

## Peer Editing

In the following document, which relates to Chapter 21 of *Acting on Words*, we comment briefly on the general principles of peer editing, illustrate those principles, and then discuss on-line peer editing boards.

### Learning by “Teaching”

You have probably experienced first-hand or heard that the best way to learn something is to try to teach it. Reviewing and commenting on the writing of your peers may not be exactly like teaching, but there are important similarities between the two tasks. As peer editor, you assume the role of encouraging and motivating someone’s efforts, of acknowledging strong points and promise while constructively pointing out areas for improvement. You do not have to be a stronger writer than the person whose work you are editing: any professional writer will tell you that *all* writers need editorial review. Writers already know, or think they know, what they intend to say, so it is harder for them than for a detached reader/editor to recognize whether or not they have said it clearly. Good peer editing requires thoughtful reading, not always superlative writing skills. Your role in helping peer writers to assess and improve their work provides invaluable assistance to them, while also furthering your own appreciation of the art of composition.

Here are some tips to guide your comments as a peer editor:

- Begin with a sincere positive response to the work as a whole, concentrating on main features while at the same time recognizing its strong and weak points.
- While commenting on grammar, punctuation, and other aspects of language usage, concentrate mainly on the fundamentals of stance (clarity of purpose, intended audience, effectiveness of voice, structure, and supporting details).

- Consider relating your comments to three major areas: content, organization, and language style and mechanics. Move from content through organization to mechanics and style.
- Look for an effective thesis and topic sentences that assert a perspective, not only a fact.
- Look for effective transitions and modifiers within and between both the structure and the ideas of paragraphs.
- Look for effective introductions and conclusions (are they concise and pointed?).
- Consider the value of phrasing some of your suggestions as questions. Sometimes you may not be sure if a certain technique or new element of approach will work, but the writer might consider the idea worth trying.
- Offer comments about language usage and sentence mechanics after commenting on content and structure. Mention specific points of grammar if you can, such as comma splices, dangling participles, and subject-verb agreement.
- To help formulate your comments, refer to the “Checklist of Steps to a Successful Essay” at the text website for Chapter 21 and to “Ten Logical Fallacies” (pp. 38-42) and “Fifteen Common Errors” (pp. 550-565). If the writing is a summary or a research paper, refer to “Ten Steps to a Successful Summary” (p. 198) or the “Checklist of Steps to a Successful Research Paper” (p. 311).
- Control your responses—too much feedback may swamp the writer. Four, five, or six precise sentences may be sufficient, depending on the length of the work under scrutiny. (In the first example, below, the peer editor “caught fire” and wrote two longish paragraphs, but notice that the tone of these suggested improvements remains constructive.)
- End by reinforcing the peer writer’s attempts overall, despite the weaknesses.

Read the following first-draft, introductory paragraph by Christina Angaran, who has underlined her provisional topic sentence. You don't want to overload the writer with too many comments; often it is best to find just *one main area* for recommended improvement. After you have done this, read the peer editor responses following the paragraph.

## Sample Student Paragraph: Find One Area for Improvement

### An Ideal Vacation Spot

When I was young I dreamt like every child did about far-away lands. Of course, children had their own ideal place, and I was no different. I would dream about a place that was warm all of the time, and when it rained, the water would feel like bath water on your skin. The place would be quiet with enough tourists to make it interesting. The people in this place would be warm and friendly. You would meet the local people and become friends, calling them by name as you would pass them on the street. There would be no crime, and the doors to people's houses would be open for all to come and visit. Staying out late would be welcomed because most people would sit on their porches, have lemonade and chat with their neighbours; meanwhile, their children would play ball on the street or play a game of hide-and-go-seek. Since the sea or ocean would back onto your hotel room or yard, you would wake up as early as possible every morning to take a dip in the water that would be waiting just for you. Then at the end of the day when dusk would fall, you would take another plunge into that warm, blue and inviting water. It wouldn't matter that you would wake up early and go to bed late, because in a place like this you would want to savour every day.

### Sample peer editor comments (focus on organization)

Christina, I find this a very engaging, extremely well-written paragraph, developed around an imaginative topic with lots of universal appeal (we have all been children and have all had similar dreams). Your description is beautiful; this creates a strong dominant impression and elaborates your dream-place through good specific

details. But could organization of these details be rearranged? I can see why you present the underlined sentence as your thesis sentence, because everything you have described is something great in this special place. When I go through the points in the paragraph, I find you have an order of aspects to savour: (1) warm, (2) quiet yet stimulating, (3) friendly, (4) safe, (5) beautifully inviting (with the sea to swim in, from dawn to dusk). Would it intensify the central impression of all this cool ocean beauty to begin with the morning swim, then cover the other features before moving on to the people (friendly, safe, available all day and evening), and then conclude with the evening swim? In other words, would a chronological scheme work here to develop a sense of place? I'm also wondering if your thesis sentence could become what our textbook calls a *direct list*. Also, maybe it's just me, but I feel some kind of really big idealized quality from this description. It so obviously contrasts with most people's "real life." Could you later add a sentence that makes that big feeling of contrast more explicit? What's up with this dream?

