Group work insights
Chris Potts, Writing 1, Spring 2003
May 14

Some insights for peer readers

(1) Before criticizing, establish that you know what the paper’s position is and how the author defends that position.

(2) Your job is to improve the author’s argument. Only in extreme cases (where the author’s position is outlandish) should you try to radically alter the author’s position.

(3) At the rough draft stage, the most useful criticism is general enough that it mentions few if any specific words or phrases in the text. (We saw an exception: it was strange that the author of the letter on Greek life at UCSC mentioned MTV in a parenthetical.)

(4) It is usually worthwhile to press the author for a solution to whatever problem the paper raises. If the paper offers a solution, commend the author for thoroughness and then work together to try to make that part of the paper stronger.

Some insights for authors

(5) Reveal enough about yourself to establish that you have the expertise to register thoughts and opinions on the topic.

(6) But don’t reveal too much. It only provides your critics with material for *ad hominem* attacks.

(7) Never lose sight of Pullum’s Golden Rule #5:

   “Remember that [as an author] you’re an advocate, not the defendant. […] You’re […] a public defender. These ideas might have been unfairly dismissed without a trial. No matter what the ultimate verdict, you will have served the court of scholarly opinion if you defend them effectively.”

   (adapted from [http://ling.ucsc.edu/~pullum/locker/goldenrules.html](http://ling.ucsc.edu/~pullum/locker/goldenrules.html))

The goal of group work is to improve your paper. It’s not about improving you. As an author, do your best to put yourself in a position where you can talk with cool objectivity about your paper’s strengths and weaknesses. (As a peer reader, remember how hard this can be to do.)

Two of the insights that Chris gleaned

(8) A peer group will be most successful if its members know and care about each of the topics discussed in that group.

(9) The best peer-group activities are those that involve an informal, verbal exchange of ideas.

(10) Some conversation-starting topics might be useful for me to suggest.