

Chapter 5: Reviewing



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Overview of Reviewing

“No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else’s draft.” — **H.G. Wells**

Sooner or later, someone is going to hand you a piece of writing and ask for your opinion. You may be asked to review another student's essay as part of your class work. Perhaps a friend or a younger brother or sister has come to you for help. If you develop a reputation for being a good writer, then the chances are good that even your boss might ask you to look over letters or policy statements and offer your professional opinion. In any case, if you really want to do a good job in these situations, you're going to need reviewing skills. You're going to need to be able to identify problems, suggest alternatives, and, more importantly, support everything you say with reasonable claims. Furthermore, you must do all this in a convincing way that makes the writer want to make the changes you suggest. You must know what's wrong with a document, why it's wrong, and how to fix it.

You've probably heard the saying, "A writer is his own worst critic." Whoever said this undoubtedly suffered from poor self-reviewing skills. After all, it's easier to spot problems in other people's writing because our own ego (or pride) doesn't get in the way. Another problem is that sometimes we

get so caught up in what we want to get across in our writing that we don't pay enough attention to how we're expressing it—a sentence that makes perfect sense to us might be total gibberish to someone else. Thankfully, these are all problems that can be overcome. You can learn to fairly and accurately review your own work. One way you can get better at self-reviewing is to spend time reviewing other people's work. Eventually, you'll develop a knack for spotting errors that will serve you well as you edit and revise your own work.

Writers, particularly new writers, often find that letting other writers review their work is tremendously helpful. Most colleges and universities have writing centers where students can have their essays reviewed for free by experienced student writers or tutors. These tutors can work with you one-on-one to help you improve your writing and earn better grades.

You should realize that reviewing your work, like planning, drafting, or revising, is a recursive process. It is not something a writer does just at the end of his work. For instance, you may want to write an introduction to an essay and have it reviewed by a teacher or classmate before trudging forward. If you're on the wrong track, you'd be better off knowing about it sooner rather than later—especially if a deadline or due date is looming.

“You write to communicate to the hearts and minds of others what's burning inside you. And we edit to let the fire show through the smoke.” — **Arthur Plotnik**

Establishing Criteria

Let's suppose that you just gave your paper to your roommate and asked her to look it over. You explain that you've been working on the paper for three days and that you really want to earn an A. “I want your honest opinion,” you say. “Don't worry about hurting my feelings. What do you think?”

You watch your roommate's face as she reads your paper. She grimaces. Laughs. Yawns. Finally, she hands you the paper back and says, “This sucks.”

This may be the type of “review” you are accustomed to receiving—overly critical and not very helpful. Perhaps you agree that your paper is in trouble and needs help, but without a better understanding of what's wrong, you aren't likely to be able to do much about it. Furthermore, how can you trust your roommate's judgment of your paper? What if it just so happens that your roommate is neurotic about starting sentences with “But,” and, seeing such sentences in your paper, decided right there that the paper was terrible?

Ultimately, what makes an evaluation worthwhile is the soundness of its criteria. As a writer, you want to know not just whether someone likes your paper but also what factors they are taking into consideration when they review your paper. Both the reviewer and the person being reviewed need to be as clear as possible about the criteria that will be used to evaluate the work. Are your reviewers only looking at your grammar, or are they also determining the rationality of your arguments? Does a comma splice make a bigger difference than a rough transition between paragraphs?

All of these matters should be spelled out clearly beforehand, either by the writer or the reviewer. As a writer, what are you personally working on? It's not a bad idea to think about your strengths and challenges as a writer before handing over your paper to a reviewer or to use work that has been returned to you in the past with feedback. For example, if you're writing a paper for a professor you've had before, and who has made comments on your past work, use those comments to provide

your reviewer with a focus. If you are the reviewer in this situation, ask to see the assignment and rubric, if possible. You can also ask the writer for specific guidelines, areas of greatest need, or even anything s/he might know about the grader. Is the person giving the grade unconcerned with punctuation conventions but obsessive about tense shifting? The point is, the more focused the reviewer and writer are, the more effective the reviews are.

Writing Helpful Comments

“There are two kinds of editors, those who correct your copy and those who say it’s wonderful.”
—Theodore H. White

In the scenario above, you were not able to gain any insights or knowledge from your roommate letting you know that your paper “sucks.” What you wanted was some kind of feedback that would help you improve your paper, so you could get a good grade. You don’t know if your paper sucks because it lacked a strong thesis, if it sucks because your writing strayed from the assignment, or if it sucks because of grammatical errors. You can be a better self- and peer-reviewer than your roommate was. Given the previous example, how hard can it be? When you’re reviewing your own paper or the paper of a friend or classmate, ask yourself a few questions:

Organization

- What are your initial thoughts? What strengths and weaknesses does the paper have? What parts confused you, or might be confusing to other readers? What’s the most important thing that the writer is trying to say?
- How is the paper you’re reviewing organized? Again, does it start with the broad and move to specifics? Do all sentences support the paragraph’s topic sentence, and do all paragraphs support the thesis? Is there an introduction that draws in the reader, or does it restate the assignment and become redundant? Is the paper organized in a way that will make sense to readers? Does the writer employ transitions effectively? Does the paper flow from beginning to end?

