

7 The Writing Process

Most activities in life involve a process. A recipe for brownies involves a process and so do the instructions for changing a tire—or a diaper, for that matter. Any time there are several steps required to complete a task, a process is involved.

Writing is no different from anything else. In a perfect world, one moment you would be looking at a blank page and the next you would be holding a completed essay in your hands. However, the unfortunate reality is that several steps are required to go from that blank page to that completed essay.

And here's the best news of all: if you follow a good process, it can take much of the pain out of writing!

Not everybody follows the same writing process. For example, when I was an undergraduate student, this was the process for writing my college essays:

1. Get the assignment.
2. Forget about the assignment until the day before it's due.
3. Remember the assignment and go into a full-blown panic.
4. Pull an all-nighter to complete the assignment, and pray for a passing grade.

Obviously, some processes are better than others.

The goal of a good process is to add efficiency and quality to the steps involved in the activity at hand. A good writing process should do the same: it should help you get from the assignment stage to the finished essay stage with a maximum of efficiency and quality.

A quality writing process involves the following three basic stages, which this chapter explains in detail:

1. Preparation
2. Drafting
3. Document improvement

PREPARATION

In the preparation stage (sometimes called *prewriting*), your goal is to create and begin organizing the content of your essay. For many students, this is the most difficult part of writing a paper. There's a reason for this, but it is an invalid reason, as you shall see, and this difficulty can be overcome by following a quality writing process.

The preparation stage actually involves three phases: (1) planning the writing, (2) creating the content and (3) organizing that content.

PHASE 1.

Phase one involves more thinking than writing. In this phase, you should review the assignment instructions, make sure you understand exactly what you are supposed to do, and plan your attack. How long is your essay supposed to be? What type of essay is it – expository or persuasive? Have you been given a topic, or do you get to choose your own? If you get to choose your own topic, what are you going to write about? You need to know all of these things before you can start actually developing content for your final essay.

Students sometimes have a hard time choosing a topic when one is not assigned. If this is true for you, it might help to do this: take out a sheet of paper and draw a vertical line down the middle of the paper, forming two columns. At the top of one column, write “Things I’m Passionate About,” and at the top of the second column, write “Things I’ve Always Wanted To Learn More About.” Then write down everything you can think of that falls under those two categories. Once you have the two lists completed, choose one and go to work. Most students find it much more meaningful to write about something they care about or have always wanted to learn more about.

Always make sure that you read the assignment instructions **CAREFULLY**. One of the most common mistakes students make is to just briefly skim the assignment instructions and then complete an essay that does not do everything required. It’s silly to lose points because you didn’t read closely enough to know that the essay required five sources or needed to be within a specific word count (yes, these things are often included in grading!). So do this:

1. When you first receive the assignment, read it **IN DETAIL**, all the way through, noting all the little things that must be included.
2. As you write the essay, refer back to the original assignment instructions again to make sure that you are still on track.
3. When you are nearing completing of the essay, read the instructions again in detail, and compare each item in the instructions to your essay to make sure you have completed it properly.

If the teacher has included a grading rubric, also look at that to note those things that will be used for grading. (A “grading rubric” is a teacher term for “grading guide”). It essentially says, “I will grade your essay based on these criteria.” Some rubrics are highly detailed and some are pretty simplistic, but if you are provided with one (it wouldn’t hurt to ask your teacher if he or she uses one, and if so, to request the rubric if you are not given one), make sure you pay attention to how the teacher plans to grade your essay, and then make sure you write with those items in mind.

This brings us to one more thing you should do in Phase 1 of the preparation step: complete an **audience analysis**. We will talk about this in detail in the instructions for

the separate essays later in the book, but it's worth mentioning here: always take note of your audience.

Again, we do this in real life. Consider this:

You are a male who is dating a female. Your girlfriend is what we might call a "tomboy." She works as an auto mechanic, and in her spare time fights in the local amateur MMA group. You can confidently take her into any bar knowing that if anybody causes any trouble, she will beat him or her up while you finish your Shirley Temple. She would much rather receive a new tool than flowers as a gift.

