

Helpful Hints for Effective Peer Reviewing

by [Seri Rudolph](#)

Coordinator of Scientific Writing
[The Writing Workshop](#), Bates College

One of the hardest things about getting started with peer reviewing is dealing with your reluctance to give negative feedback. After all, we're all socialized not to say mean things to people, and purely negative commentary usually doesn't end up helping the writer anyway. The purpose of this document is to help you find ways to get around this problem by

1) remembering to **give positive commentary** where a writer has done well, and by,

2) **turning negative feedback into productive feedback.**

1. **When reviewing, it is always important to note a paper's strengths, so that the author will not lose these in the process of revision.** Never assume an author will automatically know which parts of a paper work well... remember, they have been immersed in it too long to be objective. The [peer review form](#) asks you to list the three major strengths of the paper in section VIIc - but remember to do this throughout the paper too, writing marginal comments like "good paragraph" when you read a part that flows well.

2. **But how to deal with the parts that really do have problems? The key is to make sure the comments you write are substantive comments.** As we read, we all have reactions to problematic parts of a paper: "Huh? This is unclear"... "Gosh, this is disorganized!"... "What is this person trying to say here???" But these reactions are only the first step in the process of constructing helpful commentary, and writing down these initial reactions as comments is not usually useful to the writer.

How can you turn these unhelpful comments into helpful ones? You need to go a step beyond your initial reaction, and ask yourself *why* you are reacting negatively to that sentence or paragraph. Why, for instance, does a paragraph seem disorganized? Are several topics mixed together in one paragraph? Or is a single topic treated, but presented out of logical sequence, so that the reader is constantly grasping for information not yet given? Or does the writer seem to start with one idea or position, but then reverse him/herself later in the paragraph?

You can see that this process will take some work on your part, because you need to reflect on your reactions and read in a very involved way. Below are some examples of unhelpful "reaction-type" comments that have been turned into helpful comments by this process of reflection.

Example 1:

Unhelpful comment: "This section needs work."

Helpful Comment: Combine the related actions into a single sentence in Methods, eg, "Flies were assigned randomly to 5 treatment groups of 25, and were weighed, sexed, and marked with non-toxic paint before behavioral trials began"

Example 2:

Unhelpful comment: "Disorganized!"

Helpful Comment: "This section discusses both animal-rearing conditions and experimental methods, but the two are mixed together. Could you separate each into its own paragraph?"

Example 3:

Unhelpful comment: "How are these references relevant?"

Helpful Comment: "The background and references given in paragraph 2 don't seem directly relevant to our hypothesis. I think we need references on how light has been shown to affect flowering (in sunflower or any species), and less on other factors that promote or inhibit flowering."

Example 4:

Unhelpful comment: "Unclear."

Helpful Comment: "I'm not sure what your interpretation is after these two paragraphs: does the experiment show that mung beans cure cancer, or not? Which are we concluding? If the sample size is too small, we need to discuss that when we suggest future research, but that does not change our results here."