■ The Dynamics of Writer-Reader Response

Typically, we write with the anticipation of being read. Even the diarist, purportedly writing for herself, anticipates a moment when she returns to her text and reflects upon its composition, a moment not entirely unlike any writer's ongoing review of his draft. Analytic and argumentative writers keenly anticipate readers' responses, especially those of readers who have examined the same issues, but have reached somewhat different conclusions, or have approached the matter at hand from a different angle of inquiry.

Such readers are likely to shape more or less different interpretations than our own, to call into question or to counter our assumptions and ideas. While not all of our readers will be skeptics, all other persons who read our prose are *not* us; each reader is a writer's *other*. Writing and reading is a mode of social transaction, an activity that resembles a dialogue more than it does a simple transmission of information from one mind to another. Most writers would be disappointed to find that, after carefully reading their work, readers have nothing to say to them. With engaged response, writing thrives.

It is perhaps not too much to say, then, that reading completes writing, that writing entails reading. At its most engaged, the writer/reader exchange is a lively meeting of minds, as the writer compares her intentions with readers' realizations, learning something about the effects of her prose on others. Writers are in special need of readers' responses as they draft and revise their work. The exchange is especially exigent since writers cannot fully anticipate how their readers will respond.

Committed writers tend to be invested in their prose, so much so that the most useful responses are at times the most difficult to hear. Most of us have a desire not only to be listened to, but also to be understood. Our ability to revise is partly a function of our knowledge of readers' reception. We depend on readers to be there for us, for their energies and insights to guide our renewed attentions to our drafts. But the most productive readings don't simply happen; they are nourished by certain practices, by an accountability shared all the way around. Engaged response is among the most powerful results a writer can experience, but readers and writers need to get clear on their respective roles and responsibilities.

It is important to keep in mind that both writers and readers are potentially shaped by peer review: writers review their work by new lights, but readers are also changed in the process, as they participate in the critique and thereby clarify or revise their own positions and anticipate those occasions when their own work will also be read. Just so, peer critique is anxiety-provoking, both for students (who may fear having what are perceived as their "weaknesses" exposed to public view) and for teachers (who may find the event marked by uncertainty, ambiguity, and potential misdirection). Over the years, practitioners have found that the practice of beneficial peer review doesn't come naturally; it involves establishing best practices, experimenting with models, and being mindful of possibly bruised egos all the way around. Clearly, we need to ease students into peer response as a vital—even welcomed—aspect of Writing 101.

■ Common Pitfalls

Many of our students come to us having already reviewed their high school peers' work. This prior experience has advantages and liabilities. Some students are accustomed to having their work made public, and expect feedback as a normative part of the drafting and revising cycle. Others, however, have found peer review laborious and disappointing since what they've typically received isn't so much response as it is surface editing, with classmates pointing out misspellings and tense errors, speaking vaguely about "flow," or requisite but empty-sounding praise. Assure your students that we can and will do better than that. Some tips for students include:

Avoid surface-level reading. The greatest compliment you can pay to someone else's writing is to *engage* with it. Sincerely let the writer know how the text affects you as a reader. Speak about what interests you in the draft so far, what you find surprising or inventive, what challenges your previous thinking on the subject. Identify shared struggles by acknowledging some feature of the assignment that you also found difficult. If possible, let the writer know how you overcame such difficulty.

Fear of negativity. If you avoid critiquing, you might make yourself feel better, but you won't help the writer strengthen his/her text. Remember that the writer whose work is under review deserves your strategies for success. He/she deserves to know what's not working so well, where you become confused, what else you need in order for an argument to be persuasive. This doesn't give your license to treat the writer shabbily. You may want to break bad news gently, to situate your sharp comments within a context of care.

Critiquing the person instead of the text. Instead of saying "You're not making sense here," a judgment about the writer, try "This section isn't clear to me yet." To some degree, we are what we write, but no piece of writing, however ambitious, completely defines us as individuals. Moreover, intellectual writing is a learned behavior, a set of enacted techniques that none of us is born with.

Pointers to Success

Respond as a Reader. You don't have to know how a writer should specifically revise something, you just need to know what you find interesting. Explain how the draft affected you intellectually or emotionally. Be specific. Did you connect with an idea, an example, or an explanation? Were there sections where you had to work too hard to see the main point or the connections between supporting ideas? Are there places in the text where you expected something other than what was offered? Are there important terms offered whose definitions are ambiguous?

