Tips for Giving Useful Peer Responses

Participating effectively in a peer response group is a skill—and worthwhile to develop, because as a student you possess the ability to make positive contributions to the compositions of your peers. After all, you must meet the same guidelines in your own writing for the classes that you take. You know the classroom context, the assignment at hand, and the professor's expectations for the writing, so you are uniquely qualified to provide useful responses to your peers' drafts. To make the process run smoothly, keep these tips in mind:

Make sure you understand the writer's context and concerns. Where in the writing process is this draft? What did the writer struggle with most? Is there a section of the paper you should read especially carefully? Is there an aspect of the writing—transitions between paragraphs, for example, or the clarity of the writer's thesis—that the writer needs help with?

Read carefully. It's not only frustrating for writers, but a waste of everyone's time, if you speed-read the draft. After all, the very topic you say a writer doesn't address may well be covered in a paragraph you glossed over!

Keep in mind the big picture. Be sure your comments address the content, organization, and flow of information throughout the essay and not just proofreading issues. While it's important for a writer to know that he or she left out a comma, it's perhaps even more important for the writer to know that the his or her argument is flawed or that a particular topic isn't fully addressed!

Offer peers the same type of feedback that you hope to receive—detailed, specific, and sensitive commentary. An empty "this is good" response lacks clarification and is not useful, nor is it helpful when a reader rattles off a list of every little mistake s/he can find.

Be honest. Good responders don't hold back criticism, but of course they aren't nasty, either! Balance your criticism with a friendly tone and a willingness to help the writer figure out how to improve the writing.

Give both specific praise and specific revision suggestions (i.e., "I liked the way that you pointed out _____ in paragraph ___ because _____" and "I think that the part where you said _____ in paragraph _____ could be improved by _____ because _____")

➤ Sometimes it can be overwhelming for a writer to hear that something is wrong with the writing; giving a suggestion for how to revise makes your commentary less overwhelming and more useful

➤ Praising what works lets writers know what they should continue to do with their writing. Particularly when writers are nervous about sharing their work with others or feeling confused by a writing assignment, it's useful for them to know what they've already mastered.

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