



# CAN PEER REVIEW HELP JOHNNY WRITE BETTER?

Responding to and commenting on student writing consumes a major portion of our time as educators. Most teachers estimate that it takes 20 to 40 minutes to comment on an individual student's paper. Multiply those 20 to 40 minutes by 20 or more students per class, times one or more papers in a semester, and it adds up to, well . . . an enormous amount of time!<sup>1</sup> With so much time and energy devoted to a single activity, why doesn't Johnny write better?

The answer to this question may lay with the way teachers handle writing assignments.<sup>2</sup> Historically, teachers gave a writing assignment with some parameters. They would require a draft so they could comment and return it to the student for revision. As far back as we can trace student papers, we see teachers attempting to squeeze their reactions into a few pithy phrases, to roll all the paper's strengths and weaknesses into one tidy ball for the student's edification.<sup>3</sup> Almost every teacher who has ever assigned a paper has struggled to get students to write better.

As teachers, we comment on our students' writing because we want to help them successfully communicate their ideas. We want to raise questions, from a reader's point of view, that may not have occurred to the writer.<sup>4</sup> We want to tell the student whether the intended meaning has been adequately communicated and, if not, what questions or discrepancies a perceptive reader will observe. In essence, we want to help our students become better readers of their own work, and hence, better writers.

Yet despite the importance of teacher commentary, students apparently aren't becoming better writers.<sup>5</sup> They rarely make good use of comments as they revise. It seems that little real revision is going on.

Developing writers must learn to revise their writing because it is an important component of the composing process. In order to revise, students must improve their writing skills, which will enable them to reflect on their ideas and develop and evaluate criteria.<sup>6</sup> This is where peer review can be helpful.

Peer review is a process in which students read and comment on each other's work as a way to improve their own writing, as well as that of their peers. Critiquing their classmates' work can help students better diagnose their own writing problems.

Writing is a key factor in students' academic development; it is the primary means by which students transform from passive recipients of knowledge to active participants in their own education.<sup>7</sup> Instructors who teach writing (in any discipline) should create opportunities for students to read and to respond to one another's writing. Such opportunities for peer review can help students improve their reading and writing, as well as learn how to collaborate effectively. However, conducting effective peer reviews requires careful planning by teachers.

## Tackling the Problem of Vague Comments

"I liked your story about the horse, but I think you should add a little more detail and maybe change the last two sentences." Sound familiar? This student response to a peer's draft is all too typical of the way untrained students offer feedback. Many teachers cringe when they hear the words "peer review" because they find it difficult getting students to respond effectively to one another's writing.<sup>8</sup> The quality of students' comments about their classmates' essays—usually vague at best—is often misleading, even incorrect. Even students complain that the comments are not helpful. Vague suggestions

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BY SUSAN M. TAYLOR

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rarely translate into effective revisions.<sup>9</sup>

There are several possible explanations for vague comments. First, many students feel uncomfortable pronouncing judgment on another person's paper.<sup>10</sup> Some students, insecure about their own writing, feel unqualified to critique another's work. A blandly positive response, such as "I liked your story . . ." allows students to avoid a socially uncomfortable situation. It also helps to create an environment of mutual support.

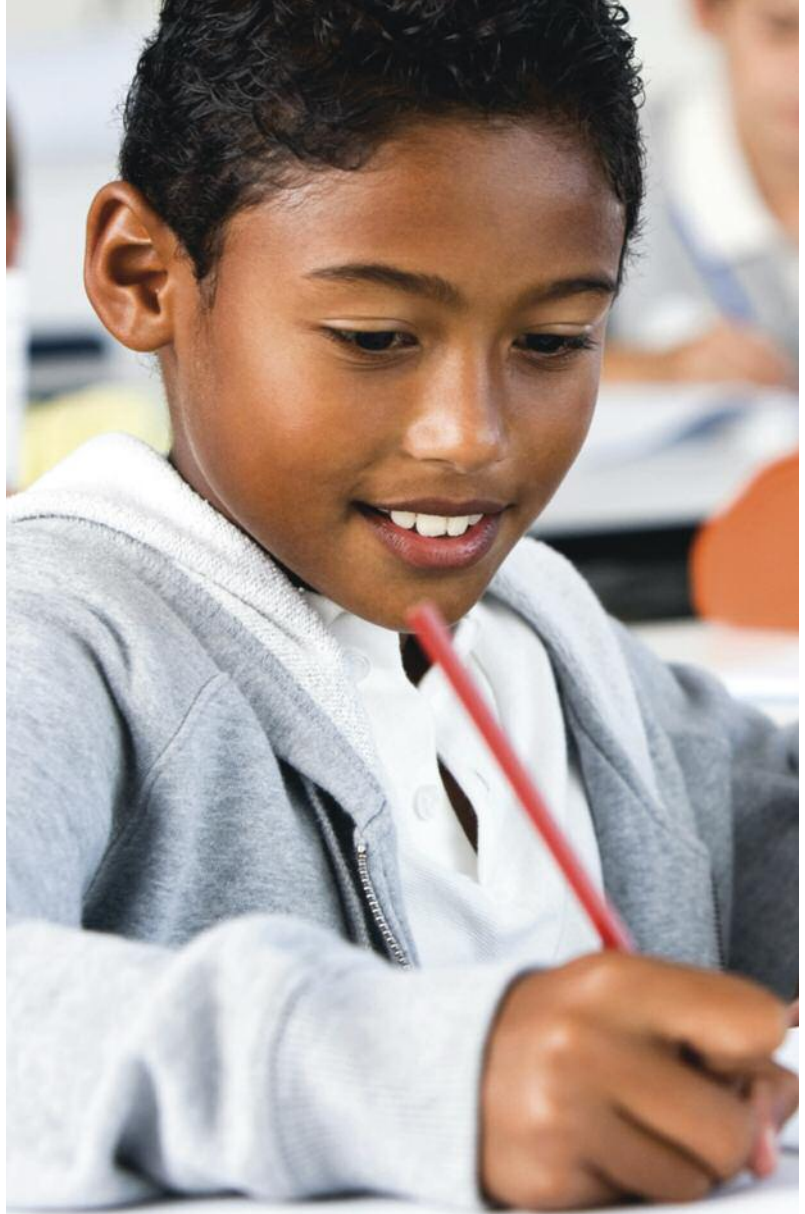
Second, literature suggests that some students are easily biased, even dishonest, in giving feedback because of friendships, gender, race, interpersonal relationships, and/or personal preferences.<sup>11</sup> In face-to-face reviews, students frequently express anxiety about sharing their comments for fear of being wrong or of being rejected by peers. Most students find it extremely difficult to give negative feedback to their classmates.

