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Teaching Tips

Moving Writing Forward Through Peer-Critique Partners

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ABSTRACT

The author describes a simple yet impactful cycle for cultivating greater engagement and agency among students during the writing process. Specifically, the article explains how the implementation of peer-critique partners who provide one another with criterion-based feedback repositions students from mere "passengers" to active "drivers" on the journey to better writing. Feedback is found to "increase [students'] effort, motivation, and engagement and reduce the discrepancy between the current status and the goal" (Hattie & Clarke, 2019, p. 3). The key is having clearly defined writing criteria that inform students of the goals or expectations for writing. These expectations should frame the feedback (e.g., comments, critiques, suggestions, and questions) provided from one peer to the next and move students beyond mere editing to true revision. Traditional commentary such as "excellent," "good job," or "more work is needed," or over-concentration on mechanical errors is insufficient to move writing forward, closer to the desired outcome. Moreover, the article highlights four steps for effectively establishing peer-critique feedback partners. These steps are powerful drivers for helping students move their writing forward by implementing a true revision process. The article opens and concludes by emphasizing that writing is the evidence of thinking. For students to become more thoughtful in their written expression, they must have clarity, support, accountability, and some choice in the process.

KEYWORDS

writing engagement; peer-critique partners; writing support

Writing is the evidence of thinking. It helps make that which is inward outward for others to enjoy, learn, or be inspired (Lee, 2021). If writing adds this much value to an experience, why aren't more students writing—and specifically—why aren't more students writing well? One can instantly witness the shift in the classroom when the teacher steps forward and announces, "Okay, scholars, great discussion! Now, take out a piece of paper (or computer device) and write an essay that reflects the ideas you discussed in your groups."

A cacophony of sighs ensues. "Aww, man, why do we have to write it? How long does it have to be? I don't have any paper. My computer just died!" Along with these responses is the obvious reluctance displayed by students' body language—legs extended, bodies slumped, an elbow on the desk with chin in hand, or pencils tapping on the desk.

As a former English teacher, I experienced these types of responses from my students early on; however, I eventually started observing more encouraging dispositions to writing when my students began seeing the value in the writing opportunity. Writing was no longer solely about the product—but the process—and what occurred throughout the writing process. My role versus my students' roles began to shift in more meaningful ways. In this article, I describe the peer-to-peer

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feedback cycle that was paramount to my later success in increasing students' engagement and agency in the writing process.

It is important to note that the peer-to-peer feedback process that I implemented helped my students understand important distinctions between editing and revising. These practices are often used interchangeably; however, editing focuses on addressing word or sentence-level errors, typically involving punctuation, spelling, or grammar mistakes. Conversely, revision requires a holistic examination of the writing. This may involve mechanical improvements, but revision also includes enhancing broader aspects of the paper, such as strengthening the voice or the argument in a paper, ensuring a better organizational structure, or establishing greater clarity. Having a peer provide feedback during the revision process enables a comprehensive and neutral review of the writing. To the writer, his or her argument may be clear and substantial; however, a reader may find the argument limited or unsubstantiated. This article focuses on how to help students use a peer-to-peer feedback cycle to navigate the revision process.

In the classroom, I established expectations and strategies that moved my students from mere "passengers" to active "drivers" on the journey to better writing. By implementing what I term, peer-critique partners, my students received timelier and in-the-moment feedback to support the revision process. I define feedback as comments, critiques, suggestions, or posed questions that aim to close the gap between the current product and the desired product. By establishing peer-critique partners, my students were able to receive this guidance with greater efficiency.

What are peer-critique partners? This practice involves pairing two students to evaluate each other's writing using specified criteria. During this session, they offer commendations (glows) and recommendations (grows) for improving their written responses. The criteria answer the question, "What are the goals or expectations for the writing?" These expectations are identified by the teacher or selected in collaboration with students, and they are influenced by the learning standards for the subject matter. Additionally, criteria should require students to move beyond mere editing at the sentence level to revising important aspects of the writing, such as clarity, coherence, and development.

The writing or language standards may be most influential in language arts. Peer-critique partners may be required to evaluate the introductions for their essays to determine the effectiveness of the opening in establishing the context and purpose of the writing. Establishing and communicating clear writing criteria upfront ensures the feedback fundamentally helps move the writing forward, closer to the desired outcome.

