TWO TYPES OF PEER REVIEW EXERCISES:

(1) Structured exercises: Students are provided with a handout that guides them through the peer review process.

(2) Unstructured exercises: Students are asked to write comments on whatever aspects of their partner’s paper need the most work.

OUR QUESTION:
Which type of exercise provides students with more useful feedback?

METHODOLOGY:
1) Students completed a structured exercise:

   Write one to two pages of comments about your partner's draft. Focus on whatever you think is most important and helpful. This means you can write about, e.g., your partner’s sentence-level mechanics, the plausibility of his/her primary arguments, the organization of the draft, or perhaps even the draft’s formatting (if this is actually helpful). If the draft is short and primitive, you may also make suggestions about how it should progress and grow. In short, in this exercise, you have complete control over how you review the draft.

2) Students completed an unstructured exercise:

3) Students filled out a 16 question survey, which asked students to evaluate each exercise overall as well as along a number of different dimensions.

SELECTED COMPARATIVE RESULTS:

FEEDBACK ABOUT THE STRUCTURED EXERCISE:
Did you find the handout’s guidance helpful?
90.3% said “yes.” (n=31)

Did you find the handout overly constraining?
29.0% said “yes.” (n=31)

FEEDBACK ABOUT THE UNSTRUCTURED EXERCISE:
Did you find it difficult to complete the exercise?
10.0% said “yes.” (n=30)

Did you feel like you had too much freedom to focus on the topics of your choosing?
20.0% said “yes.” (n=30)

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE DATA:

• Ratings of overall helpfulness were nearly identical for each exercise.

• Most students reported that the structured exercise prompted more useful feedback about the organization of their paper.

• But there was little consensus about which exercise provided more useful feedback about sentence-level writing and philosophical content.

• A sizeable percentage of students reported that the structured exercise was too structured.

• Nonetheless, students overwhelmingly reported that the guidance provided by the structured exercise’s handout was helpful.

• A sizeable percentage of students reported that the unstructured exercise had too little structure.

• In light of these results, it seems to us that both types of peer review exercises have a place in the classroom; neither is clearly preferable to the other.