

# UNANNOUNCED PEER REVIEWS

Eric Burin (History)

## Strategy

On the day that term papers are due, my students bring their papers to class, fully expecting to turn in what they believe will be their final draft. Instead, I ask them to exchange their papers with another student. I then distribute a peer-review sheet. After going over the paper, the reviewer and the author discuss its strengths and weaknesses. The final drafts are due one week later. Students have consistently expressed positive attitudes towards Unannounced Peer Reviews.

## Benefits

- In refraining from announcing the exercise ahead of time, students come to class with their best possible work.
- Students see how their classmates approach the paper topic, benefit from a review of their own work, and interact with their colleagues in a direct, face-to-face way.
- Students learn how to assess constructive criticism, deciding for themselves which advice they will heed and which they will ignore.
- Students have nothing to lose: if they feel their paper is perfect, they can simply print another copy and turn it in.
- This method can be used repeatedly—some semesters I will do Unannounced Peer Reviews; in others, I won't. Even students who have taken a class with me previously can never know whether we will be doing peer reviews.
- There are ways to insure that the reviewer takes the assignment seriously: The peer-review sheets become a part of the reviewer's record; in fact, I inform students that, if they have a borderline grade at the end of the semester, their performance on the peer review will greatly determine which grade they will ultimately receive.

**\*\*SAMPLE\*\***

## **DIRECTIONS**

Exchange your paper with another student. Review each other's essay, using this sheet as a guide. You may mark on the student's paper as well. I strongly urge you to take this assignment seriously for two reasons:

- 1) *Helping a Fellow Student*: A good review always offers constructive criticism. You are not doing someone a favor by writing, "This is fine," when, in fact, the paper needs work. If you don't point out mistakes, I will—in the form of a low (or even failing) grade.
- 2) *Helping Yourself*: If you shirk this assignment, *your grade will suffer*. I will collect both the original essay and the peer review sheet, noting the quality of your critique. If you have a borderline grade at the end of the semester—and you'd be surprised at how many students find themselves in this situation—this assignment will play a significant role in determining whether you receive the higher or lower mark.

**Your Final Draft is due TUESDAY, MARCH 20, 2007 IN CLASS.**

*I will collect today's draft, the peer review, and your final draft.*

**OVER**

### **ARGUMENT**

1. Find the author's thesis statement. Underline it and copy it here. Is this a strong thesis statement? Does it tell the reader *exactly* what the author will argue? Explain why or why not.
2. How well does the paper support the thesis statement? Is the author even-handed when picking his or her sources, or does s/he seem to be selecting only information sources will support his or her argument (while ignoring contrary evidence)? Are you absolutely convinced that the author's claims are true? Explain, using examples from the essay.
3. Many groups joined the dispute over black labor in Union-occupied areas. Which groups does the author discuss well, and why? Which groups need to be examined further, and why? Also, to what extent does the author discuss how those disputes shaped the nature of freedom?

### **HISTORIOGRAPHY / SECONDARY SOURCES**

4. How extensive is the historiographic analysis? How could the author expand the historiographic scope to make his or her findings more relevant?

### **STRUCTURE**

5. Is the paper well-organized? At any point, did the author lose you? How could the essay be re-organized to present a more lucid argument?
6. Does *each paragraph* include a topic sentence that tells the reader what to expect in that paragraph? Find and label examples of strong and weak paragraphs. What makes these paragraphs work or fail?

### **GENERAL**

7. Put a "+" by three things you liked; put a "-" by three things you think had problems. Explain your decisions.
8. Put a "\*" by things you would like to hear more about.
9. Final comments and suggestions: