


Teaching Students to Give Peer Feedback

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Literacy

Giving their classmates feedback on writing is a complex skill for students to master, but it can be taught with scaffolded modeling.

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When I first share with my ninth graders that peer review will be part of our writing process, the response is almost universally negative. Unfortunately, many of my writers have not had the best experience with this activity.

My stronger writers say that they almost never receive feedback that goes beyond basic conventions, while my emerging writers say they feel a lack of confidence in providing feedback beyond basic conventions. This frustration should be no surprise: As educators, we recognize that effective teaching is a complex skill that requires deliberate practice. Likewise, when we ask students to give each other feedback, this too is more complex than simply exchanging papers and locating errors.

To make peer feedback more focused and meaningful, I've found it helpful to define quality feedback, provide structured routines, and teach feedback as I would any other core skill.

In my experience, few high school freshmen have mastered the conventions of writing well enough to function as reliable editors. For this reason, I direct my students to reflect upon each other's work—not correct it.

My students focus on idea development, clarity, and arrangement to make sense of the writer's text. Of course, scrambled grammar can impact a reader's experience, but rather than have them try to correct a peer's confounding syntax with editing marks, I ask students to write full sentences to one another:

- This is confusing because I cannot follow your topic.□
- I am confused about who "they" are in this sentence.
- Explain a little more about why you chose this example from the text.□
- I like how you repeated key words from your hook here in your conclusion.□

I also offer kids a specific acronym to remember what constitutes quality feedback: SPARK. For feedback to be useful to a writer, it should meet as many of these criteria as possible:

- **Specific:** Comments are linked to a discrete word, phrase, or sentence.□
- **Prescriptive:** Like a medical prescription that aims to solve an ailment, prescriptive feedback offers a solution or strategy to improve the work, including possible revisions or links to helpful resources or examples.□
- **Actionable:** When the feedback is read, it leaves the peer knowing what steps to take for improvement.
- **Referenced:** The feedback directly references the task criteria, requirements, or target skills.□
- **Kind:** It's mandatory that all comments be framed in a kind, supportive way.□

Some groups I've taught took to SPARK quickly, while others have needed more practice. For these groups, I create student-friendly versions of a consultancy protocol or tuning protocol to ensure focused discourse, allowing room for all voices.

I also set a guideline for a minimum number of quality comments, but I tell students that less is often more.

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As with any other skill I teach, I begin by modeling SPARK feedback on sample student writing. I interact with students, explaining my thought process as they help pinpoint what about a text is effective or ineffective, as well as how to offer quality SPARK-based comments. From there, as a class we examine other example feedback statements before evaluating their potential usefulness to a writer.

To also give students the chance to practice giving feedback independently, I distribute the same example paragraph. We use group and class discussions to share the variety of feedback offered.

When it's time for live peer review, I assess performance by giving students feedback on their feedback. After that, students share particularly useful examples. Before students leave class, they share on exit tickets what they feel was the best feedback they offered, as well as the best feedback they received.

In the end, good peer review should provide the writer with meaningful information for improvement, while developing the reviewer's ability to analyze a text's effectiveness.