Focus

- Is the paper focused on the assignment? Does it follow the same thought throughout the paper, or does it jump from subject to subject? Do I feel like I’m still learning about/thinking about the same subject at the end of the paper that I was at the beginning of the paper?
- Try to paraphrase the thesis of the paper as a promise: *The writer will...* Does the writer fulfill his/her obligation stated in the thesis?
- What’s the writer’s position on the issue? What words does the writer use to indicate his/her position?

Style

- In what style is the paper written? Does it *work* for the subject matter and assignment? Will the paper appeal to its intended audience? Is the writing at an appropriate level for the target audience?

Development

- Does the title indicate what the paper is about? Does it catch your interest? Does the opening paragraph draw you in? If not, can you suggest a different approach to catch the readers' attention?
- How is the development of the paper carried out? Does it start with a broad subject and then move to something more specific?
- Does the concluding sentence draw the argument of the paper to a close by bringing together the main points provided in the paper, or does it just end? Does the writer conclude in a memorable way, or does he/she simply trail off? If the ending is too abrupt or too vague, can you suggest some other way to conclude the paper? Does the ending introduce any new topics?

Conventions

- Are common or appropriate writing conventions followed? Are grammar, spelling, punctuation and other mechanics observed?

While reviewing the paper, make notes in the margins of any problems you find. If you believe that developing a paragraph a little bit more would be helpful to the argument, write “more.” If you are unclear of something, write “? not sure.” If you notice a missing comma, insert it in the correct spot, but be sure to set it off somehow so that you or your friend will notice the correction. If another word might work better, write “WC” to indicate inappropriate word choice. If you’re critiquing an essay and you are uncertain of the appropriate advice to give, simply write “awkward.”

Please note: It is important not to overwhelm your writer with comments. As much as possible, try to avoid repeating similar comments (e.g. don't correct every single comma error you find). Also, although it can be tempting to make some of the changes you suggest yourself, you never want to rewrite the work you are reviewing.

Responding to Criticism

“I am forced to say that I have many fiercer critics than myself.” —**Irwin Shaw**

Nobody likes to be told that what he or she is doing isn't right. But good writers are able to take criticism, realizing that nobody is perfect, and use that criticism to help them, either with the assignment at hand, or with writing assignments in the future. If your roommate tells you that your paper *sucks*, you probably want to ask him or her *why* it sucks. If your roommate says that you are continually writing run-on sentences, ask for advice on how to correct them or look in a writing guide to learn how to fix them. By handling criticism constructively, you'll be more aware of your common errors and less likely to repeat them, or at least you will know how to find and correct them the next time you write.

If, while meeting with a tutor, you learn that you need further development of some of your ideas for clarity, revisit your writing and judge for yourself whether or not you do. Ask yourself if you understand since you are the one who did all of the research and *know* what you mean (probably a good indication that the tutor was right), or if you are comfortable that a reader would understand what you are saying without more information.

Remember: as the writer, you're in control of your paper. When people offer criticism, they're usually just trying to help you. Try to keep that in mind. Take the suggestions when you think they make sense, and discard the ones that don't.

Peer Review Example

Here is an example of an essay submitted for peer review. The assignment is to write a paper about anything in nature: a plant, an animal, a natural disaster, anything. Practice reviewing with the steps mentioned above. What would you say to the author?

Student Name

Professor Name

Course Title

Date

The Jalapeno: an Ode

1 The jalapeno— is it a tasty cooking element, or a national mystery? As a lover of all things spicy, I find myself asking questions about the nation's most elusive pepper: where did it get its name? Where did it originate from? What makes it so spicy? How and where does it grow? And, most importantly, what kinds of food include the jalapeno? These questions are only natural to ask oneself when faced with the utterly fascinating pepper. However, through some difficult research, mental travel to the wild regions of the past, and a little bribery, the answers can and will be found.

2 But who to ask? If I lived in Texas I would ask Stacey Snow, Ms. Jalapeno 2005. She was crowned Ms. Jalapeno at the 27th annual Jalapeno festival in Laredo Texas. This festival is featured on the travel channel, and is commonly known as the "hottest weekend of the year." This festival has amazingly unique entertainment: the jalapeno egg toss, the blind jalapeno toss, the jalapeno spitting contest, the "some like it hot" cook off, the land raft race, the three-legged sack race, and a good old fashion game of tug-of-war.

