

Peer Editing: Nobody's Peerfect!

Hayden Sanborn

Hayden Sanborn reflects on his daunting experience involving peer editing. With his knowledge from English 101 and the applications of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), he is able to take readers through the genre of peer editing. Sanborn provides insight into the practice of peer review and how writers and editors can expand their understanding of peer editing and how it is best accomplished.

Like many college freshmen students, I began my college career with a list of overwhelming challenges, including making new friends, adjusting to dorm life, finding classes, and being one student in a classroom of over 200 students. Who would have thought that being asked to write an article for *Grassroots Writing Research Journal (GWRJ)* in my English 101 course would be at the top of my list? My first attempt at drafting this article was very difficult. I repeatedly thought, “How do I even start this assignment, let alone complete it on time?” This is an impossible task.

How I Chose Peer Editing

All I could think of was the comments I received from the last time my paper was reviewed. One of the comments was, “This needs a lot more work.” How could that be after I spent many hours writing and working on my paper? I felt like I was not a good enough writer. After all, that was one of my first college papers, and I knew it would not be my last paper either. To this day, when an assignment involves writing a paper, I am not excited to write

it. I usually have no idea how to write it. Regardless of my uncertainty, I had to choose a specific topic for this article, devise a plan, and begin writing. Surprisingly (or not), I chose the genre of peer editing. I am proud to say that I do not regret my decision.

Peer Editing as a Writing Genre

Before we begin, let's think about the term **genre**. If you're like me, you probably think of genre as a category of music, film, or literature. For example, writers are familiar with the main genres, such as romance, mystery, or fiction. As we began to use the term more and more in English 101, I realized this not the only definition of genre. To gain a better understanding of the meaning of "genre," I turned to our program's glossary. It states that genre is used to refer "to kinds of texts that can be produced" ("Genre"). With that being said, students (including myself!) are familiar with many writing genres, including text messages, essays, laboratory reports, book reviews, posters, and so on. But how does this relate to peer editing? To be honest, I had not considered peer editing as a writing genre. But it is! It is simply producing a text about another's writing.

I was then faced with a very difficult question. How do I convince you that peer editing is a writing genre? There has to be a procedure or convention for peer editing. So, I searched the Internet and with more and more hits came lists of guidelines and questions to be addressed by any peer editor. The guidelines from the University of New Mexico's website are a prime example (Figure 1).

Now, I must point out that many of these questions are not simple yes or no questions, but, rather, open-ended questions that require a written text that can be produced. Voila! That is a genre—as we know it from our English 101 class! So now that I have defined what a genre is and how peer editing can be a writing genre, I will move on to defining peer editing, which is the heart of this article.

What the Heck Is Peer Editing?

Like many of you, I have been asked several times throughout my education to review written work for one of my classmates. This is a technique called peer editing, also referred to as "peer feedback, peer evaluation, peer review, and peer response." I have noticed that peer editing has become more and more prominent in my high school and early college courses. Now, I must

State what you think the purpose of the essay is. Be sure to respond to the specific comments of the author regarding the paper. Then answer the following questions in complete sentences however creatively you wish (within reason!). Remember to be constructive and respectful.

- 1) If you were reading this paper for the first time, would you grasp its purpose? Is its main idea clear? Do the points support it? Are the tone and style appropriate for the audience (college students and their professor)? Is the language appropriate?
- 2) What thesis directs the whole essay? If you can't find one, can you suggest one? If the thesis isn't strong, suggest a way to strengthen it.
- 3) Is the introduction interesting, clear, and easy to follow? What is the best feature of the introduction? How could the introduction be stronger?
- 4) Is the topic sufficiently narrow for a paper of this length?
- 5) Does the support for the thesis follow in a logical manner? How so? Does the writer follow through with examples to support his/her thesis? Can you suggest ways to further support the thesis?
- 6) What more would you like the writer to tell you about the details of the significant incident or issue?
- 7) Are the paragraphs themselves (internally) organized well? Are some too short/long for their subject? Which is the best paragraph and why? Which paragraph needs the most work and why? Mark those paragraphs you think need work and explain why.
- 8) Where does the writer make generalizations? Does he/she support them with specific details/facts? How so? Are there any places where s/he could use more? Can you suggest any?
- 9) Is the conclusion a good ending for the essay? What is particularly good about the conclusion? How could the conclusion be stronger?
- 10) What seem to you the essay's major strengths? What major weaknesses stand out?
- 11) Comment on the style in this essay. It is simplistic? Sophisticated? Explain. Is there a variety in sentence structure? Do they flow? Are there any that can be made stronger or clearer? Suggest ways to improve them.
- 12) Are there any striking grammatical problems in this essay? Mark any of the following that need work: spelling, grammar, punctuation, connection between thesis, body of paper, conclusion. Explain your reasons for claiming these need work. Can you make any helpful suggestions?
- 13) Are there any parts of this essay that confused you, leading you to think the writer needs to explain a bit further?
- 14) Give one argument or example that the author has overlooked that could strengthen the essay. Give one argument or example that could best contradict the author's thesis.
- 15) Does the essay meet the requirements of the assignment and the objective the author gave you? If so, explain why. If not, suggest what you would do if you were going to re-write the essay so that it would meet the author's objective and the requirements of the essay.

