

Graduate Student Writing Workshop

What You Want, What You Get, and Rules of the Game

September 20 2012

Prepared by Jean E. Wallace

“Rules of the Game” Package

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GRADUATE STUDENT WRITING WORKSHOP

“RULES OF THE GAME”

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Adapted from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Responding to Other People’s Writing

Responding to other people’s writing can be difficult. Here are a few tips to get you started:

- **Say something positive about the piece.** Even if a piece of writing needs a lot of work, there is usually something good that can be pointed out—the seed of a great idea, a particularly well-turned phrase, the beginnings of a good organizational structure, or a thorough understanding of the material.
- **Critique the writing, not the writer.** Instead of saying, “You aren’t very good at conclusions,” say, “This conclusion didn’t really work for me.”
- **Speak from your own perspective,** using phrases like, “My reaction to this was...” or “I found this to be...” rather than “this part of the paper is...”. Acknowledge that there may be a variety of opinions about the piece of writing.
- **Remember that you are in a writing group to help one another improve.** It does not help the writer if you see problems with a piece of writing but don’t mention them because you’re afraid of hurting his/her feelings. Usually a writer would rather hear about a problem from the friendly, supportive members of his/her writing group than submit a finished draft with problems and receive a poor grade, have a journal article or grant proposal rejected, be criticized by an advisor, etc.
- **Talk about the way you responded as you were reading.** Sometimes it’s easier and more helpful to say, “When I read this sentence, I wasn’t sure if the paragraph was going to be about this or about that” than it is to say, “This sentence was confusing.” It can be helpful to have the whole group read the first paragraph and then predict the rest of the paper before reading further. It will help the writer to know what you expected when you began the paper and how those expectations changed as you read.
- **Be specific.** Instead of just saying, “The organization needs work,” try to figure out where and why the organization broke down. Perhaps you could suggest a different order for the ideas in the paper or think of the kind of transition that might help make the jumps between ideas more logical.
- **Whatever you say, imagine yourself on the receiving end of the comment.** If this were your work, what would be helpful to you? How would you want people to provide you with criticism?
- Prioritize and sort your comments for the writer. What interfered the most when you read the paper, or what was the hardest part of the paper to understand? Sometimes it is helpful to break down your comments into a list of “big things” and a list of “little things” that the writer could do to improve.
- **Tailor your comments to the writer and his/her needs.** Ask what kind of feedback would be helpful and try to provide that. Ask the writer what sections s/he is most worried about. Avoid suggesting hours and hours of revision for writing that you know must be submitted the same day as your meeting. You can still point out bigger problems, but focus on what can be done between the meeting and the due date.
- **Write out key points that you want to share with the writer.** This will help you remember them and also provide a written record of your feedback.

What You Want: Requesting Feedback from the Group

It is sometimes helpful to let the group know specifically what you would like feedback on. By providing the group with such information it may help the writing group provide you with helpful feedback. Some ideas of possible pieces of information that you may write on a cover sheet for your piece of writing might be as follows:

- How much work have you done on this piece of writing already? Is this a first draft, second draft, etc.?
- What kind of feedback would be most helpful to you at this stage?
- What kind of feedback, if any, have you received from others about this project?
- Is there a specific part or parts of the paper that you would like the group to focus on?
- What do you think are the biggest strengths and weaknesses of this piece of writing right now?
- When do you need to turn this piece of writing in? How much time do you have to work on it between now and then?
- Do you want us to complete a review sheet for general, overall feedback?

What You Get: Feedback from the Group

Sometimes it's hard to pull together your impressions of a piece of writing and present them in specific, constructive ways. Here are some ideas of what you can think about as you are reviewing someone's piece of writing:

- When I read the introduction (or first paragraph), I thought this piece would be about ...
- After reading this piece, I realized that your main point was ...
- After reading this piece, I still wondered about ...
- Did any part of this piece seem like it didn't fit, or like it was unnecessary "filler"?
- Did any part of this piece seem underdeveloped, or like it might need an example, explanation, or quotation to make the meaning more clear?
- Was there any part of the piece in which you felt a little lost? What might have helped you figure out what was going on?
- If this were your piece of writing, what would you do to change it?
- To me, the most interesting idea in this piece was ...
- To me, the best-written part of this piece was ...