Of course, I would love to say this meaningful practice grew out of my thirsty pursuit of evidence-based research that highlights those promising practices that increase student motivation and writing achievement. While feedback is found to "increase [students'] effort, motivation, and engagement and reduce the discrepancy between the current status and the goal" (Hattie & Clarke, 2019, p. 3), I instituted this practice due to being exhausted from grading 86 to 90 essays each week. Also, I felt my students were not as cognitively or emotionally engaged in the process as they needed to be to make meaningful enhancements to their writing.

I knew it was important to give my students feedback, but I was the one overly consumed and committed in the process—and to some degree—learning more and more about improving writing. My students were passive recipients—like backseat "passengers" in the process. As a result, I redesigned my writing experiences to ensure students took a more prominent role in the feedback cycle. In Figure 1 below, I describe the process that I employed with my students and, eventually, with teachers in writing workshops as a literacy coach, K–12 language arts coordinator, and soon after, an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Using the technique as

described in this article is most appropriate for grades three and above. The process is simple, yet it requires a lot of patience, modeling by the teacher, and student practice to ensure their feedback is effective in moving writing to the next level.

Figure 1: Peer-Critique Feedback Process

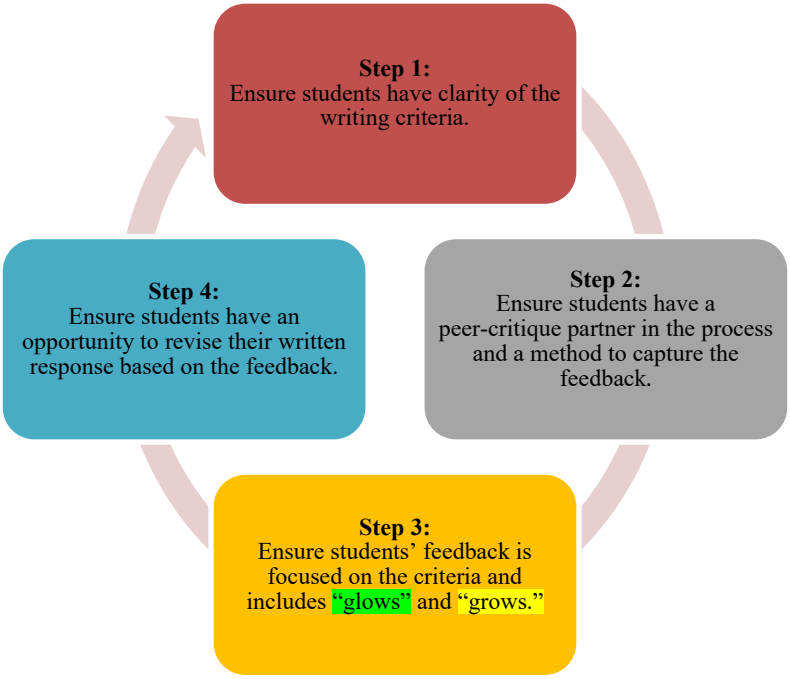

Figure 1 summarizes each step in the process of cycling peer-critique partners through their review session. The following section elaborates on each step and provides specific examples of implementing the practice.

Step 1: Ensure students have clarity of the writing criteria.

It is challenging to hit a moving target and even more challenging to hit an unknown one. The teacher and students must clearly define what constitutes effective writing based on the selected criteria. Here, I describe how instructors can determine their criteria or the expectations for writing. To start, teachers should Keep it Standards-based and Simple (K.I.S.S.) to ensure feedback is focused and feasible. Teachers can use their state's writing standards (e.g. Georgia Standards of Excellence) to prioritize the focus for the peer-critique session. The questions below provide further guidance on how to use the standards.

- What is the standard of focus for the current lesson? Use the language from the standard. If the standard is too "meaty," determine what knowledge and/or skill is a requisite for the remaining portion of the standard. For instance, this sixth-grade language arts writing standard (ELAGSE6W1) states: Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence. Element a. Introduce claim(s) and clearly organize the reasons and evidence. From this standard, the teacher may determine that first, he or she wants to assess if students can introduce a claim for an argumentative paper. Therefore, as students are critiquing one another, they may focus on evaluating how clearly and effectively the claim is introduced in the writing.

- What standards have I already taught? In the prior section, the focus was on the current lesson. Here, the focus is on previously taught standards that students should continue to implement in their writing. Consider what standards [e.g. writing standards, language standards] or writing traits have already been taught that should be present in students' writing. This practice holds students accountable for retaining the skills from previous instruction. For example, if students have learned about the importance of establishing an appropriate voice [e.g., overall style, word choice] in their writing, this may be a part of the writing criteria, along with the current standard, introducing clear and effective claims in the writing.
- How can students have a voice and choice? Have students determine an area in which they know they need to improve and want to continue practicing during future writing tasks. In this instance, students may choose to focus on revising their writing by developing their main ideas using relevant examples and textual evidence. This option is student-determined and student-driven and fosters student agency in the writing process.