Figure 1: Peer review memo guidelines from the University of New Mexico website.

confess that I was not aware of the complexity of this practice until I began to look at it in more detail for the purpose of this article. Peer editing is much more than correcting grammatical errors. It's an activity that a person or a group of people can participate in, but the texts that get produced when we do peer editing activities can be understood as a genre. So, to better understand the complicated writing genre of peer editing, I have chosen to incorporate several different aspects of **cultural-historical activity theory**, or **CHAT**, in particular the version of CHAT that the ISU Writing Program uses to describe and study literate activity.

Reception is a CHAT term that deals with how a reader, not always the intended audience, receives and uses the text. It is this aspect that causes me the most fear. How will others view my writing? Will they understand it? When asking these questions, it is apparent that peer editing is all about reception and how others will respond to your writing. The reception I get from my peers after reading my article is important. Peer editing is not based on one's opinion on a topic, but rather the reception and feedback on one's work. Peer editing is defined as "a teaching technique in which students read,

and comment on each other's written work" (*Wiktionary.org*). Another way to look at peer editing is to define each word separately. As defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary, peer means "one that is of equal standing with another" while edit means "to prepare something, such as literary material, for publication or public presentation" (*Merriam-Webster.com*). It makes sense then that peer editing revolves around the reception of text and how a reader (or peer) will use it. After you read a written draft, you have some feeling about it. It was good, it was bad, or just so-so. Or maybe there were way too many errors, which had a negative impact on your reception of the writing. But keep in mind that the reception aspect of peer editing is much more than correcting just trivial errors such as grammar and spelling. The reception of a text is an important aspect of peer editing because the author uses it to improve their paper in lots of ways, including making sure it is readable and well-organized. The writer must also be receptive to the editor's comments. In this case, they must keep an open mind about the editor's comments and understand that the comments are directed towards helping the writer improve their text.

To Share or Not to Share

As the writer of this article, I had to think of and find the order in which I would include different aspects of CHAT and how they all related to the technique of peer editing. Hey! I just realized that I have employed one of the CHAT terms, **representation**. Representation is a valuable CHAT aspect that highlights how people who produce a text think about it and plan it. Writing an article for potential publication in GWRJ requires thinking and planning by both the writer and peer editor. There are many steps leading to peer editing, all of which have to be planned. It is expected that a writer will engage in the activity of research and that they will write and edit their own work. I know as a writer I spend a lot of time thinking about what I am going to say, how I am going to say it, and wondering if everything sounds okay. I then spend time reviewing my paper. What I have found, though, is that my ability to edit my own work is not good enough. My rough drafts have been returned with many highlighted mistakes and questions. I have learned that, when reviewing my own work, it is very easy to overlook obvious mistakes such as spelling errors, punctuation and grammar errors, and other stuff I simply miss, such as simplifying run-on or unclear sentences (like this one). Further, by the time I finish writing something, I usually know what I am trying to say. It is easier to have a person reading the draft for the first time point out when my writing just does not make sense. Others have found peer editing beneficial because it encourages student participation and improves reading and writing skills.

