

SOME GENERAL SUGGESTIONS FOR A USEFUL CRITIQUE OR INSTANCE OF PEER REVIEW

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A peer critique has a primary function, and sometimes, a secondary function. The primary function is to help the author improve the quality of his or her paper. The secondary function, when there is one, is sometimes to demonstrate your ability to provide useful feedback and thoughtful recommendations for improving imperfect work. In either case, you are looking to provide substantive, critical, but explicitly constructive recommendations regarding some text.

A peer critique has a mostly familiar structure, but it does include some elements that are more essential to this endeavor than many other non-critical instances of academic writing. To that end, here's an outline of what your peer critique should look like:

1. **Introduction.** Summarize the paper you are critiquing, and be sure to state the thesis, and any general evaluation you have. Why? Doing this shows that you actually understood what the author was trying to do. It flags for the author (and the editor or instructor) whether more clarity is needed on the part of the author on these matters, and it says something about how closely you read the paper.
2. **The part where you are nice.** Here, you highlight some strengths of the paper, even if there aren't many. Most papers have at least something of redeeming value, so make sure you note that, if for no other reason than signaling that at least that element shouldn't be lost in the revision. Avoid disingenuous praise. To note that the author "demonstrated good taste by writing in the English language," is typically not a compliment in this context.
3. **The part where you are critical.** Focus on what needs improvement especially arguments or substantive failures to rightly engage with the relevant evidence or considerations. This is the meat of your critique. Make it clear, precise, and altogether free of personal attacks. Keep the focus on quality of the paper and not the author. It may also be useful to make a list of minor errors like typos, grammar glitches, and the like if there are such things in the paper) that can be attached as a postscript, or after identifying the main places of critical reaction.
4. **The part where you are constructive.** Explain how the paper might address some or all of the substantive complaints. Your goal is to suggest paths to improvement. You don't have to write the paper for the author, but this is your chance to provide some useful suggestions about how the author might reasonably attempt to address the criticisms that you are worried about.
5. **The conclusion.** Give some overall assessment that lets the author (and the editor, instructor, or third party) know what you think about the overall status of the paper in its current incarnation.