3 The jalapeno is named after Jalapa, capital of Veracruz, Mexico. However, the jalapeno's popularity is not completely foreign. In 1995 New Mexico named the jalapeno the official state pepper, with chili peppers and pinto beans as the state vegetable. The jalapeno is part of the chili pepper family. The family also includes anaheim, cayenne, poblano, and serrano.

4 The jalapeno is not native to Minnesota; in fact, it is not native to the United States. It is thanks to Christopher Columbus that we have the spicy treat. Still today the pepper is a popular favorite, with Texas producing half of the 14 million gallons of jalapenos produced each year in the United States. Jalapeno flavored potato and tortilla chips weigh in at 17 million pounds produced each year.

The spicy bite in jalapenos can send tears down its consumer's face. This burning sensation is no accident; it is due to a chemical called capsaicinoids. There are five varieties, with capsaicin being the hottest and most famous. The capsaicins in jalapenos give them the burning sensation. When the fire in the mouth sensation occurs, the brain releases endorphins into the blood stream. These act as a natural pain reliever. 5

The jalapeno plant is pod-like, and usually grows from 2 to 3 feet tall. It is single stemmed and grows upright. Though there are literally countless forms of wild peppers, the jalapeno is considered a domestic plant. The pods are cylindrical, which flourish in semi-arid climates with dry air and irrigation. The plant matures between seventy and eighty days generally producing twenty-five to thirty-five pods per plant. 6

Jalapeno foods come in many shapes, sizes, and flavors. The most recent jalapeno phenomenon to hit the market is jalapeno jelly. Originally from Lake Jackson Texas, jalapeno jelly was first marketed in 1978. This jelly is often lime-green, with a sweet flavor, and the same consistency as normal jelly. It is fitting that this jelly originated from Texas, because the jalapeno is the official Texas state pepper, along with the chiltepin; not so coincidentally, these are the two peppers used in the states official dish: chili. Though there are many types of hot peppers, the jalapeno distinguishes itself in a number of ways. First, the jalapeno is most often green when mature, and is about 2 inches long with cracks in the stem. The hotness is also immediate after a bite. The thing that makes the jalapeno so different from other foods is the cult phenomena surrounding it. Figurines, websites, and even academic papers have been formed on the jalapeno craze. 7

Most important to the jalapeno are the recipes. Many wild jalapeno recipes do exist, with jalapeno bread, jalapeno sauce, stuffed jalapenos, chicken and cream cheese with jalapenos, coca-cola ham glaze with jalapeno, jalapeno martini, jalapeno hushpuppies, jalapeno soufflé, jalapeno-basil vinaigrette, and tamale pie being just a select few. Dried jalapenos are known as chipotles, another common ingredient in many dishes. In Texas, people even go so far as to drink jalapeno coffee and jalapeno tea! Yuck! 8

It is safe to say that the jalapeno is both a tasty cooking element and a national mystery. Any time a recipe is made, the jalapeno will be there. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but rest assured, someone, somewhere (probably in Texas), will add a jalapeno to it. However, the day the jalopsicle becomes the most popular frozen treat, consider it the day we have gone too far. 9

Sample Comments

Here, the peer reviewer has organized her/his comments based on the five criteria and has made specific references to sentences and passages where appropriate.

Organization

- After the introduction paragraph, there is not much narrowing. The topic broadly seems to be jalapenos. Perhaps the writer could try picking one specific question and sticking to that.
- The organization needs to be improved. Perhaps repeating the questions would help, or as previously stated, sticking to the development of one specific question.

Focus

- The paper seems to fulfill the assignment very well, but it does jump subject somewhat, particularly between paragraphs 3 and 4. I do like the theme of the jalapeño being presented as a national mystery; perhaps that could become the thesis statement.
- Unfortunately, the thesis of the paper doesn't seem to exist. The questions in the first paragraph gives the reader an idea of where the paper is headed, but there really is no statement explaining what the writer is trying to prove.
- Does the author have a position? If he/she does, it must be that he/she reveres the jalapeno. There doesn't seem to be much controversy in here for the author to support or oppose.

Style

- The title is clever, but could be a little more specific. It isn't so much an ode, but more of an investigation. However, it does catch interest.
- The style and tone are spot on. For the topic, which is not very serious, the laid back humorous style seems to fit in very well.

Development

- This paper certainly has plenty of personality. The author has a nice balance of humor and information. However, I find myself getting lost in the middle. Perhaps if the author were to repeat a question at the beginning of each paragraph, the reader could remember what the thesis is.
- The conclusion is funny, but I don't think it really does its job; I find the last sentence especially confusing and unconnected. Perhaps the author could keep what he/she has, but add in some more review of all the information that is covered.

Conventions

- The conventions seem to be okay. BUT WHERE ARE THE CITATIONS??? The author needs to develop ethos by sharing where her/his information came from regarding jalapenos.