



## SUBVERTING THE RED PEN

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The color red resides at the lowest frequency of the light discernible by the human eye. Oddly enough, the color red is an imperative color, a color that says “stop what you are doing, or there will be dire consequences.”

A pen is an apparatus used for applying ink to a surface.

When red ink is inserted into a pen, it can be mistaken for an instrument of pedagogical discipline. As students, we see this color liberally slathered all over our essays, reminding us of our mistakes, of our grammatical shortcomings. When I came to Evergreen, I was all too familiar with the red pen, with that symbolic representation of my impending failure.

But I was not familiar with the Evergreen jargon. Everywhere I looked there were words like “evaluations,” “covenants,” “seminar,” and after I wrote my first essay, instead of handing it in to my red-pen-wielding teacher, I was told to attend something called a “Peer Review Workshop.” I didn’t know what that was. I knew it concerned having my classmates ready my writing, and I was terrified. Terrified because I was comfortable with the red pen. I was used to authority figures telling me what I was doing wrong. I understood the language of institutional hierarchy. I was not used to being in control of my own writing process. I quickly came to understand that writing is communication, which has nothing to do with red ink or just fulfilling an assignment.

I went to my first Peer Review Workshop and passed out copies of my paper with a trembling hand. I noticed everybody’s hands were trembling. And I noticed there was not a red pen in sight.

My peers and I read our papers aloud, and the comments we gave and received could not have been embodied by a judicious spattering of red ink. Instead, people made comments such as, “I’m not sure what you mean here,” or, “It seems you are saying this, when you might mean that.” I had never encountered thoughtful, productive critique before. No one mentioned my ambiguous usage of the semicolon, my disagreeing pronouns, or my use of the Oxford comma. Instead, my peers engaged my ideas and critiques by ability to communicate. After my first Peer Review Workshop, I realized what I knew all along: writing isn’t just a means to fulfill an assignment, but is actually a means to communicate ideas. Peer Review Workshop are conversations about those ideas and whether they are being communicated effectively.

I also realized that Peer Review is different from a traditional institution's red-ink pedagogy because it uses conversation and constructive feedback. Constructive feedback ranges from challenging the writer's ideas to providing positive reinforcement for less confident writers. In successful Peer Review spaces for dialogue are made possible.

No red pen can replace conversation—writing can't be critiqued through something as inert and stoic as a slash of red ink. Peer Review Workshops are spaces to engage with other writers, places to subvert the red pen mentality and upset the hierarchy of institutional learning, and most importantly, places to make sure you're saying whatever it is you want to say.