

Collegial conversation is an important aspect of success in the workplace and is indeed one of the “soft skills” that employers today identify as a specific area of need in candidate development. Strickland’s discussion of peer-to-peer conversation in the classroom considers an important perspective on how students can develop **the communication skills needed for future success**.

THE CLASS BEGINS, “Take out your rough drafts and turn to the person next to you . . . Share your writing with a partner . . .” (Dawson, 2009, p. 66). Students know what’s coming next: they are going to be asked to give some response to their classmate, pretending to be an

objective audience. Their teacher hopes that the students will engage in conversations about audience and purpose, suggestions about improving the writing, and rhetorical considerations about the best

way to express their intentions. While this type of activity does bear fruit occasionally and some students write “longer answers in complete sentences,” others will typically offer “only cursory comments, writing ‘good job’ or ‘needs more detail’” (p. 66). From the students’ points of view, their responses are “heavily influenced by the checklist [they’ve been given], with comments focused on the *teacher’s* questions and purposes rather than the students’ questions” and often completely “lack authentic discussion about writing” (p. 66).

The goal of these types of activities is generally transference: hoping that “when students respond to another paper, they practice the revision skills they need to utilize when responding to their own papers” (Byland, 2004, p. 56). For me, the problem comes from having students responding to each other in a revision activity often controlled by worksheets and checklists, which, fairly or not, students hear as simply correcting another’s paper.

The hitch seems to be that these students are unaccustomed to **giving their peers feedback** that is in any way helpful. **Outside of**

the truncated writing that is texting, students rarely converse with each other in writing, much less converse with each other about their writing. The lack of conversational familiarity could explain why students seem to resort to the sort of behavior they themselves have experienced—marking mistakes, correcting errors, or making half-hearted suggestions with dubious potential for improvement. On the other hand, rather than practicing these typical revision skills or behaviors, we might also find hope for

transference by asking students to use writing to authentically communicate with their peers about their ideas. To achieve this, we need to provide students with more experience conversing in writing about their writing, with the objective of producing better writing from both writer and responder.

HOW DO WRITING SKILLS IMPACT THE WORKPLACE?

▶ **10 Reasons Why Business Writing Skills Are So Important, *Business World***

▶ **Why Mastering Writing Skills Can Help Future-Proof Your Career, *Forbes***

THINKING ABOUT PEER REVIEW

▶ **Peer Review Strategy Guide, *ReadWriteThink***

▶ **Giving Peer Feedback Helps Writers Grow, *Edutopia***

HOW DO STUDENTS WRITE TODAY?

▶ **Is Texting Eroding Good Writing Skills among Young Students? *Yale Professor Says Teens’ Social Media Lingo Hurts Writing Skills, Phys.org***

The Importance of Getting Responses

Professional writers love to talk about their writing habits and rituals, often offering advice about frequency. Michael Connelly, author of the series of novels about an LA detective, Harry Bosch, says, “Write every day, even if it’s only a paragraph” and Gillian Flynn, author of *Sharp Objects* and *Gone Girl*, says her advice is to “read all the time, and keep writing.” I tell students that the only way to get better at writing is by **writing, every day if possible**; no one gets better at writing simply by listening to someone talk about it. And, writing is meant to be read. Even therapeutic writing, putting thoughts and feelings down on paper, is writing and has an audience of one (ourselves). Getting responses to our writing—advice, encouragement, some sort of feedback—is important. If we look to published authors like Connelly and Flynn, we’ll see that they usually express gratitude on their acknowledgment pages to friends, colleagues, and editors for assistance, support, and

guidance. Published authors rarely thank anyone for evaluating or grading their writing. So, when considering ways to help students

BUILDING STRONGER WRITERS . . .

