia if its purpose is inserting illegal substances into the body. Could you give an example of these laws, such as their titles and when they were enacted? You also bring up that it would be impossible to implement a Needle Exchange program under current law. Can you think of any amendments to these laws that would make a Needle Exchange program possible? An idea of this is the state legalization of marijuana in California and Arizona when prescribed by a doctor as treatment.

I like the way you provide information on case studies done on Needle Exchange programs and the way that you show their benefits. Did they seem to have any faults? Showing the benefits and faults of a program is more convincing than only showing the benefits. Realism does more for an argument than anything else. Also, when I read that the Needle Exchange programs provide health care referrals and similar programs, I found myself asking how many people took advantage of this. There are many free clinics now, but there are many people who don't take advantage of their services. What can be said of this with regard to a Needle Exchange Program? You say that those who oppose the programs need to look at them more clearly. Do you think that maybe the proponents of the program should consider the opposition a little more as well? Again, by providing for the opposition, you would be providing more validity to your argument.

Finally, I like the way that you conclude the paper by saying that the best way to eliminate this method of contracting HIV is to control it, not ignore it. This seems to be very true. I also like the way that this sentence serves almost as a way of restating your claim. Good Job! Your paper is off to a great start. Be sure to address the opposition a bit more and then maybe state your claim a little more clearly towards the beginning of the paper. Good Luck!