Given this, would you write her a love sonnet for Valentine's Day?

Remember, *all writing has an audience*. Even your diary has an audience, even if that audience is you—and maybe your granddaughter, who will find it years later and recoil in horror at some of your inner thoughts and the detailed accounts of your exploits.

Given that all writing has an audience, it is wise of us to consider that audience when we write.

First, remember that you are writing for your teacher, as it is he or she who will grade your work. This seems self-evident, but it's amazing how many students forget this. The most important thing you can take from this is the following:

Always read the feedback you receive on each essay (and rough drafts, if you are permitted to submit them to your professor), and apply it to future essays!

As much as we don't want to admit it, the fact is, writing is subjective. Give your essay to five different teachers, and you will not receive the same grade from each teacher. I know it sounds unfair, but there it is. In writing, unlike math and certain other, more objective subjects, there is no right or wrong answers. The hope among teachers is that at least the five teachers would grade within a fairly tight range (maybe one would give you an A, two would give you an A-, and two would give you a B+). But the fact is, I have sat in practice sessions doing this exact thing, and seen one sample essay receive grades ranging from an A to a D or even an F from the gathered teachers. YIKES!

Again, refer to back to **Chapter 1: Why Writing is Such a Pain in the Backside**. Communication is highly subjective, and so the grading of writing, despite our best efforts, is somewhat subjective as well.

Teachers use grading rubrics to try and minimize this, which is another reason to request and review a rubric for each writing assignment.

But the best thing you can do is, again, to read the feedback you receive on previous essays.

- Does the teacher hammer you on grammar? Well then, make sure your grammar is perfect on future essays.
- Does the teacher take off big points for formatting? Get your formatting perfect.
- Does the teacher focus on "big" things, like strength of argument? Put your focus there.

See what I'm saying? Read and analyze the feedback on each essay, and you will know where your teacher puts his or her emphasis while grading. Then you can focus on that in future essays.

Your teacher might also give you the option of writing for another audience—for example, let's say you are writing an essay about gun control, and your teacher assigns you to write it for the annual gathering of the National Rifle Association (NRA). Or maybe the teacher assigns you to write it for a gathering of the group Moms Demand Action For Gun Sense in America. The first group is pro-gun and anti-gun control, and the second group is the opposite. Would you write the same essay for each? (Hint: no.)

Remember our discussions about argumentation back in chapters 4 and 5. If you read those (you DID read those, right?), you understand the basics about how people are persuaded in an argument. Given that, you must also realize that you should adjust your argument based on the audience.

Note some things we might want to consider with regards to our audience:

- Who exactly is your audience?
- What is their age, race, and gender?
- What is their education/income level?
- What do they know about the topic?
- Do they agree or disagree with you?
- What are their *core values*?

Don't be offended at these (especially the second and third). Not all of these will apply to all writing situations. However, let's look at this one:

- What is their age, race, and gender?

If you were writing an essay about school uniforms, wouldn't you want to know if your essay was going to be presented to:

1. School officials
2. Parents
3. Students

Don't you think that school officials would approach that topic from a different perspective than students? Part of that is age and part is position (official vs. student), but if we are going to be effective, we need to know who our audience is and what they think. If you write this essay for school officials, making the argument that uniforms somewhat remove the class structure from the school and keep things more manageable, but the essay actually goes to the students, you would likely offend them.

Consider this one:

- What is their education/income level?

At first glance, this might sound discriminatory, and it could be if you don't approach it right. But would you write an essay in the same language for an audience with a high school education as for one composed of all PhDs?

Let me give you a story about this:

Several years ago, I was working at a community college in the southeast U.S. I had the opportunity to submit a proposal for a research project that could involve travel. As you should be able to tell from reading this textbook thus far, my writing style is pretty...informal. So I wrote up my proposal. It said things like this:

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE: To travel to Ireland to gain first-hand knowledge that will help me create a course about Irish culture and literature.

