In-Class Peer Conferences: Typical Process and Guidelines

1. Students exchange papers the class period before the conference (hard copies or electronically, with copies to you for accountability). Papers should be *full rough drafts,* not notes or outlines. At this time, it may help to model the peer conference process the first time you use it, perhaps with an old (anonymous) draft of a paper written to the same or a similar assignment.

2. The teacher provides a *response guide* to help the students focus on specific concerns and issues in their peer response. For more experienced students, or perhaps later in the course, you may wish to give the writer the opportunity to create the response guide based on perceived needs. That is, the writer directs the peer members toward features, topics, or sections in the paper where s/he wants help or suggestions. These may be written up as a cover sheet to the draft.

3. The peer readers comment in the margins, at the end, or on the back of the draft, or on a separate sheet of paper, or they insert comments electronically. You can direct them to provide certain *kinds* of response (questions, suggestions, descriptive statements, etc.) and you can provide requirements (e.g., amount of commentary).

   In the early stages, it helps to focus students' attention on large matters of voice, purpose, audience, organization, and content. At later stages, minor details may play a stronger role—grammar, usage, spelling, punctuation, etc. Remember to orient students to the process: *revision* involves major changes in voice, content, structure, etc. *Editing* involves working on sentence rhythm and balance, grammatical structure, redundancy, etc. *Proofreading* involves looking for any surface-level errors in punctuation, spelling, homophones, and the like.

4. As the conference opens, the first student, "the writer," gives a status report or some brief background on the paper. Remind them to keep the apologizing to a minimum. The writer should explain the context, audience, purpose, content, and other information to the other students. The writer can also describe any problems s/he is encountering or ask for specific kinds of feedback.

5. The readers take turns commenting on 1) the issues raised in the response guide; or 2) the issues raised in advance by the writer; or 3) issues in each paragraph of the paper. The writer listens and takes notes. Sometimes it helps to have one student take notes on the session. Another option is for students to record the session with a smartphone or other digital device, even just the sound. The best sessions become conversations about the draft.

6. The writer summarizes the comments and describes possible revisions s/he might make, and asks for other suggestions.

7. Students should *share time equally*. Appoint a timekeeper or ring a bell to remind students to move to the next writer. Or use a digital timekeeper onscreen; a good one can be found at http://www.classtools.net/education-games-php/timer.

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8. The group should also try to negotiate disagreements, if possible, and explore fully those areas where there is not consensus about a problem or solution. You can play the role of a roaming "guide," another pair of eyes if there are any disagreements or puzzles, but *do not* give students a definitive solution; coach them to figure it out.

9. Writers should avoid getting defensive; they should explain their intentions and the reasons for their decisions, and ask for suggestions if desired.

10. All readers turn over their notes to the writer, who uses them for revision. You might want each student to initial or sign anything they give, depending on your scheme for accountability. If they have commented online, have them send their comments and marked-up manuscripts to the writer.

11. The entire group should acknowledge that the writer has the final say about making or not making changes; the group is there to provide response.

12. No draft or plan is "fine as is." Something is wrong if the group's work is finished quickly or without thought. If a group says they're done early, sit with them and re-ignite the discussion.

13. Good writers go through many drafts and responses before they're "done." Students need to know this.

14. Do not neglect to work up a set of guiding prompts or questions for response and revision. Such guides can make the difference between a useless bull session and a productive, focused meeting that leads to better writing.

15. Drafts and commentaries can be stored in online folders or in notebooks or portfolios for checking. Each student can get a "respondent" grade in the course (quality and quantity of the comments given to the other peers).

16. All sorts of additional activities can surround this process, including planning notes, reflections on the conference session, commentaries on what the student did to revise, etc.

17. Remember that good peer response groups require a lot of orientation and training, especially for less experienced, younger students. Consider recording some sessions (with permission of the students), then playing selected clips from those sessions to future classes and asking them to analyze the nature of the interactions: Does it seem productive? Dysfunctional? Is someone dominating the meeting? Is someone too withdrawn? What's the quality of the conversation? What's the focus?

18. A good video introducing students to peer review is located at the following URL: http://video.mit.edu/watch/no-one-writes-alone-peer-review-in-the-classroom-a-guide-for-students-8336/