Chapter 9

Peer feedback goes by many different names: peer editing, peer evaluation, and workshopping, for example. These terms usually refer to sharing drafts of writing in the classroom. It's important to remember, though, that this process occurs outside the classroom as well. I don't know a single writer who doesn't have someone else read a draft of a piece she's working on before sending it out or otherwise presenting it to its real intended audience. I personally always have my wife—or sometimes one or more of my friends—read my work in draft stage. In fact, I often have her read it in several stages—usually fairly early on, which for me is about a fifth or sixth draft, and then again as I'm closer to being done. In fact, in our house it's become kind of a ritual: I give my wife a piece I'm working on, and she goes over to the couch to read it. Then I pretend to busy myself, while in reality I'm watching and listening closely—sometimes peeking around the corner from the kitchen—for her reactions.

Why do we need readers? Because writers know what they're *trying* to do, but there's absolutely no way to know whether they're succeeding without readers who can tell them if their words are having the effect they intended. I usually have some specific questions for my reader: Is the example in Paragraph 6 convincing? Is my tone effective? Is the language too slangy? Too formal? Is the pun in the title stupid? A former student of mine, Matt Kiser, recently e-mailed me a draft of a letter he was sending to *Spin* magazine to apply for an internship. While he wanted my general feedback, he had a very

specific question: do I come across as arrogant? (He didn't—and got the position.)

Of course, as human beings we want our readers to say, "This is perfect (totally convincing, absolutely hilarious) exactly as it stands. Don't change a thing." But as writers we also have to keep in mind that it is in fact a draft and that our reader(s) will most likely make some suggestions for revisions—and those suggestions are at least worth considering.

Peer feedback in the classroom takes many forms. Some writing teachers have students make copies of their work to pass around to the entire class. Some teachers break the class into smaller groups. Some teachers have students make transparencies/overheads, and the whole class works on one essay together. Regardless, there are certain rules to follow and important things to keep in mind if the feedback session is to be worthwhile. And it's critical that readers have specific things in mind while they're reading—including, ideally, questions from the writer. Otherwise, peer feedback can be a complete waste of time. Writing "I liked it" on a draft is not helpful.

Rules for Readers

1. Make sure you know who the writer's intended audience is. If you don't know for whom the writer is writing, there's no way to know whether something's working or not. Is the language too formal? Depends. Should the term *conjunctive adverb* in the second paragraph be defined? Depends. How about the word *phat* in the third? Depends.

2. Ask the writer if there's anything in particular that you should be looking for. Usually, writers know that certain parts of their essays aren't working as well as others or that they're stuck in certain places. If you know where the writer is struggling, you'll more likely be of help.

3. Try the biggest fish first. Address the thing(s) that will help the essay the most first and the thing(s) that will help it the least last. If someone asked you to help him restore a dilapidated 1957 Chevrolet, you wouldn't first suggest that he polish the chrome on the headlights; you'd probably suggest he reupholster the seats and rebuild the transmission, then wash and polish the car last.

4. Don't focus on what's wrong or list mistakes. Doing so is devastating for the writer, it's not how people learn, and there's no such thing as right and wrong in writing. Instead, do the following:

5. Tell the writer how the text reads to you. Say things like, "This paragraph confused me," or "I wanted to know more here," or "The title made me laugh." This is the one thing the writer can't do for himself. The writer hits the golf ball, but only you can tell him where it lands. You can't be "wrong," since you're just declaring what you experienced while reading. The writer can't argue with you, for the same reason.

If you do this one job, you'll have served your writer well, but there's much more help you can offer:

6. Identify the source of your reactions. Find what in the text is causing you to feel the way you do. You help a little if you say, "This essay feels cold," but you help a lot if you add, "I think it's because of all the academic jargon."

7. Suggest possible revision strategies. Show the writer possible ways to work with the essay features you're observing. You help a little if you say, "The opening paragraph seems lifeless," but you help a lot if you add, "Why not start the essay with the personal narrative in paragraph 4?"

Rule 7 runs a lot of risks. You must remember that it's not your job to tell the writer how to write, and the writer must remember that she doesn't have to follow your suggestions—she decides what to do, because she's the writer. But if you can both stay in your proper roles, "You could do this . . ." suggestions can be golden.

