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A Peer-Review Teaching Tool for Graduate Term Papers

Paul Beier¹

I developed a writing exercise in which students act as peer-reviewers for each others' term papers. The students are provided with detailed instructions on how to conduct a review, and a copy of the rubric that the instructor will use to grade their peer review. Each student writes 2 formal peer reviews. The instructor acts in the role of an Associate Editor at a journal or a Program Officer at a funding agency, and provides a third review. The first draft is not graded – but the peer reviews are graded to a high standard and carry a combined point value 2/3 that of the final paper. The grade on the revised paper derives 10% from a formal point-by-point response letter and 90% from how well the author addressed each comment from the 3 reviewers (2 peers and instructor). The final grading is easy for the instructor, and most students get the rewarding experience of a well-deserved good grade for a paper that benefited from the peer review process. This tool has been used in 2 graduate classes at NAU, in conjunction with both traditional term papers and research proposals. Several students felt the exercise was their most valuable coursework experience at NAU. Instructors feel that the approach produces better papers. It was less successful in a senior-level undergraduate class. The grading burden on the instructor is shifted to the 9th and 10th week of the semester (reducing the end-semester crunch) and has trivial impact on total grading effort.

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