

Giving and Receiving Useful Peer Feedback on Speaking and Writing: Advice for SRW Facilitators

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Research has shown that students can greatly improve their written and oral communication if their instruction is “scaffolded” and they receive feedback on their work along the way. Scaffolding assignments means starting students with simpler, more self-contained tasks and then moving to more complex, difficult challenges. Mastery of the simpler tasks becomes the scaffold for success in the more challenging work.

Scaffolding works well in communication instruction because novice and presenters can’t work on improving all of their communication skills at once. This is especially true if English is not their main language. Moreover, many people are nervous about writing or presenting, so simpler assignments and earlier feedback can help them overcome anxiety, develop confidence and avoid writer’s block.

Here are some tips for helping students give and receive useful feedback on their speaking and writing.

- 1. Start by having students give each other feedback on short oral and written assignments in an informal setting.** For example, early in the research process, ask students to present their research question(s) to the group for feedback.
 - *Have the presenter stand up and face the group* to present his or her question.
 - *Guide the respondents into giving positive but constructive feedback.* Referring to what they’ve learned about research questions, ask if this one is clear? specific? important? What do people like about the questions? What else would they like to know?
 - *For writing, try a “write to learn” exercise.* Ask students to write something they will need for their proposal, such as a paragraph about their experience and readiness to take on their proposed project. Then have students exchange these with each other to talk informally about whether each student’s paragraph is convincing. Ask for one to two volunteers to read an effective paragraph out loud.

- 2. For written drafts, have students give feedback in stages, responding first to content and organization and only later giving advice about style and mechanics.**
 - *Use the “Round 1” and “Round 2” peer feedback sheets,* which reflect the proposal template and are designed to observe this distinction.
 - *Have students work with hard copies of the drafts* so that they can fill out the worksheets but also comment directly on the drafts. Readers read e-documents and hard copies a little differently, and writers should always read their own documents both ways.
 - *Remind students to prioritize their comments.* They should tell the writer what one or two things are the most important to consider as they revise.

- *For feedback on style and mechanics, remind students not to suggest changes simply because they would write something differently or prefer a different phrasing.* They should have a rationale for the changes they suggest, for example, noting that making certain sentences shorter will make them more readable or that defining technical terms will help non-technical readers understand the proposals. When peer reviewers “correct mistakes,” they should be sure that they’re giving correct advice; if they’re not sure, they should ask, or tell the writer to check a grammar and usage handbook.
 - *Bring a grammar and usage handbook to the workshop* on the days when students will be peer reviewing for style and mechanics.
 - *Remind peer reviewers that they don’t have to completely edit someone else’s proposal.* Their main job is to identify patterns of problems, such as comma errors, wordy sentences, or missing articles. It is the writer’s job to make corrections. If a writer wants help with proofreading, he or she should say that; proofreading is different from peer reviewing.
 - *Encourage writers to follow up on peer review by taking their draft proposals to the Writing Place.*
- 3. For practice presentations, have students work with a presentation checklist.**
- *Discuss the items listed on the checklist with the group.*
 - *Have students practice by presenting just a part of their presentation for feedback.* This will allow time for discussion. Explain that everyone will benefit from the feedback given to each presenter.
 - *Remind speakers of the importance of facing their audience.* If they have to look at a slide or draw a figure on the board, they should stop talking, do that, and then look at the audience and continue.
 - *Insist that students begin their feedback with positive comments.* Speakers are often so nervous that they overlook their strengths – good volume, a good pace, a friendly smile, etc.
 - *Don’t let anyone give feedback if they won’t be presenting.* When people aren’t going to be presenters, it’s too easy for them to be critical and negative.
 - *Tell students to go home and practice, practice, practice!* It’s often effective to practice in front of a mirror.