8. Generalize and note patterns. Make broad statements that apply to the essay as a whole. Note when the same sort of thing happens over and over. Every time you make an observation about a place in the text, ask yourself, "Are there other places where similar things occur?" If you don't do this, feedback tends to be an overwhelming flood of unrelated suggestions.

9. Give yeas as well as nays. Give as much energy to pointing out what pleased you as to what didn't. "Keep doing this, this, and this" teaches at least as well as "Dump that, that, and that." And it feels a lot better. Psychologists who study marriages say that in healthy ones affirmations outnumber criticisms by about five to one. You may not be able to maintain that ratio, but you can embrace the spirit of it.

10. Help the writer see alternatives and possibilities. Think about what the essay could be that it isn't yet. Ask, Where can this draft go from here? What else could it be doing? What related issues does this open up?

This is the most precious gift you can give the writer, because it's the one thing she's least likely to be able to do herself. To do it

you have to stop staring at the draft and asking "What needs fixing?" step back, and think outside the box. Ironically, this is the easiest part of the feedback process for the reader, because all you have to do is *share your thoughts on what the draft says*. Since you didn't write it, you'll have things to say about it that the writer will never think of, and those thoughts will open doors and make new essays possible.

To do this last task well, both the writer and the reader must remember that the purpose behind peer editing is not to rid the draft of errors but to remake the draft into the best possible essay. That usually means replacing the essay with another. Looking for errors to fix creates a tunnel vision that prevents that large-scale growth.

11. End by prioritizing. Since a good peer-editing session touches on a dizzying range of issues, avoid overload by ending with a highlighting of the two or three suggestions that have the biggest potential for gain: "Of all the things we've talked about, I think those two ideas about opening with the story about you and your mother and dropping the tirade about rude telemarketers are the best."

Rules for Writers

While you can do several things to increase the chances of getting good feedback, you must first have the right attitude: you need to be *open* to feedback. If you're too defensive, you're not likely to listen. If you're too submissive, you're likely to assume that you should make every single change your readers suggest. So listen to what your readers say, but trust your own instincts and ideas as well—allow that your readers might be flat-out wrong sometimes.

Also, keep in mind that it's a good idea to let some time pass between getting the feedback and sitting down with it to consider what you want to heed and what you don't. You might want to wait a few hours; you might want to wait a few days. At any rate, you'll probably be more open to listening openly and honestly if you've let some time pass.

Then use the following guidelines:

1. Let your reader know, as specifically as possible, who your intended audience is. If she doesn't know that, she can't offer much in the way of feedback.

2. Let your reader know what you're trying to do with the piece of writing. While it might sometimes be good to let your reader come

to the essay "cold," that is, without telling him what to look for—an ironic tone, for example—the more your reader knows about what you're intending, the more he'll be able to tell you whether you're being successful.

3. Provide specific things for your reader to keep in mind while reading. I always have my students write—at the very tops of the papers—at least one question they have about their work, or a problem they're having with it, for their readers to consider while they read. And, as I suggested with the rules for readers, fry the biggest fish first.

4. Ask for peer feedback before you're "done." If you wait until the project feels finished, you'll fight off advice as a parent fights off criticism of his children. The earlier you ask for feedback from readers, the better.

5. Memorize the following truism: some readers just won't get it, especially if you're trying something interesting or different. Some readers dislike the unexpected. Seek out readers who are interested in your work and who are smart enough to recognize and appreciate what you're up to. They might say that what you're doing doesn't work—but it won't be just *because* it's different from what they expected.

6. Have your work read by several readers. But keep in mind that different qualified readers will have different reactions to your work. When I was in graduate school, I showed a draft of my thesis to my two committee members. One of them bracketed a long passage and said, "Cut this, and the piece will work better." The other one bracketed the same passage and said, "Great! This really makes your argument effective."

Of course, you can get more readers, and that's a good idea—to try to find consensus—but you might continue to receive more varying reactions. Ultimately, it will come back to you. It's your work, after all.

7. When it's over, say "Thank you." Remind your editors and yourself that they were doing you a favor.

Peer Editing in Groups

Peer editing in groups can be an effective way for a writer to see what kind of effect her work is having on several readers at once. However, group peer-editing sessions risk becoming chaotic and nonproductive. To that end, here are some rules:

1. Raise one issue at a time. Good students violate this rule with the best of intentions. They come to class and want to get on with it, so they start the discussion with a list: "I've got four things I want to say about the draft: first, the thesis is unclear; second, . . ." When the lecture is finished, if you're lucky, someone will address one of the issues on the list and everything else will be forgotten.