Sounds decent, right? I sent the rough draft of my proposal to a colleague who had received a similar grant a few years earlier, and asked her, "How does this sound?"

Her answer: "Not PhD enough." In other words, the committee that reviewed these applications was composed of educators with PhDs, and they liked to use much bigger words and more complex sentences. So I rewrote this:

PRIMARY OBJECTIVE: To travel to Ireland for the purpose of the acquisition of knowledge and experience in order to fulfill the pedagogical requirements of a course in Irish culture and literature.

That sounds much more PhD, right? That is what audience analysis is all about.

Depending on your subject, income level might matter. If I'm writing an essay about investing, don't you think a group of people who earn \$36,000 per year would need to be approached differently from a group of people whose average income is \$1 million per year?

Again, not all topics separate all audiences by every one of these criteria. However, you should take the time to consider your topic and consider what you need to know about your audience in order to persuade that audience.

And again, always remember your ultimate audience: your teacher. That does not necessarily mean to write what you think the teacher wants to hear (for example, you shouldn't feel that you have to support gun control because your teacher does), but you should always write in a way that meets the teacher's rubric and way of grading.

FINAL NOTE: don't confuse audience analysis with stereotyping or discrimination. If our audience is made up entirely of women, does that mean I should use no sports references in my essay, because "everybody knows that girls don't like sports"? Of course not. However, might there be certain topics that, generally speaking, the different genders look at differently? Absolutely. Are there topics that those who are, say, under age 20 generally view differently from those who are over age 60? Of course. Does that mean

that EVERY under-20 reader will view that topic the same way? Not at all. If we have an audience of one (say, our automotive mechanic, MMA-fighting girlfriend), we can pinpoint our argument to that audience. Once we have more than one, it becomes more difficult, but we should still seek to know our audience as a group and consider, in general terms, how to best approach that group.

FINAL NOTE, PART 2: That also means avoiding assumptions. Again, we can't *assume* that girls don't like sports. We can't *assume* that all people with a Hispanic background see the topic of illegal immigration the same way, or that all people over age 60 know nothing about computers. Audience analysis might involved doing a bit of research about the members of our audience so we can determine, in general terms, the best way to persuade them.

PHASE 2

In Phase 2, you start developing content for the paper. The temptation here is to jump right into the draft, which is understandable, as it seems the most time efficient thing to do. If your math teacher gave you 20 questions to complete for a grade, you wouldn't do 10 "warm-up" questions to get ready for them, would you?

However, writing is different from math; in communication, it is not a matter of right or wrong. It's more complicated than that, and a more complicated activity needs a more complicated process. In addition, Phase 2 is where the biggest challenge facing any writer comes into play, and that challenge has a name: writer's block.

The good news is: there is a specific reason why writers get writer's block, and following the correct writing process can beat that challenge. Here's how:

Imagine that there are two people in your head: an artist and a judge. The artist is the part of you that is carefree, fun-loving, creative, silly and unique. The judge is the part of you that is grown up, mature, driven to excellence, serious, and judgmental. Everybody has both of these characters within them, just in different proportions. It is the artist in you that wakes up on a beautiful spring morning and says, "I should call in sick today and go to the mountains for a picnic." It is the judge who says, "You most definitely will not. You have responsibilities. People are counting on you. Now get up, get dressed, and get to work."

These two characters come into play in the writing process as well. Remember, when you first receive an assignment, you have nothing completed. You have a blank screen. You have to fill that screen with something worthwhile, something that will hopefully express your ideas.

If you jump right into the draft of your essay, in your mind you will be thinking, "I need to write this essay, and I need to do a good job of it." Is that the artist or the judge talking?

That's right: It's the judge. Remember from our list of attributes, though, that judges do not create things; they only judge things. It is the artist who creates things—even content for essays. So picture the scene with the judge in charge: The artist is sitting at the canvas ready to create his masterpiece of an essay, but with every brush stroke, the judge says, "Nope, that's not good enough for an A." So, the artist tears off the page and starts again. "That's no good," says the judge. "You need a better opening." If that

happens enough times, soon the artist throws up his hands with disgust and says, "I'm done."