Once the writing criteria have been determined, ensure students know what constitutes effective vs. ineffective versions of the criteria by using one or more of the following suggestions. Students benefit from seeing ineffective versions, too; this enables them to self-assess where their writing aligns more closely and make revisions accordingly.

- Use writing exemplars. Teachers can create examples or use mentor texts that reflect effective examples of the writing practice teachers desire to cultivate in their students' writing. For instance, through an analysis of a text that skillfully uses figurative language to bring ideas to life, students learn the impact that figurative language can have on meaning and engagement. The non-exemplars show students the outcomes of not using the desired writing technique.
- Use a writer's checklist. This tool outlines what specific standards or traits should be present in the writing, and it may include a section to indicate to what extent the writer achieves each criterion. Figure 2 provides an example of a writing checklist.

Figure 2: Sample Writing Checklist for an Argumentative Essay

Criteria	*Yes*	*Partially*	*No*
1. Effectively introduces claim(s)			
2. Uses an organizational strategy to present reasons and relevant evidence logically			
3. Supports claim(s) with clear reasons and relevant evidence using specific, well-chosen facts, details, or other information from credible sources and demonstrates a good understanding of the topic or texts			
4. Acknowledges and counters opposing claim(s), as appropriate			

- Use an analytical rubric. This rubric describes what standards or traits should be present in the writing using a continuum from ineffective (1) to extremely effective (4). The specific language of the levels may vary. Table 4 provides an example of an analytical rubric.

Students can see in advance the expectations for proficient writing, and during the peer-critique process, peers can use the language from the rubric to provide specific feedback that will aid the writing piece in moving toward the desired outcome.

Figure 4: Georgia Milestones Assessments – Opinion Rubric (Grade 3)

Trait 1: Idea Development, Organization, and Coherence This trait examines the writer's ability to effectively establish a point of view and to support the opinion with reasons from the text(s) read. The writer must form an opinion from the text(s) in his/her own words and organize reasons for opinion (from text that they have read) in order to create cohesion for an opinion essay.	**4**	**3**	**2**	**1**
	▪ The student's response is a well-developed opinion piece that effectively examines a topic and supports a point of view, with reasons clearly based on text as a stimulus. ▪ Effectively introduces a topic and clearly states an opinion ▪ Creates an effective organizational structure to group reasons	▪ The student's response is a complete opinion piece that examines a topic and supports a point of view based on text. ▪ Introduces a topic and states an opinion ▪ Provides some organizational structure to group reasons ▪ Provides reasons to support the opinion	▪ The student's response is an incomplete or oversimplified opinion piece that examines a topic and partially supports a point of view based on text. ▪ Attempts to introduce a topic and state an opinion ▪ Attempts to provide some organization, but structure sometimes impedes the reader	▪ The student's response is a weak attempt to write an opinion piece that examines a topic and does not support a text-based point of view. ▪ May not introduce a topic or state an opinion ▪ May not have any organizational structure evident

Step 2: Ensure students have a peer-critique partner and a method to capture the feedback.

It is highly beneficial to have students involved in peer-to-peer feedback sessions. These sessions deepen their knowledge and command of the content (Almarode et al., 2022) and their needs to determine the most appropriate peer-to-peer pairing or to determine when students can freely choose their peer-critique partner. Ensure pairing is beneficial for both students so that reciprocal exchange of ideas and feedback can occur.

Peer-critique partners should have access to the checklist, rubric, or examples shared previously to ensure clarity of the writing expectations, which will guide students' feedback to one another. Partners should know how feedback will be captured and shared with one other. For example:

- If the feedback process is occurring electronically, partners can use the Add Comment feature in the writing for most applications. In some applications, partners may be able to add a voice recording.
- If the writing is not electronic, partners can use sticky notes and place the notes in the margin.

- Partners can use color coding, where each color represents a different criterion and indicates if the writing feature (e.g. detail, word choice) is a glow or a grow.
- Partners can write feedback on the actual rubric or writing checklist.
- Partners can verbally share their feedback, and each student is responsible for capturing the comments in writing.

Teachers are encouraged to model how to work with a partner and use the various methods to provide feedback to a partner. Teachers may consider providing students with a choice of which method(s) they want to use to capture and share the glows and grows in the writing they are critiquing.