Use I-statements. ("I was amused here," "I got confused here," "I found this right on target") so as to better own your response as coming from a particular set of interests.

Dig in. The instructor is going to scrutinize the argument in the writer's final draft. You'll do the writer a favor if you do the same. Is it sufficiently complex and insightful or simplified and obvious? Can you read it once and summarize its central points? Even if you don't agree with the claim, is it reasonable? Are there other possible options, counterarguments, or pieces of evidence the writer could have offered? Do you get lost anywhere?

It's just a draft. The reason why we call them *works-in-progress* is because they're still in their formative stages. Your role is to keep the draft moving forward to its next iteration. The writer needs your input to keep the engine running. Remind yourself that a tactful critique of a draft won't upset the writer. She'll be grateful.

Prioritize. You don't have to mention everything a writer might consider revising. Simply help writers see how an engaged reader responds to their work so that they can focus on two or three areas to improve in the next draft. That requires letting some things go. Two Rules of Thumb: (1) Choose higher-order concerns over lower-order concerns. Focus on issues that impede your understanding of the ideas. Don't worry as much about issues that are more cosmetic. (2) Choose recurring issues over isolated issues. Focus on the issues that crop up repeatedly rather than the issues that appear only once. If you flood the writer with suggestions, you'll seem overwhelming rather than helpful.

■ Preparing for Peer Reviewing

Successful peer reviewing depends in large measure on how we prepare for the event. Please consider these sorts of decisions:

1. **Timing.** When during the process of drafting and revising will it be useful to make time for a peer review session? Reviewing papers in class can be a powerful pedagogy, but it takes time as students process a draft, prepare to respond, and open conversation about a work in progress. If the peer review is too far removed from the moment when students return to their drafts to revise, they may forget or misremember what was said.

2. **Whole class or small group?** There are appropriate moments for either format. Small-group reviewing is useful for giving writers targeted feedback on drafts. The whole-class approach is useful when you believe that everyone will benefit from an exemplary difficult ore a moment of writerly power and rhetorical success to be witnessed.

3. **With or without names?** Again, this will depend on a number of contingencies: Do you want students to focus on the writing rather than the writer? Do you want students to assess *ethos* as it is constructed in language rather than the way it is dependent on individuals? Will readers and the writer find blind review liberating? Will reviewers feel readier to take issue with claims, to offer counterarguments and variant interpretations if names are removed?

4. **Practice models.** Do you have a sample paper or two (written by students not in the class) that you can use as practice? You might take a moment as the peer review unfolds, to ask students how the review is going, to identify what else might be said, to reflect on their own roles, attitudes, and dispositions toward the draft. With models at hand, you can differentiate between typically helpful and unhelpful comments, or distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate levels of concern.

5. **Read drafts before or during class?** If possible, distribute papers under review before class. If students read a draft for the first time in class, make sure that they have adequate time to read and prepare. You might consider reading the draft aloud, or asking students to read, each person reading a paragraph in turn.

6. **Give directions.** Prepare a set of questions that you would like students to pose of a draft. Let them know as specifically as you can what you want to come of this review, what you want them to accomplish, and how this activity fits within the larger process of revising at hand.

7. **Yield.** Ask students to take notes or to develop a "Work Plan" based on the peer review. Also, take a few moments to reflect on what happened with the whole class: What did we learn that was unexpected? What got confirmed for you about the process of writing this paper? What are the common sticking points that many writers encounter?

8. **"I've got your back."** Let students know that they can turn to you for clarification about what a peer said. Let them know that they can speak with you (taking an ombudsman role) about a peer review that they find unfair, unhelpful, or dismissive.

9. **Evaluation?** Some instructors evaluate how well students carry out their peer review responsibilities. Some figure this into a class participation grade or some other percentage of the final grade.