There's your writer's block.

The way to prevent writer's block is to take the judge out of the picture. He will come back in during the document improvement stage, but that's his territory—judging the quality of existing material. During the prewriting stage of the writing process, however, you must let the artist "play."

English teachers call letting the artist play *brainstorming*, and you can do it in several different ways. Some people make lists; others put pen to paper (or fingers to the keyboard), set a timer, and start writing, not stopping until the timer goes off. Others do what is often called *mind-mapping* or *webbing*. The important thing is to let the artist play with no judgment at this stage of the process. Right now, you want to develop content. It does not have to be perfect content—that will come later. You just want something to work with. Remember, it is always easier to work with something than with nothing.

The most important thing here is to let the artist GO, wherever your artist wants to go. If your artist even takes you to a whole different topic, just go with it. Maybe it will be a better topic than the one you were going to write about. There is NO JUDGMENT at this point. Whatever the artist gives you, go with that. NEVER catch yourself saying, "Oh, I don't want to say that," or "That's no good." Even if it all turns out to be useless (which it won't), you will have only wasted maybe 5 or 10 minutes. You waste more time watching commercials in a half hour TV show.

PHASE 3

Writers often forget the third phase of the preparation stage—organizing the content—and if that happens, the second phase was a waste of time. Once your artist has generated some content, you have to give it shape before it is ready to put into the draft of an essay.

Picture the raw material from your brainstorming like concrete spinning in the back of a concrete truck. (That's good, right? Content = concrete.) That concrete is potentially quite valuable, but not if it is poured directly on the ground. If that happens, it is just a mess. Instead, forms are built to shape the concrete. These forms are built in whatever shape the contractor wants the concrete to eventually take. Only after the forms are put into place is the concrete poured. Then, the concrete can form the foundation of the building.

Your brainstorming material is the same as this concrete; it is in rough form and needs to be shaped. Here is one example:

Suppose you do a quick brainstorming exercise about gun control, and develop the list:

Handgun	Rifle	Robbery
Murder	Second amendment	NRA
Gangs	Drugs	Shotgun
Accidents	Children	Safety locks
Concealed carry	Other countries	England
Switzerland	Australia	Bullets

Armor-piercing bullets
Violent crime

High-capacity magazines
Self-defense

Danger in the home
Castle Doctrine

This is your raw material. This is your concrete. The next step is to look at your list and ask yourself, "Are there any themes or commonalities in these items? What seems to go together? You will see things that seem to fit together. You can circle them in colored ink, or put the same number by items that fit together.

Once you have your items grouped into themes, you need to label them. You will create categories like this:

- Dangers related to guns
- Types of guns/ accessories
- Gun Rights
- How other countries view guns

Now put the individual items from the previous list under one of the categories:

<i>Dangers related to guns</i>	<i>Types of guns/accessories</i>	<i>Gun rights</i>	<i>Other countries</i>
<i>Robbery</i>	<i>Handgun</i>	<i>Second Amendment</i>	<i>England-handgun ban</i>
<i>Murder</i>	<i>Rifle</i>	<i>NRA</i>	
<i>Gangs</i>	<i>Shotgun</i>	<i>Concealed carry</i>	<i>Australia-ban</i>
<i>Drugs</i>	<i>Bullets</i>	<i>Self-defense</i>	<i>Swiss-100%</i>
<i>Accidents</i>	<i>Armor-piercing</i>	<i>Castle Doctrine</i>	<i>ownership</i>
<i>Children</i>	<i>Bullets</i>		
<i>Safety locks</i>	<i>High-capacity</i>		
<i>Violent crime</i>	<i>Magazines</i>		

Note that as you build these groupings, you might also think of new additions. For example, under "gun rights," you might add "Revolutionary War minutemen" and "dictators imposed gun control in Russia, Germany, Cuba, etc." and "Federalist Paper #46."