2. Stick to an issue once it's been raised. If someone raises a question about structure, discuss structure until all comments on structure have been heard.

3. Stay with an issue until clarity is reached. This doesn't mean grind down all opposition until everyone in the room thinks the same thing. It means talk about it until the group figures out where it stands. If there are different opinions in the room, get clear on what they are, who's on what side, and why they feel that way.

4. Voice your opinion. Silence following a comment suggests consensus, but the writer wants to know how the piece is working on the group, not on one reader. So if someone says he thinks something is working particularly well, say, "I agree." Likewise, if you disagree, say so.

5. Use your organizing tools. Since group editing is much more fragmented and chaotic than editing one-on-one, you have to work even harder to organize the chaos by doing the things we've already talked about: look for patterns, connect, generalize, and prioritize. Keep saying things like

> I think what Will is saying ties in with what Eunice said a few minutes ago.
> In different ways, we keep coming back to structural issues.
> I'd like to get back to the question of purpose and audience—that seems crucial to me.
> So it sounds to me like some of us like the tone and some of us think it's too folksy.

The Writer's Role in Group Editing

A group needs a leader, and since the writer has the most at stake and knows what he wants, he may as well be it.

This role is fraught with peril. If you can't lead without being defensive, then ask a couple of questions to start things off and say nothing else. But if you have the necessary self-control, you can do yourself a lot of good by following one rule:

6. Remind the group to follow the rules. Keep saying things like

How many others agree with Nell?—a show of hands, please.
As long as we're talking about structure, what other structural
  comments do you have?
So what do you think I should do about it?
Are there other places where that sort of thing happens?
How big a problem is that?
So what does the essay need the most?

Peer Editing for Mechanics and Grammar

Mechanics and grammar—comma placement, sentence structure,
spelling—are legitimate topics in peer editing, but most conversa-
tions on those topics turn into useless nitpicking and wrangling
that helps the writer hardly at all. So before you bring those topics
up, be sure you're practicing some of the chapter's now-familiar
rules:

1. Keep frying the biggest fish first. Discuss mechanics only in
those rare cases where mechanical problems are the overriding issue.

2. Discuss grammar and mechanics only in general terms. If the
problem isn't habitual, ignore it.

3. Prioritize all mechanical advice. Tell the writer how serious
the problem is. Are you saying, "Since we've taken care of every-
thing that really matters, we'll tinker with spelling," or are you say-
ing, "My God, we've got to do something about the spelling before
we do anything else!"?

A Final Piece of Advice

I've found that students respond best when they have specific jobs
to do, so I usually give them lists of things to do as they read their
peers' papers. On page 165 is a template of a worksheet that I mod-
ify appropriately for various assignments. Sometimes I'll put it on a
transparency on an overhead projector; sometimes I'll make copies
and have students attach it to the fronts of their essays.

While number 3 might seem obvious, I've found it to be ex-
tremely useful. If the writer finds that his reader summarizes the es-
say in a different manner from the way he would have, then he has
to find where the disconnect is.

English XX—Section 4
Fall 2008

Please attach this sheet to the front of your essay.

Writer: (1) identify, as narrowly as possible, your intended audience; (2) identify some questions or problems you have with the draft as it now stands. Be as specific as possible.

Readers:

   1. Read the essay carefully, with the intended audience in mind; then, on one of the attached sheets of paper:

   2. Address the writer's question(s)/problem(s).

   3. Summarize the essay in one sentence.

   4. Describe the degree to which the essay is appropriate to its intended audience, considering level of formality, definition of terms, etc.

   5. Identify the most convincing piece of evidence.

   6. Identify any counter ("yeah, but . . .") arguments that the reader hasn't considered.

   7. Make one concrete suggestion for revision.

   8. Sign your name.

Notes: (A) initial any in-text comments; (B) read as a writer— you can both provide feedback and learn from the writer's work; (C) feel free to talk about these and to consider aspects of the writing not specified above.

WRITER'S WORKSHOP

Peer Editing a Peer-Editing Session

Let's practice peer editing. Here's a draft that was submitted by Todd Burks, one of Professor Rawlins's composition students. Following it is the peer-editing conversation that took place