Methods

Whole Class Review

Joe Harris calls this "seminar" (as opposed to "workshop") because it involves seminar-level roles and responsibilities. That is, the draft on the table and the questions and concerns that accompany it should be of interest to everyone in the class. It should, in other words, be an event that everyone stands to learn from, so papers are chosen to bring to the table based on general criteria: Does the paper make use of (or attempt to make use of) a writerly technique that you want the whole class to know about or to practice? Does the draft take an especially interesting or productive approach to an issue or question that the entire class is pondering? Does it exemplify a sticking point that a number of other writers are struggling with? Why might you want that whole class to articulate and then to sort through their responses to a paper or to particular passages within it? What will that help them to do as writers as they press forward with their own drafts? Might you want students to have the experience of their work being read by a "larger" public? Why might you want the student to "present" his/her work to a group of readers? Can you identify pedagogic, epistemologic, or phenomenologic reasons for doing such a thing?

Do you want students to have access to the drafts on the table beforehand? How do you want them to prepare for the seminar review? Do you want the writer appeal to readers for certain kinds of assistance and guidance?

Small Group Blind Review

Here, you make students responsible for choosing and guiding seminar discussion of work-in-progress. In this case, small group work is used to prepare for seminar-level review.
1. Ask student to upload their drafts a day or two before the class.
2. Before class, strip all the papers of names, and assign each a number. (Note whose papers are given which numbers).
3. Before class, create small groups of three or four students each. Assign the numbered papers (one per group member) to each of the small groups, making sure that no students within a particular group receive their own papers.
4. Make enough copies of a group's papers for each group member to read, and assemble these into packets or folders.
5. In class, place students in appropriate groups and distribute the appropriate folder to each group.
6. Distribute directions for the group activity (See Appendix 1, Appendix 2, and Appendix 3). Tell students that the purpose of their group work is to locate a single paper that they feel everyone in the class could benefit from reading and commenting on. By the end of class, students will have selected a paper, briefly met with its writer, and decided how they will present the draft to the whole class at the next meeting.
7. Before class ends, write on the board which paper numbers belong to which writers.
8. The groups invite the writers of the papers they've chosen to join them for a few minutes to preview why they've chosen the work and give the writer a sense of what to expect will be said about his/her work.
9. After class, the instructor distributes all of the papers chosen by the small groups to the whole class, and asks them to read them for the next class period.

Round Robin Reviews

This method allows every writer to receive pointed feedback, typically on an advanced draft, as a final or near-final step in the revision process.
1. Divide the class into two or three groups (depending on T/Th or M/W/F schedules).
2. A single group comes to class and the other group(s) stay(s) home.

3. Set up two or three review teams on Moodle (see Appendix 4 for directions).
4. At least two days before the review team's session, students post their most recent draft on Moodle.
5. Reviewers download their classmates' drafts and assess them using guidelines that the instructor has prepared (see Appendix 5 and Appendix 6 for examples).
6. On the day the review team comes to class, each member has two or three minutes to respond to each classmates' drafts. The writer remains silent during the round robin of comments, but takes notes and listens for commonalities among the remarks. The writer takes a moment to thank reviewers and to ask for clarification about comments. Group members pass their drafts with written comments to the writer.

Peer Response Worksheet

Some instructors prefer to have students write out their responses to classmates' papers using a worksheet that is given to the writer. Such worksheets might be prepared by a small group of reviewers who share responses with the writer, or a worksheet could foster a whole-class discussion of a paper. (see examples below).

Appealing to Peers for Help

Somewhere along the line in the process of drafting and revising, you may want to make it possible for writers to frame questions for their readers: "I need your help with X;" "I am struggling to decide between X and Y. What direction would you recommend?" "I am looking for a stronger example from the text; does anyone know of such a passage?" Few reviewers can resist at least trying to solve a problem that's been posed. If a student says something like: "I can't seem to make my paper flow," ask him/her to point to a specific transition point in the paper." If a student says something like: "I wonder if my thesis is strong enough," ask him/her what part of the thesis seems vague or too generalized.

project 1. review team guidelines.