▶ **9 Tips for Improving Your College Writing Skills, *The College Puzzle*, Stanford University**

. . . AND READERS

▶ **Writing to Read: Evidence for How Writing Can Improve Reading, *ILA***

write every day and receive informed responses, teachers should start with “visions of students engaged in meaningful conversations” (Dawson, 2009, p. 66). These conversations are at the heart of peer response: real exchanges,

responding to common thoughts or prompts, not answering questions on a worksheet. Otherwise, students continue pretending to emulate their teachers, and the peer-response activity remains simply that—an activity.

Writing in a Journal

One of the best ways to practice writing every day—while receiving responses that aren’t necessarily graded or evaluated—is keeping a journal, sometimes called a writer’s notebook. Journals are thinking tools and ways to preserve thoughts and relive memories. Lil Brannon and teachers from the

University of North Carolina–Charlotte Writing Project

(2008) explain that writer’s notebooks began as memory tools, commonplace books, to record important thoughts. Don Murray (2011/1972), generally credited with promoting these notebooks (he called them “daybooks”), says they can be used to write about the details of our lives; record pieces of writing, key paragraphs, and drafts; revisit memories; and think about the future as well as the past.

When journals are used as part of a writing classroom, teachers wonder about content: Should it be curriculum-related (a place for students to respond to prompts or to class readings or topics) or open and free? Should it be private or shared? Should the length and frequency be prescribed? Some teachers like to determine the length of the entry by a time limit when done in a class setting or measured by a page length or word count if done outside of class. Others may feel the length of the response is irrelevant. When

keeping a journal—writing every day and getting a response, not necessarily an evaluation—creating time for it and organizing the response is the most important part.

Traditional Methods of Keeping Journals

When keeping journals in a classroom setting, there have been various tried-and-true methods of organization. The most basic arrangement has students write in their journals daily on their own and then turn in the journals for review after a certain period, weekly or bi-weekly, for instance. Their teacher then reads the journals outside of class and returns them in a timely fashion. Unless students are keeping multiple journals or writing on loose-leaf paper, they won’t be able to continue writing until their notebooks are returned to them. Another obvious problem is the tremendous paper load created when journal entries are written for the teacher. Additionally, some would say the very act of collecting the writer’s property weakens their sense of ownership and control.

A permutation of this arrangement would have students bring their notebooks to class but then exchange with someone nearby to obtain a response. After reading and responding, they would return the notebook to the original owner. The problems with this type of exchange are even more pronounced than with the “write-and-collect” method. First, not every student is present for every class all the time, and sometimes, even though present, some arrive without the physical notebook or without the assignment. As a class-time, real-time activity, the response

is impossible to “make up” when students are absent. The second problem is with the exchange itself. Students tend to exchange with the same people out of habit or out of a desire for psychological safety. The third problem is the amount of time that can be allotted for such exchanges, given the demands of the curriculum. Too little time means some students are left without enough time to thoughtfully consider the entry and respond to it. Students who are slower writers might not have enough time to compose a full response, and so their responses will be briefer than those of their classmates. Additionally, those we might call “reluctant writers” could write just enough to get by and sit out the rest of the time. So, what gets written might not necessarily be the response the teacher had hoped for. Furthermore, the student exchange method lightens the paper load, but **the teacher doesn’t get to read either writing**—the original or the response—unless the notebooks are collected and somehow returned in time for the next exchange (see earlier discussion).



We need to provide students with more experience conversing in writing about their writing, with the objective of producing better writing from both writer and responder.

SHOULD TEACHERS GRADE EVERY PIECE OF STUDENT WRITING?

Don't Grade Every Piece of Paper: 8 Strategies for More Efficient and Effective Grading, *Bespoke ELA*

teacher. Students can develop their own sense of what makes a piece of writing good and get better at writing by doing more writing and paying attention to what works. Of course, when the journal writing is a part of a course—and at this point, students may not be self-motivated enough to make themselves into writers—someone will raise a hand and ask, “How much is this worth?” Though the motivation should be intrinsic, as teachers, we need a way to give the students some incentive, some credit, for the writing.

