

## Peer Review: Reading Critically and Giving Constructive Criticism

The primary purpose of a support group will be to read each other's work and give feedback. In doing this, you will help improve each other's writing. There are two parts to this: first, you must take the time to read and evaluate the work for that session; second, you must provide feedback that will help that group member to communicate even better.

Obviously, you are not an expert on the topics that you will be reading. Do not let content or vocabulary intimidate you! Even if you are not familiar with the topic, you will still be able to see if the writer has **communicated clearly and built a strong argument**. The next two sections will provide some ideas on how to read critically and give feedback. You may even find that these help you to improve your own writing!

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### 1. How to read critically.

A thesis always explores a research question or problem. It is necessary for an author to show that the question has been approached analytically by carefully presenting the order of the ideas (or results in a scientific study) that led to the final conclusion.

When you read your peers' work, you should look at

- the **strength of the arguments** and
- the **clarity of the writing**.

**Do not look at grammar or the ideas themselves.** Unless grammar problems make it difficult to understand, grammar corrections should be saved for proofreading. Also, it is the job of the student and the supervisor to make sure that the ideas are solid. Your job is to make sure that the ideas are communicated clearly.

#### Characteristics of a well-crafted argument:

- **Explicit**  
In an explicit argument, the author is aware of and clearly states the assumptions, inferences, and reasoning that connect the different parts of the work together.
- **Significant**  
The research question and conclusions are not trivial but have a clear impact on the field, and the author has explained their significance.
- **Concise**  
Only information that is pertinent and necessary to the argument is provided.
- **Consistent**  
There are no contradictory statements or elements within the argument.

## Questions to guide peer reading

For the most part, you will be looking at *sections* of your peers' theses instead of the whole paper. Although each section will focus on different aspects of the thesis, they are all essential to the thesis. For each section, you should be able to identify the main point, which will tie that section to the greater thesis.

The following list is a series of questions to guide you in your reading.

### Argument and conclusion:

- What is the main argument and point of this section?
- Is the argument supported? How? How is the quality of the supporting points?
- What is the conclusion? (Note: There may be more than one.)
- Does the conclusion answer the research question?
- What are the reasons supporting the conclusion?
- Considering the reasons presented, how acceptable is the conclusion?

### Supporting information:

- What do you think of the examples, evidence, or data presented?
- Can you see how they relate to the argument?
- Is the author presenting facts or opinions? How are they used?
- Are there tables or figures? How are they used?
- Is there any more information that needs to be provided before the conclusion can be accepted?

### Communication of author's purpose:

- What do you think the author is doing in this section?
- Can you recognize the main argument? How?
- Can you recognize the conclusion? How?
- Are you able to follow the reasoning? Why?
- How is the structure? Does it flow well?
- Are the connections between the ideas clearly made?
- Are there any ambiguous words or phrases? How might they be clarified?

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## 2. How to provide constructive criticism.

It is important for the reader as well as the member whose work is being read to remember that constructive criticism is not an attack on the person or the research. Instead, it is a mechanism to **increase the quality of the thesis by showing areas that need clarification or more depth**. Comments should be delivered with the desire to provide useful information to the writer.

There are several different elements to giving constructive feedback that will be outlined here.

### Your understanding

First, it is helpful to explain how *you* understood the material. Not only can this alert the author to possible misinterpretations, but it can also allow the author to see what you are basing your feedback upon. You can use phrases such as:

- From what I understand, in this section you are...
- It seems to me that the focus of this section is...
- I am not sure I understand the main point here. It seems to me that...

### Clarification

After indicating your understanding of the material, you will know if that was what the author intended or not. If not, then ask further questions to help the author verbalize his or her intended meaning, such as:

- What is the purpose of this section?
- Why is it important to your paper? How?

- What is the purpose of this discussion of...?
- Why is this figure/example/description/etc. important?
- What do you mean by...? I understand this to say... Is this correct?

You can also indicate passages, sentences, or images that you are uncertain about and ask questions for clarification about these. By pointing out specific questions, the author can already see what parts of the paper need clarification or further information.

### **Constructive, not just criticism**

Once you have gained a clear grasp of the meaning of the section, you can provide further feedback on the presentation of the material:

- Indicate elements that seem unnecessary or whose purpose is unclear.
- Show which passages do not flow well and why not.
- Point out gaps between ideas.
- Indicate any arguments that appear to be weak or unsupported.

Do not just say that something is wrong. It is extremely important to explain *why* you feel a section could use improvement. Also, try to provide ways that the writing could be improved, such as making the connection between two ideas clearer or providing an explanation of a graph, etc.

### **Summary:**

The goal of the feedback session is to show the presenter where to make his/her thesis stronger and to provide suggestions to help the presenter communicate his/her ideas more clearly.

**Remember, the advisors and resources at the AWHC are always available!** Feel free to ask questions, make appointments, or make use of our books, documents, and study areas.

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### **Bibliography**

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