Please come to the Review Team meeting on either Tuesday or Thursday having read and critiqued each of your Team members' revisions. You will have two or three minutes to address the writer. Given the compressed time, you'll want your comments to be brief but focused so that the writer can make note of your suggestions.

agenda
Number the paragraphs, then read the essay from start to finish in order to get a sense of its structure and central focus. At the top of the first page, compose a sentence or two that describes the intellectual work that the writer is attempting to get done here. What's the central question getting worked on, or the central idea guided through the whole?

cut
Are there any sentences that seem redundant, and that repeat some point or an idea in an unnecessary way? Does the writer ever seem to be spinning his/her wheels, and you would suggest that such sentences be avoided?

add
Are there any places in the essay where you suggest that the writer say more: clarify a point, include additional evidence, make a distinction, stipulate a definition, offer a qualification, etc.?

change
Are there any words, phrases, or sentences that you suggest be changed? Please include your suggested substitution.

best evidence
Look carefully at the terms, phrases, or passages from the source text that the writer offers in support of some point. Do these seem the best passages for this purpose? Might you recommend alternatives?

analysis of evidence
Look carefully at the places in the essay where the writer analyzes the textual evidence, or indicates what he/she wants readers to pay attention to, or to understand about the quoted material. Often, this kind of writing happens in either the lead-in or follow-up sentence(s) before and after quoted material.

pay off
Would you say that the essay helps you to understand something better or differently about the source text? What is this exactly? What special use has the writer made of the source text that allows him/her to attend to a larger question or issue in a special way?

project 2 | review team guide.

35 minutes to review

Read each of the drafts from start to finish, making a note of its progress from point to point, its momentum as it reveals the writer's interest in/concern about Sontag's analysis.

Then, go back into the draft and locate a sentence, passage, or paragraph that reflects what you take to be the writer's strongest work so far. Make note of what you especially admire about this sentence, passage, or paragraph: its phrasing, its detail, its distinction-making, its content, etc.?

Next, I ask that you think of yourself as generous and friendly reviewer. You are interested in helping the writer carry out his/her work, in giving the writer your best intellectual energies. Locate a place in the draft that you feel the writer could benefit from revisiting with your assistance: a point that's now under-developed, a claim that's unsupported, a key term that's repeated but ambiguous, a discussion that seems incomplete. Look for something quite substantive to work on, something that you feel will benefit the paper as a whole once it is revised. Let's call this the *place for robust revision.*

35 minutes to discuss your results

Each team member should reveal his/her general impressions of all three drafts. Then, each should present his/her ideas about a place for robust revision, describing what deserves close attention, what is confusing, and offering a strategy for change.

Next, the team should reach consensus about which draft to present to the rest of the class as an example of a paper that makes an interesting and important point that can benefit from robust revision.

On Thursday, each team will have 15 minutes to present their recommendation. The team will need to contextualize its choice of place for robust revision: What does the team find potentially promising about this passage? What deserves to be enriched, rephrased, or redone? What difference will this change make to the success of the paper as a whole?

5 minutes to meet with the writer

Let the writer know what you're team plans to talk about on Thursday. Let him/her know what you're interested in helping with, and why your team feels this will benefit the essay as a whole.

Project 3 | Reviewer's Guide

This stage of reviewing drafts has two purposes: 1) to give the writer feedback about how to move the draft forward to its next stage; and 2) to determine if the draft you're reviewing would be useful for the rest of your colleagues to read and talk about.

1. Take some time to read the draft from start to finish, not making any notes. Try to follow the progress of the argument as it moves forward. Then, at the end of paper, jot down a sentence or two that summarizes the intellectual work that, as far as you can tell, the writer is trying to get done here.

→ defines X

→ considers implications of X

2. Then, go back through the draft and next to each paragraph, jot down a word or phrase that describes the function of that paragraph (introduces X, or offers evidence in support of Y, or differentiates between A and B, or defines C, etc.) Now, read back through those syntheses to see if the accumulation of paragraphs makes sense as a logical development of parts. If a paragraph seems out of place, indicate that and, if you can, suggest where else in the essay that paragraph might better belong. If something seems left out in this development of paragraphs through the essay, say so. [Place an arrow in the margin, followed by the appropriate description.]

✚ say more about the effects of viewing this image

3. Look back through the essay to discover any places in the text where you would suggest the writer say more: extend a thought, offer additional details, offer a term, phrase, or passage from a source, include an image, provide a representative instance ("For example…"), etc. [Place a plus sign in the margin, followed by a description of what should be added.]

how to finish?

4. If the draft you are reviewing is unfinished, suggest two or three directions that you believe the writer could now pursue that would strengthen the project as a whole.

to share or not to share?

5. Decide if you believe this paper would be useful for the whole class to look at. Does it take an approach that will interest other writers? Does it make an especially complex point in a smart and effective way? Is there a sticking point that can best be attended to be a number of reviewers at the table?