

Writing Project 3: The Peer Review Process and Cover Letter

An important part of making your work public in academia is the peer review process. This time-honored tradition gives you (usually anonymous) feedback from several of your peers about your written work, with one or more opportunities to address their concerns and suggestions before publication. Though at times frustrating, it can also be an extremely rewarding process in that things you thought were quite clear in your work may not be to new readers, while other things you thought were poorly executed may earn their praise.

As part of our work to accumulate a set of tools for writing and revising, each of your final research papers will be subjected to pseudo-anonymous peer review by a student in a different section of the course. Each of you is working on a very different research topic than the others; in this way, you will get a reader whose expertise is different, giving you a truly fresh pair of eyes with which to read your draft. At the same time, you will have the opportunity to practice exchanging feedback electronically, thus giving you another tool for soliciting and providing feedback on drafts of your written work (in addition to oral/iPod comments, small-group workshops, Writing Studio tutors, professor's comments, and so forth).

We will use two helpful functions in Microsoft Word to help make this process easier. Step-by-step directions for using the Insert Comments and Compare and Merge Documents functions are given below. In order to make sure that everyone can open and save documents in mutually transferable formats, you must use Microsoft Word during this process.

1. SECTIONS OF THE PAPER

To recap, each of the sections of the research paper should answer the following questions; use this as a checklist while you're reviewing it. If you are reviewing an essay that is not divided into these sections, please make sure each of the following questions is answered somewhere in the text and in more or less this order. You may also refer to these questions by code (for example, the first Introduction question is I-A, question 2 in Methodology is IV-B).

I. Introduction:

- A. What is the topic of this research paper?
- B. What is the reasoning behind this student's central claim? (warrants and reasons)
- C. Where exactly will that central claim be tested (what's the specific case study, region or community)?

II. Background:

- A. Is the information provided in this section confined to facts about the case study?
 - If there is extraneous information in this section, references to theoretical positions or other unnecessary details, make suggestions to the author about how to eliminate or consolidate them.
 - Or maybe there's insufficient background. What else would you like to know about the primary case study at this point in the paper?

III. Theory:

- A. Has the author come to terms with several major studies about similar topics (or studies of other topics in the same region) in sufficient detail?
- B. For each of those other studies, has she explained exactly how the proposed project adds to, builds on, corrects, or extends it (i.e., intertextuality)? (Note that if another person's work is mentioned, it must be clear why it's relevant to know about that work.)
- C. How does this student's central claim relate to others' work? Has he explained specifically how his work contributes to existing research in a specialty?

IV. Methodology:

- A. Are two or three specific lines of evidence (kinds of data, variables, information) covered in this section? More or less than that is probably not sufficient, or too ambitious, respectively.
- B. For each of those lines of evidence, has she justified her use of that line of evidence to test her claim?

C. Has he made explicit and specific predictions about the patterns he expects to find in that line of evidence if his claim is correct?

V. Results and Discussion:

- A. Are the data collected to test each hypothesis summarized in the text, a table, descriptive or quantitative terms, and the results clearly stated?
- B. Are there sufficient examples presented in the texts, tables, or figures?
- C. Are the implications of this research for others working in this area or on this topic explained?
- D. Are confounding variables, alternative interpretations of patterns in the data, counterexamples, possible objections, and so forth, discussed and countered where applicable?
- E. Are future lines of inquiry or possible uses of your research suggested?

VI. References/Bibliography:

- A. Are all instances of quotes or specific information referenced either in the text or in footnotes? Do references to more general things include the authors' names and (if needed) the year of publication? Do references to quotes or more specific information also include the relevant page number(s)?
- B. Is there a full, complete, and spell-checked bibliography at the end of the paper?

VII. Figures and Tables:

- A. Does each figure or table have a sequential number (Figure 1, Table 1, Table 2, etc.), and a descriptive caption?
- B. Is each one actively used in the text (not just passively referred to)?

2. FOCUS OF YOUR COMMENTS:

In commenting on another's paper, please focus not on mechanics (word choice, spelling and grammar, etc), but rather on two things. First, go through the questions listed above for each section of the essay. Indicate with marginal comments where any of these things are not answered in sufficient detail, or conversely, where the author does a very good job answering that question. Secondly, indicate parts of the texts that you find vague, confusing, contradictory, too general, particularly strong, well-written, and so forth.

In addition to in-text comments, please add comments to the end of the document as well that address the questions in part 1, and/or more general issues you'd like to point out. Finally, feel free if you wish to provide contact information (e.g., phone number) in case the author has any questions.

