Interrogating the Interface — Peer Review Exercise

For most of us, writing is a difficult process that often yields disappointing results. We may have great ideas, but we struggle to get them out of our heads and onto the page. Or, we may generate a first draft with ease, only to find ourselves stuck when it comes to organization and revision. Whatever the case, I suspect we all have one thing in common: our writing could benefit from a second (or third, or fourth) perspective. Even the best writers rely on friends and editors to review their work before they declare it "finished."

Today, you will review three of your classmates' essays; in return, you will receive three new perspectives on your work. I'm sure that all of us have been through some terrible peer review exercises, and I know that some of you disdain peer review. For one day, I'm asking you to forget your past experiences with peer reviewing and approach this exercise with an open mind.

Preparing Your Essay for Review

Open your document in Microsoft Word and save it to the desktop with the following title: "Full Name Interrogating Essay – Review 1.doc". Then, repeat that process two additional times, changing the "1" at the end of the file name to a "2" and then a "3." When you're done, you should have three files on your desktop, waiting to be reviewed.

Reviewing Your Classmates' Essays

We will rotate around the room to your right, so you will end up sitting at three different computers to complete your reviews. When we rotate for the first time, open your classmate's document with the "1" at the end; you are now reviewer #1 for this document. (At the following computers, open the files with "2" and "3" at the end.) Spend approximately twenty minutes reviewing each essay. Follow these steps to complete the peer review exercise:

1. In Word, go to View > Toolbars > Reviewing and make sure "Reviewing" has a check mark next to it. You will see the Reviewing toolbar near the top of the screen. Click the "Track Changes" button. From this point on, anything you type or change in the document will be "tracked" so the original author can "accept" or "reject" your suggestions. Because you are the only reviewer of this version of the document, feel free to delete words or sentences, add new text, and rearrange words, sentences, or paragraphs. In other words, think of this document as if it were your own essay and you were being asked to turn it in at the end of class.
2. Read your classmate's entire document carefully *before* making any comments. It is important to be specific when you comment or ask questions about perceived strengths or weaknesses about someone else's document; the writer needs to have that information in order to know what to work on and what to carry over to future drafts. To make comments on a particular sentence or paragraph, highlight the text you want to comment on, then click the "New Comment" button and type your comment in the bubble that appears in the margin.
3. After you have read through the document, go back to the beginning and answer the following questions, making corrections and comments as you go:
   - Does the essay provide the right amount of technical information about the software program to explain what, exactly, the program does? Would someone who has never used this program be able to understand its functionality by reading this essay?

- How well does the essay describe the user interface of the software program? Does the essay explore the ways in which the interface influences or limits the user's interaction with it?
- Does the essay fairly assess the *affordances* and *constraints* of the software program? Does the author come across as biased, or too much of a "fan" of the program?
- Does the essay contain any screenshots of the software application? If not, are there places where it would be helpful to include a visual representation of the interface?
- Does the essay draw conclusions or make recommendations about whether or not readers should use the program? Are these recommendations supported by logic and evidence?
- What areas of the essay are the strongest right now? Which areas need the greatest amount of work? Mark these areas using the "comment" feature in Word.

4. If time permits, read through the essay again and comment on any sentence that "sounds funny." You don't have to take the time to revise these sentences (or even know exactly what is wrong with them); just call them to the writer's attention.

Revising Your Essay for Submission

At the end of the exercise, save all three reviewed files to your flash drive or network space. Outside of class, take the time to carefully read through your classmates' suggestions. (You may want to print out the three files so you can look at all three of them at once.) If you find one review particularly helpful, you can "accept" the changes made by that reviewer and then begin using that file as your new "master document," incorporating the suggestions from the other two files along the way.

Before you submit your final essay to the class website, make sure you have "cleared" all of the comments and edits in your document. To do this, turn on the Track Changes toolbar and either "accept" or "reject" all of changes in the document. Delete any "comments" in the margin by clicking on the "X" in the corner of the comment bubble.