A third area of concern with peer review is the uneven quality of feedback.<sup>12</sup> Students with better writing skills are more adept at evaluating peers' writing. Some students fail to read the essays conscientiously. Some writers express the feeling that their peers are not as strong academically, and therefore discount their comments.<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, students often fail to take their peers' feedback seriously. They know that only the teacher can assign a grade to the work; therefore, they are often less concerned about their peers' comments than about their teacher's evaluation. However, grades do not traditionally reward effort but rather what effort produces. It is foolish for any writer not to take peer comments seriously, for it may cost the writer an opportunity to obtain constructive criticism. This may result in an inferior final version of the paper and a lower-than-anticipated grade.

Fourth, students do not know how to use the feedback to revise their writing.<sup>14</sup> Students can be vain about their writing, thinking every word is golden. They think, *How could I possibly improve such a great paper?* But everyone can strengthen his or her skills. As editors, students have a valuable opportunity to learn something valuable: how to express tactful and compassionate honesty, which will serve them throughout their lives. As writers, students learn what constructive criticism is and how it can improve writing.

Finally, and arguably most important, students are rarely given clear guidance. A common misstep many teachers make in approaching peer review is to assume that students already have the skills necessary to make insightful, valuable comments, and that incorporating peer review simply amounts to asking students to read and to respond to one another's writing.<sup>15</sup> Students may or may not know how to comment constructively. Most are relatively new at scrutinizing others' writing. So teachers must develop and implement a clear list of focal points for the peer reviewer to critique. This way, the



writer knows exactly what to improve based upon the reviewer's comments.

I have found that students tend to overvalue their peers' weak arguments and sloppy style. But when the teacher sets clear parameters for review, students learn to focus on specific aspects of the paper. Learning a subject involves judging arguments as well as crafting them. Peer review allows students to criticize the strength of a variety of arguments.

### Strategies for Using Peer Review

Two peer-review strategies have proved quite successful in my classes: PQP and Drafting. PQP is the acronym for "praise, question, polish."<sup>16</sup> This is a small-group organizational peer-review technique that requires the members (at least two, but no more than five) to take turns reading their drafts aloud as the other students follow along with their copies. This oral reading helps writers hear how well the paper flows and to independently identify possible changes. The responders then react to the piece by writing comments on their PQP form.<sup>17</sup>

*Praise: What is good about the writing? Why is it good?*

**Question:** *As a reader, what do you not understand? What would you like clarified?*

**Polish:** *What specific suggestions for improvement can you make?*

A second approach I call “drafting” is where the class establishes small groups of three. When a draft is due, students bring two copies of their manuscripts along with the original to the group. Each student in the group reads all the essays produced by that group, and comments both in the margins and at the end of each paper. During the next class period, they share comments and reactions.

During peer-review sessions, the teacher should maintain a “hands-off” approach while monitoring the groups to ensure that they stay focused on the task at hand. After the session, the teacher can evaluate and reward the reviewers’ participation. The key to success is the teacher’s preparation of the students so that they can engage in effective peer review. When students are given the proper tools, they can function with little input from the teacher.