Despite its perceived benefits, some of us cringe at the idea of having others review and edit our writing. But why? Well, for me, I can say that I fear my peers will be overly critical of my writing, remembering the comments I received on one of my first college papers. Other students may feel as though peer editing is not useful. As stated in the article, “Why Students Hate Peer Review” by David Gooblar, when students are asked about their previous experiences with peer review practices, their answers are “almost always uniformly negative.” It can be a no-win situation. Editors may do something that damages another person’s self-worth or may even be seen as being overly critical or nitpicky. I find it hard to believe, but one of the biggest complaints Gooblar reports is that the peer editors are usually too nice. This secondary source states that editors may not feel comfortable providing descriptive feedback addressing the weaknesses in another’s draft. One reason is their desire not to hurt a peer’s feelings, while another reason may be an unwillingness to think critically about the writing, or it could be a combination of both. I have learned that peer editing may have adverse effects on the writer if the practice is not performed properly. It can be like a game of truth or dare.

Through the Eyes of an Editor

After you’ve decided to take the risk of peer editing, the next step is **distribution**. Distribution involves discussing where texts go in the world, how they get there, and who might take them up. In this case, the writer surrenders the draft to an editor, which, nowadays, may happen online or the old-fashioned way from hand to hand. The editor is then faced with doing a lot of representation work, including thinking about whether or not to make suggestions, asking questions, or providing any sort of feedback. If the editor chooses to make suggestions (after all, that is the intent of peer editing), the editor must think of how they can provide feedback in a positive way (I’ll get to that later).

I believe that when investigating the genre of peer editing, **activity** and representation go hand-in-hand or even overlap. As a component of CHAT, activity encompasses the actual practices that people engage in as they create text. Peer editing is an activity of its own. In fact, getting peer review is included in ISU’s description of activity. Upon digging deeper into the fascinating technique of peer editing, I learned that peer editing is very complex and composed of multiple activities. All of these activities help to shape how peers should edit another’s work.

An editor must be able to think and plan how to respond to a peer’s writing. This requires the editor to perform a series of activities to improve

the article. One activity is answering questions. Often, these questions take the form of a checklist-style worksheet that includes questions like, “What is the writer’s main point?” and, “Are any parts confusing or unclear?” or, perhaps, “What do you want to read more about in the essay?” More specific questions like, “Is there a title? Is it catchy?” and, “Are the references cited and do they follow MLA format?” may also be found on the checklist. These follow-up questions not only encourage more critical thinking and engagement on the part of the editor, but also help lead uncertain editors (such as myself) to give more constructive and thorough feedback.

Next is the tricky part. The editor must choose how to offer suggestions. A quick Google search turned up an interesting PowerPoint slide deck titled “Peer Edit with Perfection” (Readwritethink.org). Granted, the presentation is intended for students in grades 3–5, but I like the strategy. The tutorial outlines three important activities for peer editing, including (1) providing compliments, (2) making suggestions, and (3) making corrections. That’s it.

(1) Providing Compliments

It is never a bad idea to give a compliment if you want to make something better. That rule not only applies to life in general, but is also true to peer editing. As studies (and probably you) have found, people like it when others are nice to them. I know when I receive a compliment, it encourages and motivates me to do even more. It is proof that others recognize good things that are done. Thus, it is important for a peer to begin editing with a compliment. This could be, for example, “I like your choice of topic. It’s very interesting.” On the flip-side, you may receive negative comments that you do not want to hear. One response could be, “This needs a lot more work.” But can this message be conveyed differently? YES! A better way of stating this would be in the form of a compliment, such as, “This is a good start, but where will you take it?”

(2) Making Suggestions

The next activity is making suggestions that would improve the writing. Peer editors should ask polite questions if the writer’s message is unclear. The editor should be respectful. Editors should feel free to specify weaknesses and strengths, too. It’s often tempting to say, “looks fine to me” or “meets standards,” but how useful are these comments? I want my writing to be great! Pushed to provide a response to a writing, editors may resort to something like “??” or “be specific?” I have seen these comments scribbled before where it is very difficult to imagine what an example might be or what exactly needs to be clarified. In these cases, the writer can learn nothing unless they ask questions.

