

Participating in Peer Review

When you participate in peer review, you may do so both as an author and as a reviewer of another's writing. Most authors recognize the potential benefits of being reviewed, but fewer appreciate that evaluating the writing of others is an excellent way to improve their own writing. The guidelines below may help you as authors to prepare your paper for peer review, and help you as reviewers to make comments effectively and constructively.

Advice to Authors

Going public: no fear!

Writing is initially a private process, and many writers feel at least a little anxious and vulnerable about showing their work to others. Eventually, of course, what you write will become public – that's the point of writing. If you have something to say, the goal of telling your story well in writing should outweigh your concerns about exposing yourself in writing. And even the best writers can benefit from feedback.

Organizing your paper: divide and conquer

Divide your paper into sections. This will give you several small, easier writing tasks instead of one big, difficult one. Choose the section that you most feel like working on; you don't have to work on each part in sequence. Craft each part until it says what you want it to say. Then put the parts together and refine what should now be a near-final draft.

Understand your subject

Before you start to write, lay the foundation: read, think, and talk about your topic until you know what you want to say. Don't try to short-cut this step; it won't work. To frame the main ideas of the paper, talk to someone who is intelligent and interested but not an expert in the area. Write through a hard part — in your own words — until you can't write about it anymore. If you get stuck, you probably have a content problem, not a writing problem. Go back and forth among writing, reading, and talking about your subject to clarify your understanding.

Keep your audience in mind

Writing blocks often occur because authors forget about their audience. Meet your readers where they are: Who are they? What do they already understand about your topic? What new information do you have? If you were new to this topic, what would *you* want to know?

Respect your reviewers

Show your best work. The quality of the feedback that you receive will depend on the quality of writing that you present. The reviewer is taking the time to carefully read what you have written. Do your part by preparing the clearest, most literate draft that you can, and proofread it for grammar, spelling, and whether it makes sense.

Provide a road map. Identify the areas that you are least confident about. Be explicit about the kind of feedback that you want. Is your introduction the weakest part? Do you mainly want help on organization? Say so, so that your reviewers don't edit an early draft as though it were a final revision or fail to focus on areas where you want the most help.

Trust yourself

If you understand your subject and have spent some time on your writing, then you already have a good idea of what you want to say and how you want to say it. Your reviewers should give an honest assessment of how well they understood and enjoyed your paper, but you, the author, have the final say on it. Listen to your reviewers, but listen to your authorial voice, too, and have don't feel obligated to make every suggested change without good reason.

Advice to Reviewers

Who are you?

As the reader of an academic paper, you are professional, interested in the field, intelligent, motivated — but slightly lazy. “Slightly lazy” means that the paper should not be difficult to read; it's the author's job to unpack a complex subject and explain it in a clear and interesting way. If you're not sure what the author is saying, point this out.

What to review

Keep the big picture in mind. Focus on giving feedback on *content, organization, and clarity*. Your main goal is to evaluate whether the writing hangs together and makes sense. Look over the entire draft both before and after you have made specific comments. Watch for imprecise wording — does each word mean something? Does it mean the right thing? If not, flag this for the author.

Line edits aren't that useful. Identifying grammar, spelling, and formatting errors (these are called line edits) is nice to do, but this isn't your main job as a reviewer. Mark superficial errors that you detect, but don't fix them yourself. It's easy to be distracted by line edits and miss important things like structure and content. After reading each paragraph, read it again.

Flag, don't fix, trouble spots. You might have trouble making sense of something but not know how to fix the writing. Just identify where you had a problem and why; the author can usually take it from there.

How to review

Be frank but constructive. This may seem like a narrow path to tread, but it's not that difficult, and it's the best kind of feedback that you can give. When you run into difficult writing, make constructive comments and avoid criticism without substance. Give specific evidence as to why the writing doesn't work (“I could use a clearer transition between paragraphs 1 and 2”) rather than making personal judgments (“Paragraphs 1 and 2 made no sense”). Put another way, give the kinds of comments as a reviewer that you would like to receive as an author.

Be positive. Identify positive aspects of the paper as well as areas that need improvement (“the example here was really helpful”; “wow, you condensed that argument beautifully”). By doing so, you're not just being nice, you're highlighting the author's writing strengths.

Be substantive. Avoid empty comments that the author can't use (“Looks fine”, “Interesting paper”). Instead, make specific observations (“Is this the right word here?”; “The argument might flow better if you reversed these two paragraphs”). Being specific in your scrutiny of another's writing is like exercising a muscle that, in turn, will strengthen your own writing.