Now review your information. What do you have? Do you see any patterns emerging? Do you see an argument forming? How might you work with these groups now?

Put these groupings together in different ways, and you have possible outlines. For example, I could create the two following outlines from this information:

Outline #1

- I. Introduction with thesis: Despite the Second Amendment and America's history of gun rights, guns are too dangerous to remain legal.
- II. Historic gun rights
 - a. Second Amendment

- b. Federalist Paper #46
 - c. Concealed carry laws
- III. Types of guns today and their dangers
 - a. Rifles
 - b. Shotguns
 - c. Handguns
 - d. High-capacity magazines
 - e. Armor-piercing bullets
- IV. Current dangers
 - a. Violent crime
 - b. Gangs/drugs
 - c. Home accidents with children
- V. Other countries' views on gun control
 - a. England-handguns banned
 - b. Australia-handguns banned
 - c. Switzerland-ownership but with extensive training
- VI. Conclusion: despite the history of gun freedom in the United States, it's time to follow other countries' lead and ban firearms.

Here's another possibility:

Outline #2

- I. Introduction with thesis: Despite the fact that some people use firearms improperly, maintaining the right to keep and bear arms will keep America free.
- II. Current misuse of firearms
 - a. Violent crime
 - b. Gangs/drugs
 - c. Home accidents with children
- III. Other countries' views on gun control
 - a. England-handguns banned
 - b. Australia- handguns banned
 - c. Switzerland- ownership but with extensive training
- IV. Historical gun rights and why they must remain intact
 - a. Second Amendment
 - b. Federalist Paper #46
 - c. Concealed carry laws
- V. Conclusion: Despite abuse by some, it is constitutional and within our rights to keep and bear arms.

Do you see how the information gathered can lead you to your outline and eventual essay, and it's not even hard work to get there? This stuff just falls into place when you let the artist play, organize your material, and just take a look.

And the best part here is that the whole time you are creating this content and forming it into an outline, the judge in your head is off doing whatever judges do in their spare time. And it's the judge who makes writing hard. The artist has fun, and all of this is just the artist playing.

Don't like these outlines? Fine, you could try some more. It's all just fiddling around with what's in your head. And I tell you this with complete honesty: I created that list, found themes and grouped the items together, labeled those groups, and made the outlines in maybe 15 minutes, and it was painless because I wasn't judging it. I was just looking to see what I could do with my basic thoughts on gun control. I just let my artist play, and that's what I came up with.

And look at what I have: 15 minutes later, I have two essay outlines, and all I have to do is decide which one (if either) I want to use, and then expand on it. My draft now is easy, because I know what I want to say, and how I want to say it.

DRAFTING

If your preparation was done well, the draft can almost write itself. This is where an outline comes in. It's relatively easy to turn this:

- I. Historical Gun Rights and why they must remain in tact
 - a. Second Amendment
 - b. Federalist Paper # 46
 - c. Concealed carry laws

into this:

The Founding Fathers recognized Americans' right to keep and bear arms through the Second Amendment, which reads, "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed" (U.S. Constitution). In Federalist Paper #46, James Madison explained that this right was a counterbalance to the power of the federal government and a standing army. If the government became tyrannical and turned the army against the people, then "it may well be doubted whether a militia [of armed citizens].... could ever be conquered by such a proportion of regular troops." Today those rights have justifiably been expanded to include such things as concealed carry laws...

DOCUMENT IMPROVEMENT

This is the stage of the writing process where you should allow the judge back in. Now that you have created material, organized it into an outline, and then converted it into a rough draft, the judge should enter the picture and decide what works and what does not. This is so much easier to do now than when you are actually writing the original paper. Now you have something to judge, and you have just one job to do. If you judge the

essay while you are writing it, you are essentially trying to do two jobs at once-and again, that is a recipe for writer's block. So now the artist can go back to doing whatever artists do in their downtime, and the judge can do what he or she does best.

Document improvement involves three distinct phases:

1. Revising
2. Editing
3. Proofreading

These are separate phases, should be treated as such, and should be followed in this order. We'll talk about why in a minute.