A good peer editor will focus on how to make the paper better. Opinions are fine, but should not be used in editing a paper. We all have a right to our opinion. For example, a paper might include a sentence, “The ISU Redbirds are a better team than the WIU Leathernecks because there stronger.” A good editor would catch that *there* should be *they’re*, but they would also question why the Redbirds are stronger. A not-so-good editor (I’d rather not call that person a bad editor) may reply that the Leathernecks are better, and there’s no reason to believe otherwise. The difference is that the good editing comments provided suggestions on how to make the writing better, whereas the other comments focused only on the writer and differences in opinion. Peer editing is not just hard for the person getting their writing edited, but also for the peer doing the editing. It’s difficult to withhold your opinion after reading pages explaining something that you interpret differently.

(3) Making Corrections

The third activity is pretty straightforward and deals with making corrections. We have all been trained and expected to identify errors associated with spelling, punctuation, or capitalization. It’s too easy, right? Not really. As college students, we have not practiced spotting such errors for years and are less likely to catch them. Or who knows, we may have never been taught these skills. But that’s ok. At this point, any corrections would help peers to make a paper stronger and improve the skills of both the writer and the editor.

Socializing—Writer vs. Editor

Socialization, another CHAT component, is the interaction of people that can impact or be impacted by the production, distribution, and use of texts. Peer editing is a social means where the writer and editor work together and with genres, like written drafts, make the writing better. People are open to talking about their writing, discussing what led them to a certain subject or choice of words, and sharing ideas on what can be done to improve their writing. Social interaction is bound to occur. In fact, there are several dissertations that focus on the social aspects of peer editing. For example, Cynthia Kruger bases her Master’s thesis on “Social Interaction During Peer Editing: Does It Make a Difference?” and a comparable study of two classes on the effect of social interaction in peer editing. As an editor, I have the opportunity to see the work of others and their approach to rough drafting, which, in turn, may help me catch errors that may unexpectedly appear in my own writing. Peer editing allows for all of the students to share, explore, and identify different approaches to responding to a writing assignment. The

socialization is very important. If there is no socialization, there is no peer editing.

My Experience—Good News!

By this point, you may have noticed that I repeatedly bring up the comments that triggered my interest in peer editing. It just so happens that these comments were received only a week before I was given this assignment. That's right. I had to have not one, but *two* reports written and subjected to peer editing within the same time frame. I guess a few of you may be wondering how that other report turned out. Well, after several email exchanges with the peer editor, I took it upon myself to meet one-on-one with the instructor of that class just last week. As we reflected on my first draft, the instructor gave me suggestions to make my paper better. Not only that, but she made it clear that my paper was not as bad as conveyed in my peer's emails. To fast forward, the instructor gave me ten bonus points for my efforts and told me that I did not have to rewrite the paper after all. Another thing I am happy to report is that, at the time of this writing, I am in pretty good shape to receive an A in the class.

I must admit that before meeting face-to-face with the instructor, I was not aware that direct interaction and conversation are (and will always be) critical components of peer editing. But they are! Thus, I will value any given opportunity for peer editing. I truly enjoy working with others and find that peer editing enables just that.

It's Your Turn!

Peer editing was intimidating to me. So, you may be shocked to learn that I am now a firm believer in the practice of peer editing in the classroom. Through this writing article, I have learned that, while performing the act of peer review, I develop more and more as a writer and an editor. After all, peer editing is producing a text about another's writing. If we go back to the peer review memo guidelines from the University of New Mexico's website, peer editing is a written text to answer questions about another's writing. I can say that by analyzing the process of peer editing with CHAT, I am a more effective peer editor. Not only that, but, by reflecting on the work of someone else, it has forced me to reflect even more on my own work. I believe that my activity in peer editing helps me and my peers improve our writing and gain confidence in the submission of articles.

I look forward to the support and especially appreciative comments and suggestions provided by my peers. I also realize that I will continue to receive feedback on my writing, and that I have no control over another's reception. But now, instead of being shocked by the comments of my peer editor, I will remind myself that it is one person's suggestion. Either I can accept it and see what I can do to correct it or leave it as it is.

As I write this closing paragraph, I can proudly say that I have met at least two of my three goals for this assignment. I have been able to (1) write the article and (2) complete it on time. My third goal is to provide all of us with a better understanding of the dos and don'ts of peer editing. Ultimately, if you are the writer or the editor, I urge you to think about my suggestions and to approach the paper with one goal in mind—to make it better! Now, whether or not I meet my third goal is up to you, my peer.

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Hayden Sanborn is a freshman at Illinois State University studying Business Administration. In his free time, he enjoys hanging out with his family and friends.