

Guidelines for the Peer Review

You should strive to generate **clear**, **thoughtful**, and (above all) **helpful** responses to your colleague's draft. Below are some questions to ask yourself as you read the draft. In your comments you will probably have space to cover only a few of these: choose to focus on what seem to you the most important things. However, **your peer review should include a few lines in which you summarize what you take the argument of the paper to be**. There should also be some balance between noting strengths of the paper and noting those aspects that might be improved.

1. Summarize the author's argument. What is the writer trying to say, describe, or argue in this piece of writing? What do you take the main idea to be, and how is the supporting material organized around this idea? How are the Introduction, the body, and the end related? Does the Introduction helpfully set up the rest of the piece?

2. Identify the strengths of the draft. What works well? (The topic? The argument? The historiography? The primary source analysis? The relationship between evidence and argument? The structure? The style?) What did you enjoy? Which sections are most effective? Where did you become more interested? What phrases/paragraphs resonated for you? What was surprising?

3. Suggest potential improvements to the draft. Are there any weak sections in the draft? Are there areas that clearly seem to call out for more information, or a more detailed argument? Is there anything not present (i.e., evidence, argument, historiography, background) that seems necessary? Can the argument be improved by being sharpened, made more specific, or perhaps more ambitious? Are there claims that don't seem to make sense, or need to be developed? Are there gaps between the evidence provided and the arguments that are then made? Are there issues with organization or clarity?

4. Formulate questions about the draft. Ask about your colleague's meaning and wording whenever this isn't clear to you. Ask for further information and elaboration on points you found particularly interesting. If the purpose of a particular section is not clear to you, ask what its role is in the paper as a whole.

Tips:

- Remember to **be specific** whenever you can, pointing to particular sentences and paragraphs when appropriate.
- You *may* if you wish provide your writing partner with marginal notes on their drafts. These can be very helpful in making your comments as specific as can be. (However at this stage it is probably best to avoid correcting things like spelling or comma usage. That kind of copy-editing comes later in the process.)
- When noting potential weaknesses, try to suggest a possible **concrete solution** rather than simply pointing out the problem.

- The most helpful sort of advice is the kind that will help the author improve *his or her actual paper*. At this stage, it is less helpful to say things like: “I think it would be super-interesting if you changed the whole subject of your paper to this idea you mention in passing in footnote 5”, or “What I’m really interested in is X: why don’t you make your paper about X?” One helpful way to think about the central issue: Is the draft you are reading **convincing? If not, why not?**