Though many consider writing to be a solitary activity, letting others read and give feedback on your work can drastically improve your ability to write a reader-friendly text. This handout will suggest ways that you can make the most of peer review.

Note: This handout does not cover the issues involved with the type of peer review conducted by readers for academic journals.

Peer Review Basics

Why?
Writing is an act of communication between a writer and an audience about an issue. Accordingly, peer review is invaluable for its ability to show you where your piece succeeds and fails with readers. You might have the greatest idea in the world, but until you are able to effectively communicate it to others, that idea might as well not exist. Peer review helps ensure that your writing has maximum impact.

Who?
In most cases, you will want to find people who are familiar with your discipline to review your work. This will allow you to get feedback on the content of your argument as well as on the quality of your writing. However, sometimes an outsider can help you identify blind spots that a content expert might pass over. The most important element in choosing someone to review your work is trust—trust that this person will give you honest and helpful feedback. A loved one or close friend who automatically loves everything you write might not be the best choice for critical peer review.

When?
Working with peers can be advantageous at any stage of the writing process. However, you will want to make sure that the reviewer has enough time to read the draft and make comments and that the reviewee has enough time to make necessary changes to the piece. In other words, do not conduct a last-minute peer review.

Where?
Pick a place where your group will have privacy and where noise and distractions are not an issue (e.g., a group study room in a library). If your group cannot meet together, consider exchanging drafts through email.
Your Role as a Reviewee

As a reviewee, you need to do more than just hand your reviewers the latest version of your draft. As you begin the peer review process, keep the following ideas in mind:

**Emotional Distance**

Like all projects that require significant portions of our time and mental effort, writing can be intensely personal. When someone critiques your writing, it sometimes feels like he or she is actually scrutinizing you as a person. Remember this simple fact as you go through the peer review process: **you are not your writing**. In other words, maintain a healthy emotional distance from your work. Do not take feedback about your writing personally. This will allow you to view your reviewers’ comments more objectively.

**Apologize for Your Work…**

Most of us are hesitant to share our work because we are worried that it might be garbage. Our first instinct is usually to apologize to our reviewers for making them read such terrible writing. (We also do this to soften the blow of any criticism that our reviewers might actually have.)

**Example:** “Okay, here is my draft. It’s not done yet, and it’s still pretty bad. It’s not polished at all. It’s just awful. I’m sorry.”

Instead of fighting this impulse to apologize, take a moment for you, the reviewee, to voice all of your concerns, no matter how petty. Within your group, set a time limit (e.g., thirty seconds) for this short rant at the beginning of the peer review process. After each member has apologized for his or her work, move on. No more apologizing is allowed.

**Note:** If you have legitimate concerns about an aspect of a draft (e.g., the organization, the way you incorporate sources, etc.) let your reviewers know in advance so that they can read your work with those issues in mind.

**…Then Keep Your Mouth Shut**

As your reviewers give you feedback, resist the knee-jerk urge to defend your work. Just listen to your reviewers. If your reviewers are physically present, set a rule that you, the reviewee, are not allowed to talk at all until all suggestions and feedback have been presented. If you are conducting your peer review through email exchange, you might set time restraints on replies (e.g., no replies for 12 hours). This will give you time to calmly consider your reviewers’ feedback.

Your Role as a Reviewer

When you are reviewing someone else’s work, consider the following ideas so that you can use your time to best serve the reviewee.

**Emotional Distance**

Reviewers also need a level of emotional distance from the draft they are working with. Do not be upset if your reviewee does not take your feedback. In the end, he or she is responsible for the paper.

**Global vs. Local Issues**

Global issues are the “big picture” issues of a paper: thesis, argument, evidence, organization, etc. Local
issues are those affecting a text at the sentence level, such as spelling, grammar, and syntax. Since peer review is not the same as proofreading or editing, you should spend the majority of your time focusing on global issues.

By all means, if you see a glaring typo, feel free to correct it, but neither you nor the reviewee should expect the peer review process to produce a draft free of local errors.

Specific Examples

Vague generalizations about your reviewee’s paper are unhelpful. Make sure that you have specific examples from the text to back up your feedback.

Example: “There are several paragraphs that lack a clear focus. For example, the paragraph about Korean-American attitudes towards diabetes on page 7...”

Framing Your Feedback

When presenting feedback, be sure to respond as a reader (i.e., as someone trying to read his or her way through the text). Keep the comments focused on the piece and not on the author.

Begin by discussing what is working in the piece.

Example: “I really enjoyed the introduction. It was clear and easy to follow, and it did a good job of establishing the context for the problem you are investigating.”

After discussing what is working, point out those parts of the piece that could be improved. Remember, by framing your responses as a reader, you will be able to keep the discussion on the text.

Example: “I got lost in the ‘Discussion’ section. It was difficult for me to see how each paragraph related to the one before it.”

Finally, offer suggestions for improving the problems you previously identified.

Example: “I think the ‘Discussion’ section would be easier to follow if there were some transition words or phrases to show how the paragraphs relate to each other.”

Summarize Your Feedback

When you are the reviewee, receiving a large amount of feedback from multiple reviewers can be overwhelming. As a reviewer, you can make this process easier on the reviewee by ending your comments with a summary of your main points of feedback. You might even want to put these items into a bulleted list to give to the reviewee.