In addition, you might find the "Making Sense of Research Articles" handout helpful in reading others' work as well as the "Manuscript Review Sheet".

Reacting to Other People's Responses to Your Writing

Sometimes it is difficult to hear other people respond to your work, even if they have the best of intentions. Here are some tips that might help you react to other people's critiques in a positive way:

- **Remember that your writing group is trying to help you become a better writer.** Anything the group members say about your work is designed to help you make it stronger, more readable, and more effective.
- **Put yourself in the critic's shoes.** Remember when you've struggled to respond to someone else's work without hurting their feelings or being "too nice." Understand that this process is sometimes hard for both the reader and the writer.
- **Keep in mind that every reader is different.** What one reader finds confusing, another might find crystal clear. It is ultimately your writing, and you will have to decide which bits of feedback to act upon and which to ignore.
- **Try not to be defensive.** It's easy to think, "What do they know?" or "They just didn't get it," but keep in mind that while one reader's response may be the result of that reader's own misunderstanding, if several readers agree that a section is confusing or implies something you didn't intend, the problem probably lies with the writing and not with the readers.
- **Keep it in perspective.** Remember that a criticism of one piece of writing is not an indictment of you as a writer or scholar more generally, nor is it a critique of your worth as a person. It is simply a response to words that you wrote on one occasion.
- **Listen to praise** with the same intensity that you listen to criticism. Often, writers can obsess over critical comments and fail to hear all of the good things said about their writing. We can be our own worst critics and harshest detractors. Shut off that filter that says, "They don't really mean that," and accept sincere praise at face value.
- **Keep track of the kinds of feedback that you receive again and again.** Do readers often suggest changes in organization of your work or logic of your arguments? Do your conclusions usually seem to need work – do they simply summarize the results or do they take the findings to another level? Do people frequently tell you that they don't understand words that you use? Do readers often indicate that they find your sentences hard to follow? Do readers praise your clarity? Do they regularly tell you that your introductions are interesting? Use these observations to identify patterns of problems and strengths in your writing.

MAKING SENSE OF RESEARCH ARTICLES
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- 1. RESEARCH QUESTION:** What is the research question to be addressed by this study? Is it clearly stated? It is presented early enough that you know what the paper is going to be about? Does the author seem to do what they say they will do in the remainder of the paper?
- 2. PLAN OF ATTACK:** How does the author propose to answer the research question? Usually, this is stated early on in the paper and then expanded upon later. Is it clear how they're going to do this? Is the argument and plan presented in a logical fashion? Does it seem to you that what they propose will actually answer their research question?
- 3. RELEVANCE:** How is this question related to other important issues? Is it sociologically important? Does it make an important contribution to the literature empirically and theoretically?
- 4. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE:** Does the review of the literature seem relevant and complete? Do you feel you've gained an adequate background of the area to understand the questions or hypotheses being posed? Does the author draw logical conclusions from the review (e.g., they often identify deficiencies or gaps they hope to address)?
- 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:** Is a theory or theories presented? How innovative or insightful are the ideas underlying the paper? Is the theory/theories stated in a testable form, that is do they explicitly state their hypotheses? If not explicitly stated, is it clear what their hypotheses are? Do they actually state the hypotheses they state or imply? Do they adequately test the theory being presented (i.e., is there a good fit between the theoretical framework they present and the empirical model they test or are there any missing links?)?
- 6. DATA AND METHODS:** Are the data and methods used in this study appropriate for testing the hypotheses? Is there a good fit between theory, methods and analyses?
 - Sample:** Is the source of the data clearly and completely described? Does the sample seem appropriate for answering the research question? Are there certain people who are included or excluded who should not be? Does the sample seem adequate for generalizations?
 - Data Collection:** What methods were used to collect the data? Does the data set include all of the variables needed to adequately test the theory and hypotheses? Are there specific variables included or excluded that should not be?
 - Measures:** Are the key concepts in the hypotheses measured? Is there evidence for the reliability and validity of the measured used?
 - Data Analysis:** Are the statistical procedures described? Do they seem appropriate for the hypotheses they want to test? Are there different types of analyses they should have done instead? Is the data analysis well done, thorough and clearly presented?
- 7. RESULTS:** What are the results of the analysis? Do the results actually test the hypotheses? Can you understand and read the tables?
- 8. DISCUSSION:** How do the results link to the author's research question, theory, hypotheses and findings? Does the author attempt to explain findings that are not consistent with their predictions?
- 9. CONCLUSIONS:** What are the major conclusions reached by the author? Do you agree with the author's conclusions or would you interpret the results differently?
- 10. LIMITATIONS:** Does the author offer limitations of the study or qualifications about the conclusions? Are there any others? Does the author discuss the implications of this study for future research? What are the implications (e.g., for theory, research design, the substantive area?)?
- 11. "RICH BIT":** What is the "rich bit" of this article? What would you tell someone is the reason they should read this article? What is the one thing that you learned about this topic that you did not know before?
- 12. "FATAL FLAWS":** Are there any fatal flaws in this article? Is there any aspect of this paper that makes you seriously doubt the quality of this paper and/or research?