My Hack: A Redesigned Response Plan

My students write every day; that is, six of the seven days of the week—I count the weekend as one day. They compose a variety of types of writings, transactional and expressive, sometimes in composition notebooks and other times in electronic Dropbox files, and this series of daily writings that I think of as their journals creates an overwhelming amount of writing—a paper load—that needs a variety of responses. I have implemented a practice with my students that is a way to get out from under the paper load while getting students to write and respond to each other. Brannon and colleagues (2008) say, “We don’t grade the writing . . . but we do check to see that students are doing their work” (p. 12).

My “hack”—a shortcut to increase productivity and efficiency—has students experience the benefits of keeping a writing journal through a variety of writing types. My students write six times a week in sets of three paired assignments, shown in Figure 1.

The Sunday weekend writings focus on specific class content and the Friday writings focus on a novel that each student chooses to read. The Tuesday and Thursday writings are timed in-class free-writings.

The Monday and Wednesday writings, textbook-based responses, are the most traditional “write-and-respond” journal entries. I ask students to read various essays about writing-related topics found in their textbook, *The Subject Is Writing* (Bishop & Strickland, 2006), although this strategy would work equally well with articles found on the internet or selections of literary texts. The Monday night entry is a response to the “Sharing Ideas” questions that follow the specific textbook chapter assigned as reading for

Yet perhaps, in the spirit of Peter Elbow’s *Writing without Teachers* (1973), the writing and the response to writing needn’t always involve a

