

Using Peer Assessment to Improve
Student Writing: the Case of
LIS 2000 Understanding Information

Christinger Tomer
School of Information Sciences
June 1, 2015

For Openers

Peer assessment works. It helped improve the quality of writing in *LIS 2000 Understanding Information* significantly.

And a confession: I once wrote a paper that, according to the Flesch-Kincaid readability scale, was as clear and easy to read as an insurance policy.

Background

- MLIS degree program attracts mainly students with degrees in the humanities, social sciences, and education. In the last decade, the average age of the students in the program has dropped from 30 to 25 years.
- LIS 2000 Understanding Information is a core requirement of the program. It represents an effort to introduce students to the major issues that define librarianship and archival practice.

More about LIS 2000

- Enrollments have fluctuated from 75-200 students. In 2014, a Pitt Online section with an enrollment of 28 students was offered for the first time. The students in the Pitt Online section used SWORD Peer Assessment.
- Assignments focus on the writing of a mix of brief and longer essays on assigned topics, with the number and length of the essays varying as a function of enrollment and levels of support.

Paper Topic

The purpose of this assignment is to analyze open information and knowledge that provided for the good of the general public. In this paper, use the book by Peter Suber to consider the relationship open information has to the public good.

- Address these importance considerations in your essay:
- What does “open access” mean?
- What does it mean when an institution provides “open information”?
- In your paper, you might also consider copyright issues, the economics of open access, and/or the future for open access.

SWoRD Assessment

There are four steps to the assessment of your Reflection Paper. See the Schedule for the exact due dates. These are hard deadlines that must be met in order to complete the peer review process and receive full credit for the assignment.

- Create a SWoRD account (see SWoRD in the course navigation menu).
- Before the due date, upload your paper (without your name or identifying info) to the SWoRD peer assessment program.
- After the due date, SWoRD will automatically assign three student papers for you to review through an anonymous process. Read and provide feedback to three other students in the course. See [Providing Constructive Feedback to Your Peers](#) for guidelines on providing specific, constructive, and supportive feedback to you peers.
- Use the feedback from others to revise your paper and submit your final document (with name and title page) to the instructors in the “Assignments” area of the course navigation menu.

Grading Rubric

Reflection Paper Grading Rubric			
Use the following criteria to develop your reflection paper and to provide peer feedback to your classmates.			
Written Preparation	Comments	Possible points	Your points
Organized with a thesis statement, introduction, body and conclusion. Identified and introduced areas of interest.		4	
Demonstrated comprehension, synthesis of information, and critical analysis. Discussed key issues, research, and challenges.		4	
Incorporated 3 distinct Peer Reviewed journal articles published ≥ 2010 to support key points; Formatted and properly used citations (Chicago author/date).		4	
Provided constructive and specific feedback to peers; Posted and discussed abstracts in Discussion Board.		3	
Total		15 points	

Writing Issues

Quality of student writing has varied substantially over the years.

In 2011, the general quality of student writing was characterized by structural incoherence, problems with grammar and syntax, and spelling errors.

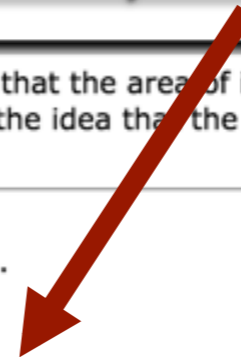
In 2012, a student group almost identical in its demographics exhibited relatively few of these problems.

In 2013, although the problems were not as widespread as they had been two years earlier, a significant number of the essays presented exhibited structural and grammatical problems.

Typical Assessments, Part 1

This review is largely positive, but it makes an important criticism in assessing the draft's success in synthesizing key topics.

Reviewer	
Dimension	
Introduction	<p>Introduction clearly addresses the prompt of OA and lets us know that the area of interest is going to be the stakeholders in OA. This paragraph defines the range of stakeholders, and introduces the idea that the relationship between stakeholders in OA is complex - the main idea and argument of the paper.</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(5): Glad it is easy to identify what I was trying to convey in my thesis.</p>
Synthesis	<p>You did an excellent job arguing the points you set out in your introduction. However, I felt your paper was hugely lacking in examples - and I think this was because you didn't bring in outside sources other than Suber. your paper would benefit so much if you would look up a few outside criticisms and viewpoints to either support or counter the claims and analysis you already make within your paper.</p> <hr/> <p>Can you dig a bit deeper? I felt like your paper maybe only scratched the surface of green/gold OA and the stakeholders. Again, looking up other sources will make this easier to do! You're so close!</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(5): Agree!</p>
Conclusion	<p>I think your conclusion did a good job of driving home the point that OA is, in the end, an altruistic endeavor - it makes everyone's lives easier. I think your final concluding sentence opened a whole new idea that made me want to read more, but cut off a little suddenly. Maybe you could just switch the arrangement of the last two sentences to let it seem a little more closed?</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(5): I like this thought. I will do my best to incorporate it into my paper.</p>
References	<p>You did not include any citations at the end or any peer-reviewed journals. I could only find one in-text citation - Peter Suber's book - which led me to believe you did not consult any other peer-reviewed sources. I would be sure to revisit databases and find other sources to include to flesh out your arguments more for your final draft!! Also be sure, even when you have an in-text citation, to include the end citation with a works cited page at the end of your paper.</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(5): Agreed. I had not bothered to incorporate sources in the first draft. I will be sure to do that for the final version.</p>



Typical Assessments, Part 2

This second evaluation is more concise and more critical. The criticisms themselves and the outwardly receptive responses of the authors are representative of the body of comments and responses, including the variability of scoring. In this instance, the third reviewer was far more critical and probably had a much greater impact on the quality of the final draft.

Reviewer	
Dimension	
Introduction	<p>The paper needs a thesis. The paper does a very good job at introducing areas of interest.</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(4): I will clarify my thesis based.</p>
Synthesis	<p>The paper shows a clear understanding of key concepts.</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(3): OK</p>
Conclusion	<p>There needs to be a clear conclusion that summarizes the argument. It could talk about the future of oa.</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(4): Good thought.</p>
References	<p>There needs to be three peer review articles.</p> <hr/> <p>Backevaluation(5): Will work these in for final version.</p>

Introduction	Text's argument	Writing Conventions	Transitions	Rhetorical strategies	Conclusion	References
5	5	6	6	5	5	1
6	6	6	7	6	6	1
1	7	7	7	4	1	1

Results

- The overall quality of writing was improved, at least to the extent that the grades on average higher and the obvious problems fewer. Specifically, drafts in the middle and lower qualitative rungs were probably most improved by the peer assessment process; in other words, fewer unacceptable and obviously deficient papers were submitted as final drafts. The handiwork of the more skillful writers in the class seemed the least affected.
- It's also worth noting that the students who used the peer assessment system treated each other well, in the sense that criticisms were generally even-handed and phrased in ways that suggested concern for the author's feelings. That's not always going to be the case. Whatever system is in place, it should be carefully monitored throughout the peer assessment process.

Some Other Recommendations

- Careful attention to the documentation and process of setting up and configuring accounts
- Populating assessment groups with more knowledgeable writers
- Using a text analysis engine as a means of objectively categorizing drafts (outside of the peer assessment process itself), e.g., Flesch–Kincaid Readability Tests, which are designed to indicate how difficult a reading passage in English is to understand.
- I'm going to use WebPA, a system developed at Loughborough and under continuing development by a special interest group. The URL is: <http://webpaproject.lboro.ac.uk/>. Another option is STEAM, at <http://peereval.okstate.edu/beta/WelcometoSteam.html>.