



Building Relationships and Literacy Skills through Peer Review

By: Brittany R. Collins

for Write the World, Inc.

Cambridge, MA

June, 2023



Peer review, in the classroom context, constitutes the process of structured, student-to-student feedback exchanges geared toward the development of a drafted written work. Through regular practice of peer review, students have the opportunity to ‘re-see’ their own work and the work of others. This re-seeing transforms the drafting process into one of delight and discovery for learners and instructors; presents rich opportunities for social learning in the writing classroom; promotes transferable skills regarding constructive feedback; and, for teachers across disciplines, relieves the pressures of providing feedback on writing, saving valuable time.

Teaching Peer Review through Direct Instruction

Providing effective peer review is an acquired skill that is not often taught. The Center for Teaching and Learning at Washington University asserts that: “A common misstep that many instructors make in approaching peer review is to assume that students already have the skills described above and that incorporating peer review simply amounts to asking students to apply these skills to the tasks of reading and responding to one another’s writing. Instead, instructors should approach peer review as an opportunity to teach these skills and for students to practice them” (2023).

The beneficial outcomes from explicit teaching of effective peer reviewing techniques are reiterated by Harvard Graduate School of Education Professor Nancy Sommers, a member of the Write the World Board. In *Responding to Student Writers*, she shares, “Mentoring students to become thoughtful and critical readers not only shares the work of responding but also, and more importantly, creates a vibrant classroom community... The more students read of one another’s work, the more they learn; the more they learn, the better they write. Yet students need guidance to become thoughtful readers and responders, just as their teachers do” (2013, p. 31).

Creating a Strong Writing Community in the Classroom

Community-building through peer review creates rich opportunities for relational learning and fosters a sense of belonging that promotes academic engagement. Peer exchanges rooted in storytelling and authentic expression expose students to a breadth of perspectives and experiences, challenging them to hone their perspective-taking skills, increase empathy and cultural competency, and develop their “theory of mind” (ToM) or ability to presume another’s thoughts and feelings (Ruhl, 2023).



These skills are necessary in the construction of feedback that will be well-received and implemented by a peer writer, and the balancing of support with constructive guidance is a skill that is transferable across work and life contexts. Students adept at peer review will perform more effectively in other contexts where feedback is central—from coaching a team, to facilitating a meeting, to training a colleague—validating consistent, intentional practice of, and discourse about, constructive review in the classroom.

Supporting Teachers' Time and Wellbeing

Importantly, when educators “[share] the work of responding” with students, they make feedback more efficient. The implementation of a constructive, supportive, and effective peer review process with student writers lessens instructors’ assessment load by improving the quality of students’ final drafts, necessitating fewer instructor comments and combating the number one barrier to teaching writing reported in Write the World educator surveys: lack of time.

In the United States, classroom teachers work an average of 54 hours per week (Hardison, 2022); many of those hours are unpaid and are devoted to providing feedback. However, in a climate where nearly half of all teachers leave the profession within the first five years (Neason, 2014) and report higher rates of job-related stress and depression compared with average adults (Will, 2021), it is critical to consider ways to reduce stress for instructors without sacrificing student learning. Peer review is one such way to institute a collaborative approach that boosts the literacy and social competency of all involved.

Write the World’s Scaffolded Approach

Write the World’s iterative approach to peer review includes instructional resources, rubrics, classroom activities, and readings that draw upon research in best practices of writing instruction (Sommers 2013; Graham & Perin, 2007; Graham & Hebert, 2011); the importance of feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007); self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000); the role of mindset in learning (Dweck, 2006, 2016); teaching to variability (Gordon et al., 2016); and social-emotional learning (CASEL, 2023).

Using an embedded, interactive rubric tool consisting of guiding questions tailored to each of our original writing prompts across the curriculum, students on our platform have the opportunity to become both writers and editors, seamlessly switching roles by offering (as editor) and receiving (as writer) encouragement, advice, and inquiry.



By providing in-text annotations through a highlighting and commenting tool, supplementing that close-read with rubric responses, and providing a summative letter to the writer, peer editors practice literacy skills that transfer back to their own written works, reinforcing the reciprocal nature of reading and writing that is proven by research yet absent in United States curricula, which overemphasizes reading and leaves writing siloed if addressed at all (Education Week *Science of Reading and Writing Report 2023*).

Our model reviews serve as guides, or “mentor texts,” for students’ own reviews, and our technology facilitates formative and summative feedback opportunities between peer reviewers and writers, as well as peer reviewers and teachers, meaning students have opportunities to receive guidance not only on their writing but their reviewing skills in the classroom. These scaffolds support a gradual release of responsibility (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), or an “I do, we do, you do” (Fisher & Frey, 2013) approach to review in which students learn from sample texts and dynamic feedback on their path to independent practice.

At Write the World, we teach peer review explicitly—filling the gap in direct instruction outlined above—and position writing as an iterative process and social activity that is improved through interactions among writers, readers, editors, and real-world audiences. The regular practice of writing and receiving feedback throughout the drafting process helps cultivate a cohesive and vibrant writing community, fostering a sense of camaraderie in the classroom and better preparing students for the world beyond it.

References:

- Dweck, C. S. (2016). *Mindset the new psychology of Success*. Ballantine Books.
- Fisher, D., & Frey, N. (2013). Gradual release of Responsibility Instructional Framework. *IRA E-Sentials*, 1–8. <https://doi.org/10.1598/e-ssentials.8037>
- Gordon, D., Meyer, A., & Rose, D. (2016). *Universal Design for Learning*. CAST Professional Publishing.
- Graham, S., & Hebert, M. (2011). Writing to read: A meta-analysis of the impact of writing and writing instruction on reading. *Harvard Educational Review*, 81(4), 710–744. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.81.4.t2k0m13756113566>
- Graham, S., & Perin, D. (2007). A meta-analysis of writing instruction for adolescent students. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 99(3), 445–476. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.99.3.445>
- Hardison, H. (2022, April 19). *How teachers spend their time: A breakdown*. EducationWeek. <https://edweek.org/teaching-learning/how-teachers-spend-their-time-a-breakdown/2022/>
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81–112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Neason, A. (2020, March 30). *Half of teachers leave the job after five years. here's what to do about it*. The Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/half-teachers-leave-job-five-years-heres/>
- Pearson, P. D., & Gallagher, M. C. (1983). The instruction of reading comprehension. *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8(3), 317–344. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476x\(83\)90019-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/0361-476x(83)90019-x)
- Ruhl, C. (2023, February 14). *Theory of mind in psychology: People thinking*. Simply Psychology. <https://www.simplypsychology.org/theory-of-mind.html>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.55.1.68>
- The science of reading ... and writing*. Education Week. (2023, February 23). <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/the-science-of-reading-and-writing>



Sommers, N. I. (2013). *Responding to student writers*. Bedford/St. Martin's.

Using peer review to help students improve their writing. Center for Teaching and Learning. (2022, August 1).

<https://ctl.wustl.edu/resources/using-peer-review-to-help-students-improve-their-writing/>

What is the Casel Framework?. CASEL. (2023, March 3).

<https://casel.org/fundamentals-of-sel/what-is-the-casel-framework/>

Will, M. (2022, June 9). *Teachers are more likely to experience depression symptoms than other adults*. Education Week.

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/teachers-are-more-likely-to-experience-depression-symptoms-than-other-adults/2021/06>