Revision is the first phase of the document improvement process, and it comes from the Latin word, *revisere*, which means "to see again." If you break the word into its component pieces, you can see this:

Re + Vision

Re = to do again

Vision = sight

Re + Vision = to see again

When you revise your paper, you look at the big issues: Did I make a good argument? Is my argument understandable? Is it logical? Did I organize my paper well? Is it well balanced? Can my reader find my thesis? Does my paper back up that thesis? Is the language appropriate for my audience? Did I include all my main points? Did I repeat some of my points unnecessarily? Did I follow the assignment guidelines?

These are the big things required for a successful paper. Do not look at the little things like spelling and grammar right now; you'll get to that later. For now, you want to make sure that your content is solid, easy to follow, and persuasive. These are whole-paper and paragraph level issues, or as English teachers sometimes call them, *HOCs* (higher order concerns).

Once you're comfortable that the big things are working, you can look at smaller issues, and this involves editing and proofreading.

Editing is when you look at the smaller issues. Now you are looking at word choice, grammar, mechanics, and structure.

Does it make sense now why you revise before you edit? What if you spend an hour or more going through your entire paper to fix all of the grammar, usage, spelling, and other errors, and then decide to cut whole sections out of the essay and include others? You have just wasted all of the time you spent fixing the small things in those paragraphs, and now you have additional, new paragraphs that you have to edit so you are repeating the process.

Proofreading is when you give your paper one last review to make sure you have not missed anything. Double-check your corrections, watch for typos, run a spell check and a grammar check, but do not depend on this solely. Nothing replaces your own proofreading. For instance, a spell-check does not necessarily flag misused words (*then/than, woman/women*).

Make sure the paper is formatted properly, include a cover page and proper citations if you use outside sources in your writing. If you do use outside sources, such as journal articles or books, include a properly formatted reference page. Finally, review the assignment instructions and make sure you have done everything required for the assignment.

When it comes time to review, edit, and proofread your essay, think of your work like a block of granite, and you are the sculptor. Does the sculptor take a tiny hammer and chisel to a new block of granite? No, that would take forever. The sculptor uses big tools to make big cuts to remove the big pieces that do not belong. As the block gets closer and closer to the shape the sculptor eventually wants, he and she uses smaller and smaller tools and makes smaller and smaller changes, until eventually the piece takes shape. An essay is the same way. Do not start the revision process by fixing the commas; start by looking at the big picture: Do I make a good argument? Can my reader understand what I'm saying here? Is this essay well organized? Is it balanced? These are big decisions, and at this point, you should make big changes- move paragraphs around, cut pieces here, add others there. Once the big changes are in place, look at the sentences. Do they say what you want them to say? Are they clear? Can you improve them? Then look at the words; are you using the right word? Should you use *mad* or *incensed*, for example? Finally, look at the tiny things, like punctuation, spelling and typos. Start big and work small, like a sculptor perfecting a work of art.

PEER REVIEWS

We need one final word (or several, actually) before we leave the writing process. Often, especially at the college level, students are required to complete peer reviews with classmates as part of the essay writing process. These can be either boring or terrifying.

“What if everybody says my paper is stupid?”

“I'm an awful writer, but only the teacher knew. Now the whole class will know!”

“What if I give someone bad advice, and it hurts his or her grade?”

To begin with, nobody should ever say that your paper is stupid, and you certainly shouldn't say that about anybody else's paper. Your teacher should make this clear to the class. A paper may be disorganized. It may not make a strong argument. It might be filled with grammar errors. You might totally disagree with its argument. But it's not stupid.

Consider this: a peer review is an act of **service** for a classmate. You are helping a classmate write a better paper, by letting that classmate see how an outside reader reacts to it. If you take 30 seconds to scan it, and then hand it back saying, “Yeah, I liked it,” you haven't done anybody any good.

