Peer Review Guidelines

As part of your experience in Advanced Writing in the Technical Professions, you are asked to comment on the writing of your fellow students. This work is essential to a successful AWD experience, and it's worth considering how best to go about it.

Peer review has a long history in academic writing. People in academic settings often distinguish between "peer reviewed" articles and books and those articles and books which are not peer reviewed. Peer reviewed publishing differs from other publishing in several ways:

Editorial. In traditional publishing, submitted articles are typically either written by paid staff or solicited by an editorial board. Sometimes articles are proposed by freelance writers, but their work is also reviewed by editors. Virtually all peer reviewed articles, by contrast, are written by practicing academic researchers rather than professional writers. Further, they are distributed for review to other academic researchers who know the field and can comment usefully on the submitted text. Typically, they go to two researchers, each of whom writes a document called a peer review. The editors, who are also professional academics, make decisions based on these reviews. They may reject the paper outright, accept it as is (this almost never happens), or ask that it be revised and resubmitted. If the requested revisions are significant enough, the editor may ask the author(s) to submit it for further peer review.

Audience. Peer reviewed articles are almost never written for the general public. Nor are they usually written for a specialist but non-peer audience, such as an article about a new psychotropic medicine written by a pharmaceutical researcher for an audience of non-medical psychotherapists. Peer reviewed articles are an example of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called "production for producers"—in this case other writers of peer-reviewed articles. In some cases, the peer reviewed articles in a particular field form a fairly small universe. It is not uncommon, for example, for the reviewers of an article to know the authors. For this reason, an author may request of an editor that an article not go to a particular researcher or group for review: if the author believes that reviewer may be biased against the work or be likely to abuse his advance knowledge of the research.

Financial. In traditional publishing, the author receives a fee for writing an article. By contrast, authors of peer reviewed articles are almost never paid for their work. In fact, in the hard sciences especially, it is not uncommon for the authors to pay for their work to be published. In academia, such fees are known as "page charges." How expensive can these be? To take an example, the Journal of Neuroscience charges authors $60 per published page of the final article and $1000 for each color figure. Scientific researchers typically pay for page charges from their grants.

Although you are not writing for publication here, you should take the issue of peer review seriously. An effective peer review is designed to help the author of a paper think through the difficult challenges of the subject with the goal of producing the best possible paper. Your peer reviews should be in the form of a *memo to me*—after all, I'm sort of pinch-hitting in the role of editor. Submit your peer reviews in the *Discussion Board* as replies to the draft submission. Your peer reviews should contain the following sections:

Summary. Your first paragraph should summarize, without evaluating, the draft you are reviewing. Why summarize? You want to ensure, both to yourself and to the author, that you understand the draft completely. This helps the author trust your judgment later, and it may also point to something the author missed. If you identify as the main point something the author views as peripheral, then the author needs to be clearer. Don't evaluate at this stage for the same reason: you need to focus on the nature of the argument first before you judge its strength.

Major Points. The bulk of your review should consist of a critique of the major aspects of the paper, such as its use of evidence, the strength of its claim, its need for warrants, its tone, its style, its clarity, its brevity, and so forth. The Grading Criteria can be very helpful here in determine what are "major points." Feel free to compliment the writer, but remember that your goal is not to make the author feel good. Your goal is to help the author revise the paper so as to produce as strong a final product as possible. Therefore, critique is often more valuable than praise. If you have a lot to say, as you should, you might divide this section into labeled subsections.

Minor Points. This is the place where you mention grammar, punctuation, spelling, documentation, formatting, and so forth. You should restrict your minor points to a separate section so that they do not overtake the major points section, which is the most important. In paper with a lot of minor issues, don't go over every little error. Instead, identify patterns and suggest making an appointment at the Writing Center (https://www.northeastern.edu/writingcenter/). A word on your attitude in peer reviews. Keep a respectful tone at all times. Don't refer to the author in the second person (i.e. "you"). Instead, refer to the author either as "the author" or by last name (e.g. Smith's paper). Better still, avoid referring to the author at all, instead referring to the "paper" or the "text"—this keeps the focus on the writing. Back up your own points about the text with quotes and suggestions for improvement. And again, concentrate on the big issues—you are a peer reviewer, not an editor.