Some work is needed on mechanical improvements. The transition from first- to second-person seems a little distracting. I realize you probably use "you" to include the reader in this big, universal child's fantasy, so do you really want to start with the more personal "I"? What about "me"?? The reader wonders why the shift occurs, though you may have your own strategy here. Another questionable element is your use of conditional tense. While you reinforce the unreal aspect of the fantasy, I wonder if it compromises the writing's energy. Could your opening sentences be changed (to avoid too many "woulds")? How about this: "When I was young I dreamt, like every child, did about far-away lands. (Of course, children ~~had~~ have their own ideal place, and I was no different.) In particular, I would dream dreamt about a special place ~~that was~~ by the ocean, a place of permanent warmth and peace, of friendly people sharing their joy all day long. My special place is so warm that when it rains . . ." Maybe our instructor will disagree with my idea for shifting tense here (from "dreamt" to "is"), but I just wanted to raise the idea of playing with a move into the present tense, as if the writer and reader have become so caught up in the fantasy that it takes over, like childhood is immediate again.

Would that add to a strong effect when we return to awareness that this is a temporary dream?

My only other question is about the word “vacation” in the title. I wasn’t sure if this prepared me for a child’s dream. Anyway, as you can tell, I think this work has a very strong evocative power. I’ll be really interested to know how much these comments are of use to you.

Read the following first-draft paragraph by Christina Angaran. She has underlined her proposed topic statement. You don’t want to overload the writer with too many comments; often it is best to find just *one main area* for recommended improvement. After you have done this, read the peer editor responses following the paragraph.

## Sample Student Paragraph Find One Area for Improvement

### Friendship

When we were young, anyone who was our age and played with us was considered a friend; however, as we age our definition of friendship becomes much more complicated. Personally, I am very demanding of a friend just as I would that he or she was demanding of me. I believe that the expression “mia casa è sua casa” explains it all; my house should be their house and vice versa. A friend is also a person that you can sit quietly with, because at times sitting silently together is worth more than talking to pass time or to fill an awkward moment. It’s wonderful to know someone with whom you can share all of your thoughts, interests, and concerns with, without feeling that they’re judging you because they respect you. A friend shouldn’t be someone who is always polite; indeed, they should be able to tell you when you make mistakes and then be there for you without making you feel bad. Friends argue from time to time, but what separates them from everyone else is that they don’t take everything personally. You work together to resolve your argument, because your friendship is much more important than a petty disagreement, whose cause isn’t remembered in the end. My mother told me when I

was young that friends are hard to come by, and I would be very fortunate to have only one friend in my life. Now that I'm older I realize that my mother was right.

### **Sample peer editor comments (focus on grammar and punctuation)**

Christina, I think this is a very focused paragraph, offering a meaningful definition. The topic sentence works for me: it sets up the further explanations and examples that follow. Sentences seem to flow smoothly and logically. I really like your use of the Italian "my house is your house." I guess that's a good case of the writer's voice and experience enriching the general topic. The paragraph is cinched by an effective concluding sentence. All I can really nitpick in this one is English usage, so here goes:

"Personally, I am very demanding of a friend just as I would that he or she ~~was~~ be demanding of me."

My mother tells me that the subjunctive mood is called for here. I looked this up in her old copy of the Prentice Hall Handbook for Writers. I'm not sure I can explain this yet, but it's also described on the Web if you search in Google.

"It's wonderful to know ~~someone~~ people with whom you can share all of your thoughts, interests, and concerns ~~with~~, without feeling that they're judging you, because they respect you."

I checked with Mr. Timms, and he says that without the comma before the concluding subordinate clause, it could seem like you are saying that they judge you because they respect you. You really mean the opposite, so if you use the comma, the clause refers more broadly to why you can share things with these people. The second "with" has been stroked out, because you have already presented it after "people." I guess "someone" is considered singular, so you aren't supposed to go on and use "they" for someone. Mr. Timms suggested making "someone" into a plural, "people."

~~A friend~~ Friends shouldn't be ~~someone~~ people who ~~is~~ are always polite; indeed, they should . . . .”

Same thing again.

“ . . . they don't take everything personally. ~~You~~ They work together to resolve ~~you~~ their argument, because your friendship is much more important than ...”

Again, that thing about keeping pronoun person consistent.

That's it—I really wish my paragraphs were as smooth and coherent as this one.