If you take the time to read the paper closely and make comments throughout, now you've given the author something to look at, something to consider. That's an act of service. We can only know how we see things; it's hard to know how others will. So

getting that outside perspective is invaluable. And you don't have to be an expert in English (you should have learned by now that there really is no such thing) to help. Just give your reaction. You're the audience. Let the writer know how the audience reacts to his or her essay.

Quick story: I used to write humor columns for a local newspaper. Oftentimes, before I would send my column to the paper, I would email it to a friend I knew in graduate school. He was a great reviewer, because he was honest. He would say, "I loved the story about your dog, but the follow-up about breaking the tree didn't work for me." I almost always took his advice. And he was NOT a humor writer himself. He didn't have to be. He only needed to be a humor READER. I just needed the reaction from an audience member.

Your teacher should give you guidelines for performing peer reviews. Sometimes, teachers prepare actual forms for you to fill out while performing a peer review. This can help, because the forms will ask you specific questions about the essay you are reviewing, so you know what to look for. You might have questions like these:

Does that essay have a thesis statement? Write it here.

Does the essay use transitions? Write three samples from the essay.

What sources does the essay use? List one.

Can you find the main supporting points in the author's argument? What are they?

If your teacher does not give you specific guidelines for the peer review, the best thing is to imagine that the essay is YOUR essay, and follow the same series of questions we discussed above regarding revision and editing. You're looking for the same things:

- Did I make a good argument?
- Is my argument understandable?
- Is it logical?
- Did I organize my paper well?
- Is it well balanced?
- Can my reader find my thesis?
- Does my paper back up that thesis?
- Is the language appropriate for my audience?
- Did I include all my main points?
- Did I repeat some of my points unnecessarily
- Did I follow the assignment guidelines?

Ask the same questions of the essay you are reviewing.

At the very least, your teacher should give you tips for how to approach a peer review. Consider these:

- Make specific comments, such as, "The third paragraph might fit better right after your introduction," rather than vague comments like, "This wasn't good."

- Point out things that you thought worked well as well as those that didn't.
- Be polite in your comments—remember, we attach ego to our writing.
- Comment on the work, not the author.
- Use “I” statements, such as, “I didn't understand this section,” rather than “you” statements, such as, “You wrote that poorly.”

The more specific you are, the better, but if you read something that sounds odd but you don't know why, then just say it: “This doesn't make sense to me, but I don't know why.” That's enough to let the author know to take a second look.

And always treat the essay and the author with respect. Someone put a lot of time and effort into this essay, and your job is to help him or her to make it even better. No name calling. No sarcasm. No running the person down if you disagree.

In fact, if you get an essay with which you radically disagree (for example, the essay argues for gay marriage, and you oppose it), then you are the perfect person to review that essay. You know the opposing argument well, and you can spot the holes in the argument the author is making. It's easy to “preach to the choir,” but it's better to try to persuade someone who disagrees with you. Point out the essay's weaknesses, and help your classmate write a better paper.

And don't underestimate the learning YOU can get from performing a peer review. You might see a new way to start your essay, or discover a way to write a thesis statement that you never considered. Perhaps the essay you are reading does a great job of integrating outside sources, and you can learn from that. You might also see errors in the essay that make you say, “Man, I'll have to be careful not to do that in my essay!” Sometimes a peer review can be as valuable for the reader as it is for the author.

Finally, let's discuss the final worry many students have about peer reviews: “What if I give someone bad advice, and it hurts his or her grade?”

First a pop quiz question: is the original author required to make the changes you suggest?

The answer: NO.

Remember, your job is to provide an honest audience reaction to the essay. That's it. If you do that diligently, you've done your job.

Once the original author has the essay back in his or her hands and sees your comments, he or she then has the responsibility to decide which suggestions to follow and which to ignore. You have given the author the opportunity to review (to “see again”) those areas of the essay where you made comments. If the author decides not to take a suggestion, that's fine.

And if the author DOES take your suggestion, then the author has now taken ownership of that suggestion by making the change. And if that change results in a lower grade, it was the author who bears that responsibility for it, not you.

Now go be of service to a fellow human being!