

A Guide to Peer Review

Some General Advice

Writing is hard. That's why we're helping each other through this peer-review process. But there's a problem: *helping* people write well is hard too. That's why this peer review form exists.

Here is the general challenge you face: when helping someone write a better paper, you are really trying to do two very different things at once.

First, you are trying to read the paper as a member of *the general audience*. How will other people read this paper? Will the central thesis be clear to them? Will they find the arguments reasonably persuasive or are there overlooked objections? Will they find it interesting? What criticisms will readily come to mind?

Second, you are trying to read the paper as a member of *the writing team*. This means getting into the spirit of the argument you're reading, even if it isn't your preferred stance on the issue. What does the view of the paper look like from the inside? What major themes or conclusions do we the writing team want the audience to adopt? How can we improve the arguments we already have? What is the guiding insight that drives this paper?

These are two very different mindsets. When starting out, it's not a bad idea to read the paper twice, once as the audience, and once as a member of the writing team. As you practice, you'll learn to have double-vision, to read critically and charitably at the same time.

Here is some starting general advice:

1. Remind yourself of the norms of good philosophical writing that we covered earlier in the semester (for example, by re-reading [this guide](#)).
2. Figure out what the **Big Idea**, or thesis, of the paper is before doing anything else.
3. You are a member of the writing team not (merely) an editor. Stylistic and grammatical comments are useful! But **your primary focus should be on developing a strong argument for the thesis**.
4. When you think of an objection, your next thought should be **"How would I respond if I were the author?"** You don't always have to come up with an answer, but it's a question you should always ask.
5. Don't be afraid to **be critical**. That's one of the ways you can be helpful.
6. Be critical **kindly**. The author has put a lot of work into this. Treat their work as something they care about.

Some Specific Instructions

While reading

1. Read the first paragraph. Stop. Write what you think the thesis of the essay is.
2. Skim the headings and topic sentences of the paper. Get a sense of how the essay is structured.
3. Read the essay, leaving brief notes throughout. Notes might include:
 - a. Questions about the structure of the essay (does each paragraph play a role in supporting the thesis?)
 - b. Questions of clarification (what does this sentence mean?)
 - c. Comments about when the essay does something especially well (I really liked how the essay handled x)
 - d. Potential objections
 - e. Grammatical corrections

Writing the peer review

Your peer review will consist in answers to the following 9 questions:

1. What do you think the thesis is? Is it the same as what you thought it was in question (1)?
2. Was the paper on topic? Did it defend the thesis of the paper? Why or why not?
3. What is the author's central argument? Re-state it briefly in your own words.
4. If you had to pick just one thing, what was the most interesting claim or insight in the paper? What made it interesting?
5. What is one objection to the thesis of the paper that the author might consider?
6. If you had to pick just one thing (other than the objection in (7)), how does the essay most need to be improved? Be as specific as you can.
7. If you were trying to make the improvement you identified in (8), how would you go about doing it? Be as specific as you can.
8. Consider the norms of paper organization (e.g. one main idea per paragraph, good signposting throughout, clear transitions between ideas, etc.). Suggest one way in which the paper can be better organized so as to make it more accessible to the reader.
9. After you read the paper, fill in the table below:

	Incomplete (1-4)	Needs Significant Improvement (5-6)	Good, Adequate Work (7-8)	Truly Excellent (9-10)
Clarity of Thesis				
Strength of Argument for Thesis				
Quality of Objections, Responses				

Writing Style/Grammar				
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Grading Rubric

“-“ and “+” grades are assigned for fine-tuning.

A: Fully answers all parts of the prompt in a concise and convincing manner. Clearly articulates helpful answers to all parts of the prompt, identifying weaknesses and providing implementable advice. Writes clearly, in plain language, and uses terminology in a precise manner.

B: Answers most of the question. Some items of advice might be somewhat vague or unclear, but, overall, articulates the paper’s strengths and weaknesses in a way that is of some help to the author. Writes mostly in a clear manner, though there might be inaccuracies that compromise the points made.

C: More-or-less off-topic and unclear. Fails to provide clear advice and shows significant confusion.

D and below: scarce evidence of effort or understanding along all dimensions.

F: dishonest work.