Step 3: Ensure students' feedback is focused on the criteria and includes "glows" [commendations] and "grows" [recommendations].

Many students will not know how to give standards-based feedback that reflects a combination of glows and grows. Students may be more accustomed to saying, "Good job," "I like it," or "I don't like this." The instructor will have to teach students how to reference specific criteria when they provide feedback, such as stating, "Good job of using relevant details to elaborate on your first main point." Teachers will have to model this process and give feedback to their students as they gradually release them to work independently. Peer-critique partners should remember the following during feedback sessions:

- Be respectful and focus on the writing, not the writer.
- Be clear and specific.
- Start with glows. [Share what was most enjoyable or effective about the writing in general if students are not yet exhibiting the writing traits of focus.]
- Share the grows. [Here, feedback should be specific to the criteria.]
- Allow the receiving partner to provide an explanation or ask any clarifying questions based on the feedback provided.
- Peer-critique partners are encouraged to provide examples to complement their feedback.
- As a courtesy, peers can thank each other for the opportunity to read and review the paper.

To reiterate, the teacher must model this process, perhaps modeling what it should and should not resemble. During feedback sessions, teachers should monitor, notice, and listen to gauge how well partners are implementing the process, how aligned the feedback is to the specified writing criteria, and what are the trends and patterns in writing that may need to be revisited with the whole class or with smaller groups of students.

Table 3: Example of Glows and Grows Peer-Critique Chart

Writing Criteria: ▪ Introduce claims clearly and effectively [current standard]. ▪ Vary sentence types for reader interest [previously taught standard].	
The Writer: Student 1	**The Peer-Critique Partner: Student 2**
Glows: I like that in your writing . . .	**Grows:** In the future, remember . . .
▪ Your claim clearly explains your position on students having homework.	▪ Your claim would be more effective if it aligned with the main ideas in the remaining portion of your paper.
▪ Most of your sentences are correctly written and not run-ons or fragments.	▪ Select conjunctions to combine simple and choppy sentences in order to vary your sentence type.
Additional Comments:	

Table 3 shows an example of one peer providing feedback to another using specific writing criteria, which involve evaluating claim statements and sentence types. Notice that one criterion is based on the current lesson, and another criterion is from a previously taught lesson.

Step 4: Ensure students have an opportunity to revise their written responses based on the feedback.

This is perhaps where the magic happens! It is great to know the criteria, it is wonderful to have a partner in the process, and it is remarkable to receive feedback. However, none of these steps adds a level of value as when students are required to revise to move the writing forward. According to research, "...most comments, unless they required a student response, were often ignored by students if the feedback comments were given out with no time allocated for students to read the comments, no chance to use them to improve, or where they were illegible or hard to understand" (Hattie & Clarke, 2019, p. 3). Of course, students can have a voice in what they choose to incorporate or not incorporate from the feedback session, but there must be an expectation for revising and editing because this is where the learning crystallizes in students' minds.

Revising requires students to think about their thinking and become cognitively engaged in the process—moving from passenger to driver. If writing is the evidence of thinking, the writer and the teacher must see that students really got it! And this is not verified by students merely stating what they will do next time. Seeing is believing! Furthermore, revising increases students' self-efficacy, motivation, and confidence in writing. One way to incorporate the revision process is via a strategy known as the ticket out of the door. Toward the end of the lesson, students are asked to revise a portion of their writing based on their peer's feedback. The teacher has a way to check or review each student's efforts before leaving the classroom.

In conclusion, the four steps described in this article and summarized below are powerful drivers for helping students move their writing forward. In order for students to become more thoughtful in their written expression, they must have clarity, support, accountability, and some choice in the process.

✓ **Step 1** – Ensure students have clarity of the writing criteria.

✓ **Step 2** – Ensure students have a peer-critique partner and a method to capture the feedback.

- ✓ **Step 3** – Ensure students' feedback is focused on the criteria and includes "glows" and "grows."
- ✓ **Step 4** – Ensure students have an opportunity to revise their written responses based on the feedback.

The process discussed in this article will hopefully provide meaningful guidance on how students can take a more active role in the writing process. The implementation of the Peer-Critique Feedback Process allows both the teacher and students to have greater clarity on how to implement feedback in an impactful manner. Continue to make writing an instrumental part of your instruction and ensure feedback is provided in real-time; this will take students' writing to the next level on their journey to writing with confidence and competence. Here's to activating your students' WriteVoice! To receive more practical strategies for teaching writing, purchase the WriteVoice Toolkit. Also, visit writevoicellc.com to sign up to receive writing strategies electronically.

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