

Devil's Advocate Peer Review Activity

Contributed by Mike Palmquist

Goals: To help students conduct a peer review that challenges the writer's argument, key points, and supporting evidence.

This activity is best carried out in a Chat program, such as the Chat rooms on Writing@CSU (<http://writing.colostate.edu/cfchat>) or the Chat program in Syllabase. It can also be conducted face-to-face. Be sure, however, to appoint a recorder for each exchange if you are doing this activity in a face-to-face setting, since inexperienced writers tend to (1) forget criticisms of their essays, particularly those they disagree with, and (2) think that by explaining the problem to a reviewer they've solved it (even if they haven't done anything to change their document).

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Today, you will use our chat room to present your original line of argument to a partner and get feedback from him or her. However, the feedback you get (and give) will be a bit out of the ordinary. You and your partner will take turns playing devil's advocate, that is, you'll try to think up reasonable alternatives to your partner's line of argument.

To complete the exercise, you will need to find a partner. Read the instructions below and then begin the session. Half-way through the period, we will switch roles and comment on the "devil's" line of argument. At the end of class, you will save the log of your conversation and send it to me via email.

The Role of Devil's Advocate

A person playing devil's advocate can quickly become a nuisance by constantly disagreeing with what you say. While you wouldn't want to put up with this type of person for any extended period of time, responding to such an antagonist while discussing an argument you have written can often produce new and different insights for you. In addition to opening your eyes to new ideas and viewpoints, carrying on a discussion with a devil's advocate forces you to do your best at explaining and defending your position. In reviewing the log produced by the chat room after such a discussion, you may find that you have stated your position much better while discussing it than you had in what you had actually written.

Playing the role of devil's advocate can be a lot of fun, and is really quite easy. In general, you want to challenge the assertions made by the writer. The writer will then have to elaborate the point, by presenting arguments and evidence to support the stated view. When the writer begins to present solutions to the problem, you would want to propose alternate solutions (possibly far-fetched ones) so that the writer will have to argue why the proposed solution is better than the ones you offer. You may also propose a solution that the writer had not considered before, and which may be quite helpful to the goals of the paper. One important point to remember: When the writer has done a good job of stating a point, concede the argument and move on to another topic.

Arguing a point to a stalemate will not be helpful to the writer. Below are some sample exchanges between a writer and a devil's advocate.

Writer: In my paper, I say that the administration needs to do something about the quality of student's lives on campus.

Devil: I don't think it's the job of the administration to make improvements in the quality of life for the students on campus. What makes you think that the administration can do anything about it? [State an opposing viewpoint, i.e., it's up to the students, not the administration.]

Writer: Well, I think that part of the reason the quality is so bad in the first place is because the administration places so much emphasis on academics, and not enough on the other aspects of a student's life. I think the administration can help balance these things out, by emphasizing the other aspects as well.

Devil: The students come here for academic training--that's what the school is here for. If they want to develop other interests, I would say it is up to the individual students to do this for themselves. [Propose alternate solutions: i.e., The solution is not to have the administration de-emphasize its role, but instead, the students should take charge of their lives and develop other areas on their own.]

Writer: Well that might be true. But if the students are forced to spend so much time and energy on their studies, they don't have any spare time in which to pursue their other interests.

Devil: OK, I'll give you that small point! (Concede to writer) Tell me what you think would improve the quality of life on campus. (Move on)

Writer: Well, first I say that one problem students have is lack of spare time. As a way of addressing this smaller problem, I suggest that the Administration provide more activities on campus, so that it will be easy and quick for students to get to an event. This will also address a problem often cited by students--they can't "get" anywhere to do anything because they don't have transportation.

Devil: Oh come on. I don't think that is a valid complaint for students to make. After all, there are buses or they could catch a ride with someone who does have a car. (Challenge assertions)

Writer: That may work for some of them, some of the time, but what about the others? I contend that if you consider the lack of time problem for some students along with the transportation problem for some students, you will see that the end product is still a problem. And this problem can be eased, if not solved, by the administration offering more events of interest to the students on campus.

Devil: OK, you win. I'll admit that more events on campus would contribute to an overall improvement in the quality of life on campus. (Concede to writer) But that seems like a rather small effort on the part of the administration. What else do you propose they do? (Move on)

There are, of course, many other roles you may wish to try. For example, you might take the role of a Doubting Thomas--someone who has trouble believing anything the writer has to say. Such a person would constantly demand more proof, more evidence, more examples and more explanations of the main points, before ever being persuaded by what the writer has to say. Or you could take on the role of a child, or some average Joe off the street. When playing this role, you would act as though you just simply could not understand what the writer is saying, repeatedly asking for clarifications and further explanations. Think of a child who constantly asks "Why?", "How?", etc.