Arts One—A Student Guide to Peer Reading in Tutorial

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The rise of "new literacies" enabled by digital technologies reinforces the value of a sharing economy in which students are sources as well as objects of learning. But if the potential of peer learning is just starting to be realized in the wider academic community, it has been at the heart of the Arts One learning model since the program's birth in the 1960s. This program is one of the oldest of its kind in North America and arose partly in response to a report commissioned by UBC's Faculty of Arts called *Discipline and Discovery*. One of the founding assumptions of this report—that students coming straight from high school to university were not equipped to make the educational decisions which would guarantee either coherence or real substance in their studies—led to the implementation of what was then the "pilot project" Arts One. The core principle of this program, reflected in its diverse and open-ended themes, is the notion that no single discipline is competent to address the "reservoir of fundamental questions" central to enquiry in the humanities and social sciences. To this day Arts One consciously resists the increased specialization characteristic of modern scholarship, and to rest on the notion that exploration of its themes cannot presuppose the existence of ultimate answers, and that students must be prepared to traverse the essentially arbitrary boundaries of standard disciplines.

Arts One does not simply incorporate peer learning but builds a two-way, reciprocal learning model into its educational design. From lecture, to seminar, to tutorial this course emphasizes a sharing of knowledge, ideas and experience between the participants and the value of moving beyond independent to interdependent or mutual learning (Boud, 1988). This is especially evident in your four person tutorial, where you are expected to work collaboratively with each other to give and receive feedback on your own learning.

Being a peer learner/teacher is not something that comes naturally, nor is it widely taught in a pre-university context. Even established academics can have difficulty accepting the feedback of their peers, or struggle to provide effective criticism themselves. While we can all learn a lot by explaining ideas to each other, research shows that students do not typically already have the skills to read and respond to one another's writing. This guide is designed to help you get the most out of your tutorials, and to identify skills you will need to practice in order to be an effective peer learner/teacher.

What does it mean to "criticize" someone's work?

Commenting on one another's work critically can seem like an inherently negative activity that runs against a natural instinct to "support" each, which can come to mean affirming everything spoken and written by one's peers. Such behaviour is neither supportive or conducive to learning, especially in courses where questions are more relevant and illuminating than answers, like Arts One.

You should begin by noting a few important considerations:

1. It is important to keep things collegial and friendly but to recognize that vaguely positive comments like "I liked your paper," good job," "awesome," or "great paper, but a few parts need more work" have very little academic value to your peer. You may feel uncomfortable when passing judgment on your peers, especially when you know that your turn to receive feedback is coming. But, while you should work toward creating an environment of mutual support, you need to be rigorous and specific with your feedback.

2. Effective criticism almost always means noting strengths *and* weaknesses. It should be based on concrete standards, one of the most important of which is what the author is trying to accomplish. Think of the paper as an exercise in communication and ask yourself what your peer seems to be trying to say, and whether they have said it effectively (see *What should a peer reader by looking for?* part a. below).

3. Research shows that peer review is most helpful when used at the drafting and revision stages of writing, where there are opportunities for feedback to be used to make substantial changes. Arts One essays as a rule are not revised after presentation in tutorial, but because each student writes 12 papers your feedback should be directed toward improvement in the next essay (Nilson 2003).

4. Think of yourself as a reader, not an assessor. You are not marking the paper and should not make judgments on the paper as a whole. Your feedback is important but it is ultimately up to the writer to decide if and how to make all or some of the changes you suggest.

What should a peer reader by looking for?

What follows are some of the most important specific tasks that you should be looking to complete as peer-reviewers. Please be aware that these observations are meant to serve as guidelines to your own analysis. There are no set formula for writing and reviewing essays, so keep an open mind and focus on your overall experience as a reader.

a. Tell your peer what you take the *purpose* of the paper to be. If this is not clear say so (nicely), but allow for the possibility that you might have missed something yourself. Be aware that you are not just looking for words like "the thesis of this paper is," but for a sense of purpose/direction in the paper as a whole. Paper's will often claim to have a "thesis" when they don't, or not claim or make explicit a "thesis" when close inspection might reveal a sense of purpose. Try to get out of the habit of thinking about a "thesis" as a sentence, or something that can be easily defined and isolated.

b. Try to be clear about the distinction between *purpose* and *focus*. For example, if a writer says "this essay looks at Plato's conception of justice in *Republic*" she is making a statement of focus—what the essay will examine—not purpose, since it is does not give an indication of

any particular line of analysis (for a fuller discussion see my blog, "Say it with purpose: An overview of Arts One writing, http://blogs.ubc.ca/rmac/course-blog/

c. Does the paper have an effective introduction? This is not the same as "the thesis" but relates to whether the author effectively sets the context for the argument. The paper should have a title and this should relate to its purpose. The paper may or may not have an obvious "hook," but opening statements should never be arbitrary or superfluous, or consist of grand and sweeping generalizations. The bottom line: does the author effectively draw the reader into the topic and set the scene for what the paper will go on to say?

d. Is the paper structured effectively? This is not the same as organization, but pertains to whether the essay is able to fashion a coherent set of ideas into an argument. Because an essay's structure will be unique to the main argument it is making do not expect all essays to be structured in the same way, but always expect the author to make an effort to present ideas in an order that makes sense to a reader.

e. Remember that the object of your comments is the essay and not the author. Keeping this in mind when you present your own essay will allow you to be more relaxed and objective. The tutorial is NOT intended as forum in which to defend what *you* have said, but a workshop in which everyone can benefit from discussion if *what* has been written.

f. If there are things about which you are not clear, and/or points that you do not find persuasive, try to identify and be clear about where the essay is breaking down in its communication. For example:

   • is there a problem with organization?
   • are the "paragraphs" actually paragraphs? and do they transition well into each other?
   • is there a conclusion toward which the paper builds? is it convincing? does it feel like i ties the paper into a cohesive whole? Does it feel abrupt, force, or under-developed?
   • are there impediments created by language, style, or grammar?
   • does the paper provide evidence (textual or logical support) for its claims? remember that quoting from the text is necessary, but doing this well (selecting especially useful passages) is crucial. does the paper merely cite text ("quotations") or use the cited material to support/supplement its *own* arguments?

Practical considerations

If you are presenting your paper, bring a copy of your paper and your copy of the other paper being presented. If you are not presenting that day, bring your copies of the papers being presented. For everyone: bring in at least two written comments on the papers you have read for that week.