

## Responding to Writing

Having others respond to a piece of writing is a way to assist an author in the editing process. The purpose is to bring up questions regarding organization, clarity, completeness, and relevant evidence needed for an effective narrative. Giving and receiving response to writing is essential to the writing process. In fact, it is the main focus of most writing workshops and writing groups, and is also widely used by professional writers.

There is nothing natural about asking others to critique your writing. Even experienced writers feel uncomfortable sharing their work-in-process. But the better the author, the more he or she cares about receiving a response and about how the writing communicates to the reader.

This process takes practice for both the author and the responder. When conducted in a respectful setting, this process can be used by your students as a way for them to learn about their own writing and the writing of others. The authors read their writing aloud, and listeners respond to what they hear, provide specific praise, respond to the author's questions, and finally make specific suggestions.

Responding to writing is different from proofreading. When introducing this process to students, this point needs to be emphasized. There is a natural inclination to proofread someone's writing for spelling and grammar, but this is not the purpose of the responding process. Students may need to be 'retrained' that this process is *not* writing notes on another student's writing. Response is almost always *oral*. The chart below differentiates the two processes and can be used to introduce the responding process to your students.

<b>The Difference between Proofreading and Responding</b>	
<b>Proofreading</b>	<b>Responding</b>
<p>Occurs just before publishing</p> <p>Addresses conventions that appear on the printed page such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, and formatting</p> <p>Is done by <i>looking</i> carefully at the printed page</p> <p>Results in a text that is easily read and respected</p> <p>Asks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this spelled correctly?</li> <li>• Should this be capitalized?</li> <li>• Are the paragraphs divided correctly?</li> <li>• Is this paper formatted correctly?</li> <li>• Are all sentences complete?</li> </ul>	<p>Occurs after drafting and before revising</p> <p>Addressed issues of content, organization, clarity, and diction</p> <p>Is done by the author <i>reading aloud</i> and the responders <i>listening</i> for content, clarity, tone and diction (<i>though responders may read as well as listen to a text</i>)</p> <p>Results in a text that is engaging, amusing or communicating with the reader</p> <p>Asks:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is this clear?</li> <li>• Can I make this more interesting by adding more information or description?</li> <li>• Do I need more or fewer facts in support here?</li> <li>• Are things in the right order?</li> <li>• Do you understand that I am trying to be satiric here?</li> <li>• How can I make this transition make more sense?</li> </ul>

## Introducing Students to the Responding to Writing Process

The following are the main ideas to introduce to your students about the responding to writing process:

1. Explain the purpose of responding to writing, i.e. It assists the author in the editing process by discussing organization, clarity, completeness, and relevant evidence needed for an effective narrative.
2. Explain the difference between responding and proofreading using the chart above.
3. Remind students as with any other higher-level skill, it will take several sessions to master the process.
4. The success of the response session is dependent on practicing the specific skills and the mutual respect demonstrated by each person in the group. The expectation is that students will:
  - Listen attentively and respond respectfully to each other's writing.
  - Provide specific positive feedback about the writing.
  - Encourage their classmate' about his/her writing.
  - Give specific suggestions.
  - Accept feedback from other students on their essay draft without taking it personally.
5. Before students use this process with their own writing it would be helpful to practice the process. Here are some ideas:
  - First have the students respond to short pieces of writing that are not personal such as a short narrative or report of information.
  - Model the process frequently in front of the whole class.
  - Teach students to read writing prompts carefully for suggestions for the responders' praise, the author's questions, and the responders' suggestions.
  - Provide students with examples of specific feedback and praise, specific questions and specific suggestions.
  - Practice several times to become proficient responders.

## The Responding to Writing Process

Divide the class into response groups of three or four students, or allow the students to choose their own responders.

Each student needs to have a copy of the writing.

Students should face each other so they can work without speaking loudly. Alternately, if only a few of the students are in need of response, designate an area in the classroom for responding, an area where conversations about writing will not distract others.

### 1. The author reads the paper aloud.

- During the reading, the author *may* make marks in the margins to note where it "does not sound right." The author will discover things about his or her own writing as it is read aloud.
- The responders are to listen for content and clarity. They may put marks in the margins of their copy to remind them of points (positive feedback, questions, suggestions they will discuss with the author). They are NOT to proofread for spelling, writing conventions or any other aspect of writing that exists only *on the page*.

## 2. The responders give praise.

- This is important because authors need to know what they do well. Positive feedback or praise also helps the authors accept suggestions later on.
- You may wish to suggest types of praise, generally based on the skills or content standards you are trying to teach with the assignment. The positive feedback may be correlated to items on the rubric.
- You may need to teach directly how to give praise; most students hear criticism more often than they hear praise.
- If the responders cannot find anything to praise, they can say, “I hear you saying that...” The gap between what the reader understands and what the author means to say may be helpful to the author.
- For example:  
*Your introduction is clear and indicates the order of your evidence.*  
*You have a good explanation in the section where you say....*  
*You have good examples in your section when you say....*  
*Your conclusion summarizes your evidence well when you....*

## 3. The author asks questions.

- You may wish to suggest possible questions, based on the rubric or the content standard you are teaching.
- Beginning authors who have not yet developed concern for their audience ask fewer questions and less significant questions than more proficient authors. With experience the authors' questions become more powerful; they will need less support from the teacher to generate meaningful questions about their own work.
- For example:  
*Do I have enough evidence to support (name a specific point)?*  
*Does this (name specific) paragraph need more explanation?*  
*Is there a place where I don't have enough evidence or examples?*  
*Is there a place where I say something, give examples, but need more explanation?*  
*Should I put my evidence in a different order where I say....*  
*Is there something I should add to show that my hero is really heroic?*

## 4. Finally, the responders give suggestions.

- Suggestions also should be based on the rubric, the content standard being taught, the needs of the audience and the purpose of the work.
- The students are not required to accept all the suggestions they receive. They may ask for clarification of the suggestions, but they do *not* need to rebut their responders' suggestions, convince him or her of the correctness of the author's choice, or defend themselves. They merely need to listen.
- Suggestions will become more powerful as both the responders and authors become more skillful.
- The students will revise their work based on their new knowledge of their writing and bring it back for proofreading or for further responding.

## A Suggestion for Modeling the Process

One of the most powerful methods of teaching responding to writing is to ask the class for response to something you have written with authentic purpose and for a specific audience. Have four or five students be the official responders. Seat them in a responding group that includes you, the teacher. Distribute copies of your work to the responding group and to the rest of the class. Number the lines (in *MS Word* go to: File, page setup, layout, line numbers) for easy reference. Follow the responding process, reading your work, accepting positive feedback, first from the response group, then from the other class members. Ask questions and allow responders and then the whole class to answer them. Then listen to suggestions. Revise your work and share it with the class.

## Student Reflection on Being a Responder

As they learn the procedure, students become more skillful responders if they reflect on the quality of their response and revision by writing a friendly letter to you after each response session. In the letter students can respond to these questions:

- Who responded to your draft?
- Which response questions helped you the most?
- What have you learned from the responders?
- What have you changed after you received the responses?

[Click here](#) for a rubric that can be used to assess the students' responses.

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