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Stylizing Peer Feedback through Playful Shells

Cover Page Footnote

I am indebted to Professor Tom Deans (University of Connecticut) for introducing me to stylistic study in his graduate seminar, and I must also thank Professor Ellen Litman (University of Connecticut) for introducing me to the hermit crab essay genre in her creative writing workshop. This teaching tip article would not be possible without their support and encouragement.

Stylizing Peer Feedback Through Playful Shells

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When peer review is guided by traditional rubrics, checklists, or worksheets, not only is the content of student peer feedback unsophisticated (Grimm, 1986; Holt, 1992; Nilson, 2003), but its writing oftentimes lacks style: it is, at best, plain and transparent, or, at worst, monotonous and voiceless. In this teaching tip, I introduce a stylized form of peer feedback: the hermit crab review. The hermit crab review refers to peer feedback in which students choose a particular form to contain their comments, a form that helps them frame and curate their peer response.

The hermit crab essay, first introduced by Miller and Paola (2019), is a playful genre where the writer (hermit crab) uses an unusual form (shell) to contain their content (body); the shell can be any kind of writing: “a ‘to-do’ list, . . . a field guide, or a recipe” (Miller, 2015, para. 1). The hermit crab essay is ideal for “material that seems born without its own carapace—material that is soft, exposed, and tender, and must look elsewhere to find the form that will best contain it” (Miller & Paola, 2019, pp. 127–128). One such “carapace-less” writing, I suggest, is student peer feedback, the content of which can be generated and enhanced by various forms.

In this teaching tip, I share a hermit crab review activity that walks students through moving their peer feedback into the shell of a genre with which many students are familiar: Amazon customer reviews. The activity can make peer review more fun and more accessible: students, even when

they are not proficient in providing feedback, can use the playful form to create “a ‘shared space’ between reader and writer” (Miller, 2015, para. 14), or between reviewee and reviewer, where both sides can relate and engage.

Context

The activity teaches students to move their peer feedback into a playful shell and thus works best *after* students have some comments on their peers’ work ready to share.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

1. Students will develop fresh perspectives on peer review.
2. Students will experiment with alternate forms of feedback.
3. Students will engage in peer review as a playful writing practice.

Course Format

The activity can take place in any course format where in-class discussion can happen and where worksheets can be distributed.

Teacher Preparation

1. Double-check that students have written some comments on their peers’ work, comments that are guided by whatever prompt you usually use. The more comments, the better.
2. Create a worksheet or “playsheet” to walk students through writing their hermit crab review. See the Appendix for a sample playsheet for teaching the shell of the Amazon customer review.

Estimated Time

The activity has three parts: theory (20 minutes), theory to practice (30 minutes), and practice (30 minutes, or depending on whether students complete their hermit crab review in class or not). You may decide how much time to spend on each part; the time allotted will depend on your teaching style as well as the writing habits and academic levels of your students.

Procedure

1. Theory: Introduce the hermit crab review genre and articulate the goal of learning this playful form of peer review.
2. Theory to practice: Have students discuss the shell of an Amazon customer review using the sample playsheet, which helps identify the conventions of an Amazon customer review and provides sample hermit crab reviews.
3. Practice (in class or at home): Have students turn (move) their peer feedback (body) into a list of Amazon customer reviews (a new shell).
 - a. How many customer reviews students should write depends on how many aspects of the writing reviewed you want them to address.
 - b. You are encouraged to have students create at least one customer review in class; students may not have questions until they begin writing.
 - c. After the activity, you may have students reflect on writing and reading the hermit crab review:
 - i. Have peer reviewers write a process note where they answer questions like “How did the shell frame, curate, organize, generate, or enhance your feedback?”
 - ii. Have peer reviewees, after they read the hermit crab review, add a comment where they answer questions like “What can (can’t) the shelled feedback do that shell-less feedback can’t (can)?”

Caveats and Alternatives

1. Hermit crab-style writing may be new to you or your students. To learn more about it, you may read the essay “The Shared Space Between Reader and Writer: A Case Study” by Miller (2015) or the textbook *Tell It Slant: Creating, Refining, and Publishing Creative Nonfiction* by Miller and Paola (2019; see pp. 127–130 for the hermit crab essay). You may also use these texts when introducing the genre in class.

2. The Amazon customer review is not the only shell that can contain peer response. Depending on the nature of the writing assignment to be peer reviewed, you may also consider the shell of a newspaper column or a sports commentary. You may also assign a multimodal hermit crab review project. For example, students can record audio peer feedback in the shell of a podcast or a sportscast.

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Appendix

Peer Review Worksheet

Hermit Crab Review Playsheet

Since you’ve already written some comments on your peer’s work, you (hermit crab) will, through this playsheet, learn how to move your feedback (body) into a new home (shell). Your new home is the Amazon customer review shell!

1. Before you pack up, let’s study the *design* of this new home. Visit [amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com), view some customer reviews (Don’t shop in class, please!), and discuss the components of an Amazon customer review:

Form	Function
Public name of the reviewer (with a picture)	
Overall star rating	
Review headline	
Review text (with photos or videos)	
[How many] people found this helpful	

2. To facilitate the move-in, divide your feedback into [TBD] aspects: Each customer review addresses one particular aspect. See the two samples below—one addresses punctuation, and the other, story development.
3. Ready? Let the move-in begin! “Begin writing [your feedback] *suggested by the form*” (Miller & Paola, 2019, p. 134; emphasis original). Play with different tones, voices, and personas in different reviews!

Sample Hermit Crab Reviews

PunctuationPolice

☆☆☆ Disappointed

I like this essay, don't get me wrong, but the punctuation police in me just shouted, beware of misplaced punctuation marks! I was distracted by unnecessary dashes in the fifth paragraph. Some commas were omitted too, probably for stylistic reasons. I like the typographical play, but the author must not play with punctuation marks to the point where clarity is compromised.

7,250 people found this helpful

Suspensestorylover

☆☆☆☆☆ When a story delivered more than required

Ok, this might be an unpopular opinion, but EVERYONE has to read this! The way she created suspense in the beginning and delayed the surprising ending, without making readers bored, just WOW! She fulfilled all the requirements, but the story's just so intriguing and nerve-wracking that if I could give more than five stars, I absolutely would! Highly recommended!

27 people found this helpful