Peer Review Session Guidelines

While peer-review sessions offer students a wonderful opportunity for feedback, it can also be a stressful experience for authors. To keep a friendly and productive atmosphere, a specific feedback form/sheet can be used to help nourish participants with constructive feedback.

Setting the Stage: Determining Roles for Each Party

Many graduate students are familiar with critiquing published work, but are unsure how to respond to other students' work. Spending time explaining the role of a reviewer ensures the peer review sessions are a collaborative and productive experience.

Here are some problematic roles to avoid:

- *The Evaluator:* Some students turn into instructors and evaluate material. They focus on grading work, rather than offering constructive feedback. They offer comments such as weak, needs works, and fails to include.
- *The Editor:* Some students focus on spelling, grammar and other aspects of expression when reviewing another student's paper. While these details may be helpful, this feedback ignores larger issues, such as what the paper is about.
- *The Cheerleader:* Some students aren't comfortable giving negative feedback to their peers. They offer a series of vague and generally positive comments to avoid feeling awkward.
- *The Critic:* Some students respond to a student's paper based on their specialization. Their comments often focus on re-conceptualizing the project, using a different theory, or proposing a new methodology.

Ideally, peer reviewers should imagine feedback that would be most helpful to the author. Rather than falling into extremes, reviewers respond like a reader. They indicate when questions arise in the work. They highlight a particularly strong and convincing aspect of the paper. They offer their interpretation of the paper, leaving changes to the author.

It is also important for the author to take responsibility for understanding and directing feedback. Authors, who become defensive about their work, often overlook useful comments. The author should be prepared for questions that arise from confusion or lack of clarity.

Benefits of Peer Review Session Introduction Forms

Before authors send out papers for peer review, it is important that they reflect on their writing experience. This reflection helps authors identify on possible challenges or gaps in the document. Rather than defending the paper, the student should be prepared to get help or collaborate on the document. The attached form allows authors to explain their impressions of their papers to the group of reviewers.

- Students should highlight the key message of their paper. This allows readers comment if this message was successfully communicated.
- It allows authors to suggest where they feel they would benefit from feedback. This assists reviewers in offering constructive feedback. Cheerleaders will feel more comfortable critiquing a section that the author already feels is weak.
- Lastly, authors may feel more comfortable if they are able to section off parts of the paper that they feel are in progress. Reviewers may offer suggestions, while not emphasizing errors with which the author is familiar.

Benefits of Peer Review Sheets

By using a peer review sheet, readers use the same criteria. This focuses the responder on key issues in the paper. It also can prompt students to respond in a more collaborative. The most beneficial feedback offered to an author is questions, what the reader wants to know. They prompt the author to address a gap or lack of clarity. The following peer review sheet aims to promote this kind of feedback.

- To avoid responders evaluating the work, the peer review sheet guides students to explain why or what was challenging. This focuses vague feedback and helps the responder identify the cause of confusion.
- To facilitate the timely completion of the form, there are checkboxes. Likert scales are avoided to remove the sense of grading.
- Lastly, the peer review sheet focuses local errors. The clarity of the writing overall is left for the last section. on global rather than

Peer Review Session Introduction Form

Please give your fellow students a brief introduction to the piece of writing that has been submitted.

Author:

Title:

What was the context that it was written for? (Class, conference, future publication)

What do you want the reader to know after reading the paper? (Please limit response to 1-2 sentences)

What challenges did you face with this paper?

Is there a section of the paper that you would like to focus on? Why?