## Multiple Peer Editors

Professional writers may value one “pet” editor, but most of them also like to have their work reviewed by more than one reader. This is because multiple reviewers will help to separate genuine concerns from just one person's idea. If two, three, or more people make the same suggestion, chances are the writer should consider what they say. If only one person of several suggests a change, maybe the suggested change won't make a significant improvement for the majority of readers. Try to get as many thoughtful reviews of each piece of writing as you can.

## Virtual Peer Editing

Many writing courses set up virtual peer editing boards, so that students at home or other locations away from campus may post essays for peer editing as well as provide peer editing responses on posted essays by classmates. Such boards may be classified according to the course assignment number or according to the genre of writing. Writing courses may provide and moderate peer editing, with boards for major forms-- for example, for paragraphs, personal essays, expository essays, analytical essays, and argumentative essays. If these are rewarded with marks, they will generally be widely and consistently used, but students who take advantage of peer-editing opportunities experience improved marks in any case, because peer-editing promotes improved insights

and results. The benefits flow not only from the comments received but also from those given.

***Reporting on the Experience: Obtain Informed Consent of Others You Intend to Name or Illustrate***

Students in introductory composition sometimes do assignments reporting on and assessing the experience of receiving and providing feedback. Those who choose this project are usually reminded of professional and ethical requirements to respect personal information: those with whom the student interacted, if they are to be represented in any way in the report, should be informed of the writer's intentions and should give approval.

Introductory Composition at Athabasca University provides the following consent form for students wishing to write about peer editing experiences in such a way that could represent the identity of other students.

**Statement of Citation Intent and Request for Permission**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

As my special project for English 255 Introductory Composition with Athabasca University, I am participating in the online peer editing exchanges provided by that course as well as reporting on what I learn through the experience. I would like to summarize, paraphrase, or quote from the following posting by you: \_\_\_\_\_ (here identify the posting. It may be a piece of writing or a comment on another student's writing).

Could you please sign beside "permission granted" at the bottom of this page to indicate your approval that I refer to your posting(s) or comment(s) as described above, and mail back this page to me at \_\_\_\_\_ (include your mailing address or direct the student to mail back the permission care of the online facilitator and include the online facilitator's mailing address).

Please indicate whether I may use your name as given on the peer editing boards, or if you prefer a different form of identification. Please ask someone to witness this agreement before returning it to me.



Permission to Cite Granted By: \_\_\_\_\_

Please specify how you wish to be named: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sincerely: \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signed copies of permission from all students whose writing or comments are specifically identified in your report must be included in your submission.

Any project involving human subjects requires researchers to obtain their university research ethics board approval. This process ensures that subjects in the research will not have their identities, words, or actions disclosed against their wishes. While obtaining informed consent to report on a class group activity of this sort may seem a little extreme, it is an opportunity to consider the ethics procedures involved in research. Furthermore, in the case of the Athabasca University peer editing boards, students do not agree to participate in studies as part of their use of the boards. Consent therefore does need to be obtained.

Discussion groups and peer editing boards should include clear disclaimers for all users advising that activity on these boards may be subject of research study from time to time, and that students not wishing to have their postings read by anyone other than the authorized student participants and course staff during the applicable time should inform the appropriate course supervisor. As part of research ethics, transcripts of posting are regularly archived and destroyed.

## Student Essay Reporting on Peer Editing Activity

Andrea Zawaski decided to use peer editing boards to supplement her growth as a writer throughout her course. She posted essays, received feedback, and provided feedback to other essays posted by other course students. She kept notes and

ensured that others involved knew about and approved her intentions to describe their exchanges in her report.

## Report on Peer Editing

Andrea Zawaski

I chose peer editing for my special project because I felt that, although I love to write, my grammar and punctuation were weak, and this would be a great way to learn more about punctuation and the writing process in general. I posted three essays of my own: an expository essay, an argumentative essay, and a critical essay. The first draft of my expository essay, about global warming, was posted June 23, 2006, and the second draft was posted July 18, 2006. The first draft of my argumentative essay was posted July 23, 2006. However, I reworked the essay into a more argumentative style and posted it again on the argumentative board as 'Bilingualism Reworked' on August 18, 2006. A third draft of this essay was posted August 23, 2006. I posted the original essay on bilingualism, with a few revisions, on the critical essay board August 21, 2006. A second draft of this essay was posted August 24, 2006. I also edited two of my peers' papers. The first essay I edited was titled 'Second draft: Montessori - The Good, The Bad & The Ugly', originally posted April 14, 2006 on the expository board, and my edit was posted June 23, 2006. The second essay that I edited was a personal essay titled 'Sri Lankan Shock' posted July 5, 2006, and my edit was posted July 7, 2006. Editing my peers' essays helped me to focus on the topics within paragraphs, as well as the organization of topics throughout an essay, and having my own essays edited allowed me to learn more about clauses, phrases, qualifiers, and other forms of punctuation.