3. HOW TO INSERT COMMENTS:

Each of you has an electronic copy of the paper you are reviewing in the Group page on Blackboard. Please download that document, and open it in Microsoft Word. Within Word, you can use the Insert Comments function to...well, insert your comments right into the margins of the text like I've done with your paper drafts. Simply drag your computer mouse to select parts of the text, click on Insert, then Comment. The comment boxes are automatically numbered in sequence, so if you go back and insert another comment, those that follow will be automatically renumbered. (Note that Mac's version of Word does not number comments.) To edit a comment, simply click on the text inside the comment box. To delete a comment, right-click on the comment box and choose Delete Comment.

In Word 2007, click on the Review tab, then New Comment. Under the Show Markup pull-down menu, you can select comments, insertions and deletions, formatting changes, and so on to make each category of changes visible or invisible.

Once you've inserted your comments into the text of the paper you're reviewing, and added additional comments at the end of the document, please save the file under a different name using this format:

Author's_lastname.WP3.D1.Your_lastname.doc. Please send this file to the student author through Blackboard's File Exchange feature, and upload it to the appropriate Assignments folder for me.

Important: *Please save a copy of the file with your comments on a disk or your hard drive; you will need this document to compare with the revised paper later on!*

IV. HOW TO COMPARE AND MERGE DOCUMENTS:

Once the author has made his or her revisions, and included his or her Peer Review Cover Letter at the beginning or end of the document, that paper will be saved using the following file name format:

Authors_lastname.WP3.D2.doc. It will be sent to you, the reviewer, via File Exchange, and uploaded to the Assignments folder for me. Please download the revised paper from your Digital Dropbox, and open the new version in Microsoft Word. Then, click on the Tools menu, followed by Compare and Merge Documents. A browser window will pop up; find the file you saved that had your comments inserted into the text (**Author's_lastname.WP3.D1.Your_lastname.doc**), click on it, then click Merge in the lower right corner of this box. Marginal boxes show you what has been deleted since the last version. Notice that your comments are preserved in the margin, so you can see what your suggestions were. Any new text that has been added since the last version of the paper is highlighted and underlined in the text itself. You can turn off any of these individual features by clicking on the drop menu called "Show" next to "Final showing markup." Email me if you do not see these menus in Word's menu bar once you've merged the documents.

To merge documents in Word 2007, click Compare on the Review tab, and select Compare two versions of a document. Under Original document, browse to select the file with your comments in it; under Revised document, choose the final draft of your student reviewee's paper.

One by one, please go through your comments, and make sure that each has been addressed to your satisfaction, including any comments and suggestions you added to the end of the document. Please make a note of any comments that you feel weren't adequately addressed, as well as anything else you'd like the author to address in future writing assignments, or in the final presentation of or poster about the research project. Send me those comments in an email (cbeaule@duke.edu), and please CC (copy) that email to the student author; you do NOT need to insert comments again in the text. In this email, you can refer back to your comments by number (e.g., "Comment A9 wasn't addressed well because I still don't know how this person's work is related to the Bawden article she describes."). Though we don't have enough time for another round of drafts, your comments are still valuable, and the peer review email is part of your project grade, so please give this final step the serious effort and attention that it deserves.

5. DEADLINES:

The following set of deadlines must be strictly enforced, as each step affects two people (you and your reviewer or reviewee). Unless you have arranged alternate deadlines with me ahead of time, and unless we have agreed in writing (via email) on those alternate deadlines, you will be penalized one third of a letter grade on your WP3 project grade for each step where you fail to complete the assignment on time.

- **Thursday, November 8:** Download the draft you will be reviewing before class that day, and bring either a laptop with the paper already downloaded to it (internet access is unreliable in LSRC), or a hard copy to class for the peer review process. Note that if you bring a hard copy to class, you must type your comments in the margins and at the end of the document before sending it to those students by tomorrow.
- **Friday, November 9, 6:00 pm:** Please use File Exchange to send your reviewed paper with in-text comments back to the student reviewer, and upload this same document to Blackboard for me. Please indicate in the Comments section of the Assignment folder upload screen your name, and the name of the student (or pair of students) whose paper you have reviewed. These two steps must be completed by 6:00 pm.

- **Monday, November 26, 6:00 pm:** Please revise your proposal using the feedback you or your group has received from the Writing Studio tutors, your student reviewers, and me. You will next compose a cover letter explaining how you have incorporated these various forms of feedback and, where applicable, where you disagree with your reviewer's suggestions or comments. Both the final draft of your paper and the cover letter must be submitted to me via the Assignments folder, and to your student reviewer via File Exchange by 6:00 pm.
- **Tuesday, November 27, midnight:** First, compare and merge the draft of the essay you reviewed and which has your comments in it with the revised draft you received yesterday. Please read through the merged draft and the accompanying cover letter carefully. Secondly, send me and the author an email indicating whether or not you are satisfied with the revisions made by the student(s) whose paper you reviewed, and by their explanations of those revisions in the cover letter. Congratulations! You've fulfilled your responsibilities as a peer review panel member, and seen the complex (and sometimes unexpected) ways that your feedback can shape another's written work.