Are there any parts of the paper that you feel are unfinished, or need to be developed further? How much attention should your readers put into those parts?

Peer Review Session Feedback Form

Journal editors use feedback forms to both describe and rank an article. This feedback form is based on the instructions given to reviewer from the *Canadian Journal of Administrative Sciences* and *Canadian Review of Sociology*. Please keep in mind that the purpose of your feedback is not to evaluate your colleague but to help them understand where you, as a reader, need more clarification. The goals of this peer review are to identify strengths and weaknesses that may not be clear to the author.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE TOPIC

Has the reader made the significance of the paper obvious to the reader?

- Not clear
- Somewhat clear
- Very clear

How would you describe the significance of the paper?

RELEVANCE AND USE OF CITED MATERIAL

Does the paper follow a recognized citation style (APA)?

- No
- Mostly, except for a few errors
- Yes

Does the paper demonstrate a mastery of relevant literature?

- Not sure
- Somewhat, but there is a gap (_____)
- Definitely

Would the review of literature be stronger if:

- The literature was synthesized and compared to each other.
- The literature was paraphrased and not quoted.
- The authors were addressed in sentences.
(Giltrow argues that... ; however Smith posits)
- Primary theoretical texts were used, rather than others' interpretation of the theory.
- More scholarly sources were used.
- Other:

STRUCTURE AND ARGUMENT OF THE PAPER:

What are the key parts of the paper?

What is the strongest part of the paper?

What is the weakest part of the paper? What should the author focus on to clarify it?

INTERGRATION OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

What is the theoretical framework of the paper? _____

How clearly is the theoretical framework explained?

- Not clear
- Somewhat clear
- Very clear

If not clear, what was the most significant question remaining?

How clearly is the theoretical framework integrated into the paper, particularly the analysis?

- Not clear
- Somewhat clear
- Very clear

Did you have any questions or ideas that you think should be answered but weren't?

IF INCLUDED METHODOLOGY

Has the paper clearly explained the methods used to collect data?

- Not clear
- Somewhat clear
- Very clear

If not, what information would help you to understand it?

Has the paper clearly explained the methodology used to analyze data?

- Yes
- No

Do you feel that the author has explained all the limitations of the study?

- Not clear
- Somewhat clear
- Very clear

If not, what would you add that would benefit the paper?

RICHNESS OF THE RESULTS OR OUTCOMES

How clearly does the paper explain the outcomes or results?

- Not clear
- Somewhat clear
- Very clear

Are there questions or ideas that you would like to see clarified?

- Yes _____
- No

Is there a potential result that the author could include?

- Yes _____
- No

Are the conclusions supported by the earlier analysis?

- Not supported
- Somewhat supported
- Strong supported

CLARITY OF WRITING

What detracts from your ability to follow ideas in the paper?

- Word choice
- Sentence variety (short, long)
- Precise wording/use of terminology (unfamiliar/incorrect)
- Transitions (between ideas, between sentences)
- Punctuation (comma, colon, semi-colon, apostrophe)
- Length of paragraphs (short/long)
- Organization of paper (overall/in a particular section _____)

What is one aspect or technique used in this paper that you would like to try in your own writing?

Thank you for your feedback.

Manuscript Review Sheet

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Some journals use evaluation forms like this to provide authors some numerical scores for different parts of their paper. This can be helpful in identifying the strengths and weakness of the paper in a summary form, in addition to more detailed comments.

Title of Manuscript:

Author of Manuscript:

Author of Review:

In addition to writing qualitative comments on the manuscript outlining your views as to the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, it would be very helpful if you could let the author know your views as to how the paper rates in terms of the following criteria:

	Low					High	
Significance & relevance to topic addressed	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Interest beyond narrow debates for specialist audience	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Relevance and use of cited material	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Coherence of argument	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Conceptual clarity	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Appropriateness of methods	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Integration of theoretical framework and data	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Richness of interpretation of results	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Substantiveness of discussion	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Clarity of writing	1	2	3	4	5	NA	
Overall contribution	1	2	3	4	5	NA	

Overall recommendation:

Revise and resubmit: Has potential to be published subject to minor revisions

Revise and resubmit: Has potential to be published subject to major revisions

Likelihood of eventual acceptance:

Low 1 2 3 4 5 High

Reject: Does not have potential to be published

Please provide comments to the author(s) on a separate sheet.