Working with a Writing Partner

Writing is very personal, so it takes trust and empathy to have the confidence to work with another person on your writing. Take a bit of time to get to know the person who will be your writing partner. You might plan to meet at the Coffee House and chat about things you’ve written before. Afterwards, or at another time, you should get together to work on your papers, either at the planning or revising stages. Below are tips on following the Honor Code, using a COACH approach, collaborative planning, and reviewing a draft.

Following the Honor Code

In either planning or reviewing a draft, you must follow the provisions of the Rice University Honor Code as those are applied by your professors. In most cases, faculty require that the person who turns in the paper is responsible for the specific words of the paper. The writing partner is responsible for asking the other person about his or her intentions, meanings, and so on, but the writing partner cannot say, “Right here you should put in a sentence that says, ‘specific subject specific verb phrase’.”

Using a COACH Approach

In order to make your partnership positive and productive, you must focus on what you like about your partner’s work as well as the aspects that can be improved. Try to sequence your responses to a draft in the following COACH order:

Commend you surely liked some things, even the way that the paper meets the requirements of the assignment. Say so.

Observe Look closely to see whether the writer has fulfilled his or her purpose, followed the assignment’s requirements, and justified the argument with solid evidence and explanation. Note whether each paragraph addresses a single point about a topic. Look for transitions. You may have to read the draft two or three times to be ready to respond.

Appraise Put wavy lines under parts that didn’t work well; underline things you liked.

Critique Using the assignment requirements and your own observations, point out those aspects of the paper that might meet the requirements better if they were revised. Explain what you saw or felt descriptively, not evaluatively. Say, “Here’s where I felt that I needed to know more” instead of “Don’t you know enough to fill this out better?”

Help Suggest steps that could be used in revision (for example, “expand the discussion of the causes in part two” or “add a definition of “photosensitivity”).

In general, treat your partner the way you want to be treated.

Collaborative Planning
You can draft more efficiently if you have a clear plan for your paper. Getting together with your writing partner to discuss the plans for your papers can make decisions much easier when you sit down to write. Go over the plan for one person at a time.

Here are ten questions you should ask one another:

1. What exactly does the assignment call for? Go over the instructions so that you’re both familiar with the instructor’s requirements.

2. What’s the specific issue, question, or conflict that you want to respond to in the paper?

3. Why is this an important issue, question, or conflict?

4. What’s your purpose in addressing this issue, question, or conflict? What are you trying to show your readers about it?

5. If it is a problem, will you simply analyze the problem or give a solution to it?

6. What evidence do you have to support your purpose in writing?

7. What other evidence might you still track down that would improve your argument?

8. What evidence might rival your claims? What do you need to discount? Especially think about what the reader might know that would lead to a different perspective.

9. How can you organize your evidence to accomplish your purpose? What questions will you answer first? Which will you answer later? Would there be any benefits to a different sequence, given the readers for your paper?

10. What aspect of yourself do you want to demonstrate most? How do you want to “come across”? Do you want to sound like a person who takes all sides of a question into account? As a complaining citizen? As a researcher who has consulted many sources? What?

**Reviewing a Draft**

A writing partner should focus on the “big stuff” first. Ask the questions below before making any comments on grammar or spelling. Try to follow the COACH approach, commending all the things the writer has done well before appraising the weaknesses and suggesting revisions. Here are eight questions to ask about the big stuff:

1. What major point came across? Why does the paper say this point is important?
2. What was the writer’s purpose in writing? What issue, question, or conflict was he or she addressing? How did you think the writer wanted you to react?

3. How is the major point broken down into subpoints in the argument? What divisions did you see in the paper? It’s important to find out whether the partner who read the paper recognized the divisions the writer intended.

4. What evidence seemed strongest? When you tried to believe everything the writer said, were you convinced?

5. What evidence seemed weakest? If you tried to doubt everything the writer said, would you still have been convinced, or would you have rejected the major claim? What else could the writer have done to reinforce his points?

6. What kind of impression did the writer make on you? Did he or she sound like a voice shouting from the mountain top? Jim Carey exaggerating? Bill Murray being ironic? A timid person trying not to be noticed? A really smart student?

7. Where were the places you got lost or needed more explanation?

8. What two things could the writer do to make this a paper that would fit the assignment better?