It is vital for teachers to convey the importance of peer review and collaboration to their classes. I prepare my university-level students to work collaboratively by pointing out that this is standard practice in the workplace. For younger groups, the teacher can share research studies showing that students who work in groups enjoy class more and earn better grades.<sup>18</sup>

### **Merits of Peer Review**

Strong support for the use of peer review has come from theories that emphasize the social nature of language, thought, writing, and learning.<sup>19</sup> Peer interaction is vital to writing development because it allows students to construct knowledge through social sharing and interaction.<sup>20</sup> Peer review also taps into the benefits of collaboration. Research has shown that learning emerges through the shared understanding of multiple students, and that learning can occur effectively within interactive peer groups.

Peer review of student writing is beneficial in the following ways: First and foremost, peer feedback seems to be associated with better student academic achievement. A quasi-experiment by Plutsky and Wilson revealed that peer review helped students become proficient writers. Studies on e-peer review also support its academic benefits.<sup>21</sup> Results from empirical studies on English as a Second Language (ESL) writing instruction suggest that peer feedback is as good as, or better than, teacher feedback in helping students revise and improve their papers.<sup>22</sup>

Second, peer review reinforces a system of values about the way writing should be taught. The core of this system rests on the idea that communication within any discourse community (and in any educational setting) relies entirely on that community’s respect for negotiation and cooperation.<sup>23</sup> Ideally, peer review magnifies the roles of both these factors by making writers and readers more keenly aware of each other’s

needs, and cultivates within them a spirit of mutual responsibility. Peer interaction makes young (and not so young) writers better able to choose which criticism to take seriously, making them better and more confident writers. In cultures where competition and individualism, rather than negotiation and community, are valued in schools, peer review improves student achievement. Editing makes one a better writer, writing makes one a better editor, and both make one a better thinker. Peer review is an opportunity to become proficient in all three areas.

Third, peer review teaches students to read more carefully. They pay more attention to detail in a piece of writing, whether their own or someone else’s work.

Fourth, students learn how to formulate and communicate constructive feedback about a peer’s work, as well as how to obtain and respond to feedback on their own work. They learn how to strengthen their writing by taking into account the re-

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sponse of actual and anticipated readers.<sup>24</sup>

Fifth, students learn how to make the transition from writing primarily for themselves, or for a teacher, to writing for a broader audience (a key skill for students preparing to enter college, postgraduate study, or the workforce).<sup>25</sup> Peer review helps students learn to write for a variety of audiences.

Finally, peer review teaches students the art of teamwork. Collaborative experiences are fundamental to empowering students as communicators, both in school and in their future careers.<sup>26</sup>

### **Suggested Procedure for a Peer-Review Class Session**

In my classes, I typically have students choose a partner during a given class period so they can give each other feedback on the first drafts of their assignment. (This procedure can be used for elementary school through college level.) I use the following procedure:

1. Each student fills out a “Getting Thoughts Together” form about his or her own paper. This form helps them to reflect in specified ways on the draft. Some questions I include are:

- Where does the paper need further development?
- What kinds of responses from a reader would be helpful at this stage?
- Students then exchange papers and their “Getting Thoughts Together” form. Student A reads Student B’s paper and shares thoughts about it, and vice versa.

Each student fills out a “Peer Review” form about the paper he or she has just read. This form prompts the reader to give certain kinds of feedback, including responses to the following questions:

- Which parts of the draft (ideas, sentences, quotes) stood out to you?
- What do you want to know more about?
- Which areas need to be more specific?
- What kinds of added examples or evidence do you need?
- After the “Peer Review” forms have been filled out, the students are given time to talk about their papers, to ask each other more questions, and to elaborate on their written feedback.

### Getting the Most Out of the Peer-Review Process

The whole process of peer review—from the first mention of it in class to students’ making use of their peers’ comments—is a crucial part of improving their writing. Peer review is a process that yields positive results at all phases. If done correctly, it should be kinetic, alive, and most of all, *fun*.

Three learning goals can be addressed merely by requiring a peer-review session. First, by assigning a peer-review draft, the audience to whom the student is writing is immediately broadened. Students learn that someone besides the teacher will read their work. Second, students are required to produce a draft earlier than they might otherwise have done. This helps those who tend to procrastinate. Third, students learn that the teacher values students’ input as readers of one another’s work.

Reading their classmates’ drafts will be beneficial to students before they write a single comment. As they read another person’s response to the assignment, they can boost their own confidence about having written well, and/or see possibilities for improvement. Responding to focused questions about another person’s writing reinforces the idea that writing involves choices. The writer is in control and has the opportunity to make changes.

Teachers need to create a guide (assignment criteria) to help students respond directly to their classmates’ writing and indirectly (but more reliably) to their own. When students are asked to label places where peer-authors integrate quotations smoothly, suggest counterarguments, or write an engaging title, the experience helps them actively review assignment expectations. As a result, they will become more aware that writing is a negotiation between the intentions of the writer and the needs of the audience.

Teachers and students will find satisfaction in the time they invest in the peer review activity because peer review can help students make significant progress toward meeting their goal of becoming better writers. ✍



Susan Taylor earned her Juris Doctorate degree from Valparaiso University School of Law. She has taught at Indiana University and the University of Notre Dame Law School, and currently teaches Business Law at Andrews University in Berrien Springs, Michigan.

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