6. PEER REVIEW COVER LETTER

Please revise your paper using the feedback you have received from your peer reviewer, your classmates, and me. You will compose a cover letter addressed to your peer reviewer explaining how you have incorporated these various forms of feedback and, where applicable, where you disagree with your reviewer's suggestions or comments.

Why a cover letter? Editors of scientific journals generally expect the authors of a submitted manuscript to respond to reviewers' comments in a cover letter that accompanies the revised manuscript. Although you presumably don't plan to actually submit your paper to a journal, writing a cover letter should help you create a better final product. It's a more formal and thorough version of the "Final Reflections" I've asked you to write at the end of each writing project this semester. Reflecting upon readers' responses to your writing encourages you to get out of your own head (in which everything is perfectly clear!) and to instead consider your writing from the perspective of the readers.

What to include in the cover letter. Include a section for each written response, in which you respond to both the marginal and final comments made by your student reviewer. When referring to specific marginal comments, use the same numbering in each section of your cover letter as your reviewer's comments (e.g., comment CB3).

In your point-by-point response, explain how you addressed each substantive comment, referring to specific sections of the paper (or paragraph numbers) in the old and new versions where appropriate. You do not have to make a revision in response to every comment or make any specific revision suggested by a reviewer. However, if you decided not to change something in response to a reviewer's comment, explain why—keeping in mind that your WP3 essay still must stand alone. (In other words, readers of your paper wouldn't normally be able to read your cover letter to see your full explanation.) If a comment doesn't call for a response (e.g., it simply notes a strength), then you can, if you choose, just write something like "The reviewer thought XYZ was a strength." If you wish, feel free to include responses to any additional feedback you received from your reviewers, other classmates, Writing Studio tutors, roommates, or anyone else. Also include a section in which you explain the revisions you made (or didn't make) in response to the peer reviewers' header comments, which have the most important points of his or her response to your argument.

You can use single spacing for your cover letter. Please include it as the first page of your revised paper, not as a separate document.

Tips. Remember that the cover letter is a graded writing assignment that will take time and effort to do well. If done thoughtfully, your letter will almost certainly help you improve your final essay. Some tips:

- *As the writer, you are the one who decides what to revise and how.* The peer review assignment encouraged reviewers to focus on explaining their responses as readers, rather than on making specific suggestions about how to revise your paper. But what if a reviewer did suggest specific revisions? In that case, consider what it was in your draft that led the reviewer to make the suggestion; talk to the reviewer again if you need to. You may choose to take whatever advice the reviewer gave, or you may decide that a different revision will more effectively address the underlying concern. Or you may decide not to revise at all in response to a comment—but be aware that this can be risky, especially if more than one of your readers (in the small-group workshop, during an appointment with your UWT tutor, and in my comments) expressed similar concerns.
- *Write your cover letter so that it stands alone.* Make it obvious what comment you are responding to without the reader of your cover letter having to refer back to the original comment. For example, let's say that a reviewer wrote that you didn't adequately justify your decision about X in the methodology section. Rather than starting out your response with "I agree with that comment," instead begin with something like this: "I agree (or disagree) that I did not adequately justify my decision to test hypothesis X with data from line of evidence Y in my methodology...I've responded by explaining that Y is a good way to test hypothesis X because..."
- *Explain your revisions and your rationale behind them.* You do not have to go as far as cutting and pasting in excerpts from your draft and final version. But instead of just "I changed that paragraph" give a little more explanation, such as: "To address the reviewer's comment that I hadn't justified X in the methodology, I added Y. I think this is adequate justification because..."

Peer Review Partners:

- Michelle Bradshaw - Jessica Gaul
- Amy Cotter - Kristine Brown
- Nicole Garrett - Kimberly Donovan
- Nicholas Garvy - Joon Gil
- Rui Jiang - Richard Veerman
- Ashley Kang - Michael Alexander
- Elizabeth KonKolics - Karima Christmas
- Kaicheng Liang - Garrett Dobson
- Daniel Parker - Amy Snook
- Andrew Pelisek - Cristina Lopez

We have an odd number of students, so the last three read each other's work as follows:

- Katherine Roemer read Sherril Yuen's paper
- Sherril Yuen read Joseph Tkac's paper
- Joseph Tkac read Katherine Roemer's paper

**REVIEWING A SCIENTIFIC PAPER
— ETIQUETTE FOR REFEREES —**