Editing an essay written by someone else was an interesting experience. I found it much easier to see mistakes in someone else's writing than I did my own, particularly in matters of topic organization. From the reader's perspective, I

expected the paragraphs to follow certain topics and connect somehow from one paragraph to the next. When they didn't, it was awkward to readjust my train of thought. For example, in the draft essay 'Sri Lankan Shock' the fourth paragraph began with a definition of culture shock. The expectation at this point was for the paragraph to discuss culture shock in more depth and perhaps what was particularly shocking to the author. However, midway through the paragraph the topic changed to the way in which Sri Lanka 'shaped and changed' the author's life, and then moved into some wonderful examples of the importance of language skills. Separating these three ideas into their own paragraphs and adding more detail to them, I suggested, would remove the chopiness within the paragraph and strengthen the essay. I also felt the need to adjust my train of thought after the fifth paragraph. This paragraph introduced Germany as another example of a foreign culture that the author had to adapt to. At this point I was expecting the essay to shift from the experience in Sri Lanka to an experience in Germany, but instead the story left Germany and went back to Sri Lanka. I was left wondering about the importance of this paragraph and what the experience in Germany was. Removing the fifth paragraph would prevent the reader from feeling stranded and give the essay a better flow.

These experiences made me scrutinize the organization in my own essays. I made an extra effort to ensure that there was only one topic per paragraph, and that the paragraphs had an easy flow from one to the other. Editing other people's essays made me more aware of writing from the reader's point of view.

Having my essays edited was valuable in teaching me more about punctuation. The placement of commas in particular was an area with which I struggled. For example, in the first draft of my expository essay, I had some comma splices. Not only did Melanie Klingbeil, the online facilitator, point out where some of these mistakes were, she also explained what a comma splice is and how to correct it, and offered reference to more information on the subject should I feel I needed it. Here is an example of an error that Melanie pointed out:

A gradual increase in temperature over a long period would allow the

planet's ecosystems to adapt, however a sudden change, within one or two hundred years, would not give the planet's ecosystems enough time...

I learned that there are two independent clauses in this sentence joined only by the comma before "however," and that "however" is not a coordinating conjunction but rather a conjunctive adverb. For more on the comma splice, and how to fix it, I referred to p. 551 of *Acting on Words* and background information in "Preparing to Solve the 15 Common Errors" at the text enrichment site, Handbook.

Having someone else explain where and what types of mistakes I was making helped me to focus on the purpose of the comma, and allowed me a greater understanding of clauses, phrases, and qualifiers. With an increased awareness of comma placement, I felt more confident in when, and when not, to use the comma. I also learned to be more aware of when to use semicolons and colons.

The peer editing board was an excellent tool in learning about the writing process. Not only did I learn from trying to edit my peers' papers and teach them some of what I know, I also gained valuable insight into the flaws of my own writing. It is too easy to hand in an essay and not focus on the instructor's comments once a mark has been given. Peer editing motivated me to focus on the comments made about my essays, and revise the essays, sometimes several times. I was able to edit only one personal and one expository essay due to time restraints. However, it would have been beneficial to have edited one essay from each peer editing board to gain a better understanding of the different styles of writing. I would recommend to other peer editors to allow themselves the time to edit from each board. Even with the time restraints, I found peer editing to be engaging and motivating.

Andrea's essay stands as an important reminder that writing is rewriting, that it is an ongoing process, and that it rewards the diligent practitioner with steady improvement and satisfaction.

## Final Thoughts

Environmentalists insist that humanity needs to reduce car and air travel by drastic amounts. Katie Alvord, author of *Divorce Your Car*, reports that one day of telecommuting by 10% of the US workforce can drop air pollution by about 13,300 tons (194). In 2000, she predicted that by 2003, 137 million workers would be telecommuting in some sense (196). She also reports that over a third of telecommuters would quit their jobs if their employers ended their telecommuting programs (194) and that 60% of telecommuters in a 1997 survey found that telecommuting had positively affected their careers (196). Not the perfect analogue of face-to-face experience, on-line communication nevertheless offers a way to reduce massive reliance on fossil fuels without returning us to the local isolation of previous centuries. And as Alvord's research suggests, for many people this means of communication works extremely well. When it comes to education, methods like on-line discussions and peer editing have proven highly effective, and when it comes to writing apprenticeship and critical thinking, these methods are ideal. With a little imagination, Canadian educators could establish learning networks to connect the entire country and to allow populations that have been historically isolated to share their neglected knowledge. Given Canada's geography, demographics, and history, not to mention the appeals of planetary survival, virtual space sounds like a good idea, doesn't it?

## Work Consulted

Alvord, Katie. *Divorce Your Car! Ending the Love Affair with the Automobile*. Gabriola Island: New Society, 2000.