RESPONSE JOURNAL SCHEMA

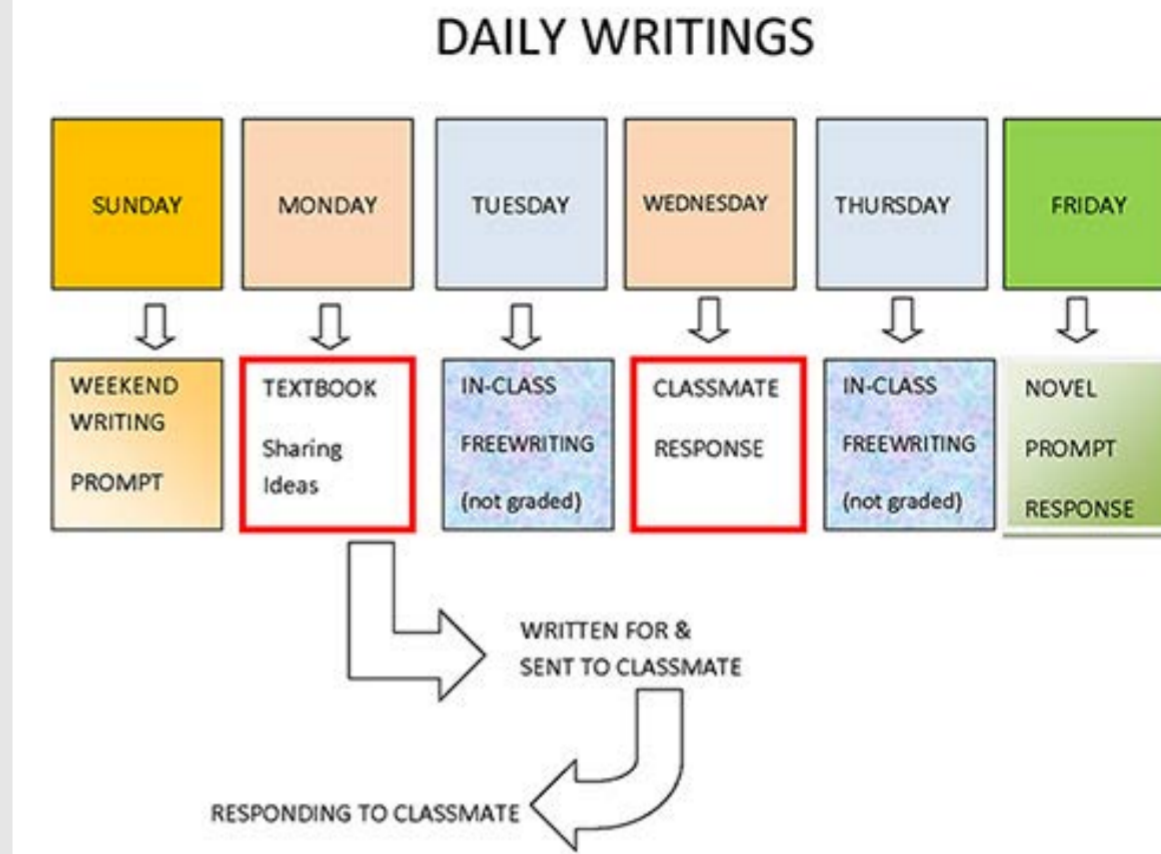


FIGURE 1. THE RESPONSE JOURNAL SCHEMA FOR DAILY WRITING

the week. Some of the questions call for persuasive or informative responses; others generate expressive or descriptive responses. The minimum length to receive full credit for each journal response is 500 words. Generally, I offer partial credit for journal responses less than the required minimum (though within a week most are writing more than 500 words); I am more rigid about not accepting late work, since the purpose of the daily journal writing assignment is organic to the content of the course and timely for the smooth running of the Monday/ Wednesday sequence for the journal.

Technology Facilitates the Journal Conversation

To receive credit, students submit a copy of their Monday entry to me in the course Dropbox folder (using Desire 2 Learn [D2L], a web-based management system chosen by the university, similar to Blackboard or Moodle), but in fact, they are actually writing this assignment (and the Wednesday one) to a classmate, a different person each week. The software technology facilitates the exchange: each student goes to the class roster on D2L and counts down the list the number that corresponds to the semester week and clicks on that classmate’s name. The software opens an email box addressed to that classmate, and the writer simply attaches a copy of that week’s Monday entry and clicks “send.” For example, for the fourth week, Emily F. sends her response to the student who is four below her on the list, Austin K. Emily will receive an email from

her classmate four above her on the list, Ethan B. Each classmate needs the email sent by Monday night because the Wednesday assignment depends on it. Each student receives an email every week from a classmate who is different from the person to whom they sent their own Monday entry.

The Wednesday journal entry is a 500-word response written to the author of the original email (see Figure 1). What each student writes back to the email author depends on the original content—a conversation, a simple response, agreeing, disagreeing, sharing similar stories, chatting about the topic. Again, the technology facilitates the Wednesday exchange: the student simply clicks the “reply” button on the email, uploads the response, and clicks “send.” A copy is submitted to me in the Dropbox for credit. In this way, the designated classmate changes on a rotating basis for each student, so students don’t get locked into a predictable pattern or stuck

with someone who is irresponsible. On Monday of the fifth week, for example, Emily would write to Sara and receive a response from Lauren, the students five down and five up, respectively. On

PEER RESPONSE AND COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative Learning/Learning with Peers, Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric

Peer Review, Common Core, and ELLs, Larry Ferlazzo at Edutopia

Wednesday of the fifth week, Emily would be writing back to Lauren and receiving a response from Sara.

As you can see, the technology that facilitates this arrangement solves most of the problems with the way journal exchanges used to be done. First, students do not need to be physically present to each other; they can send the response on their own schedule when the assignment is complete, eliminating the “make-up” issue. Second, students are not stuck with the same partner all semester; each week they meet a new classmate via text exchange. Third, the work is done outside of class time, so each writer works at their own pace, whatever time it takes. Fourth, everyone writes to the same minimum requirement of 500 words, so no one gets to disappear with a half-hearted attempt. And finally, the teacher can read each entry quickly without need for evaluation or comment and without physically taking the writing away from the author—the technology allows the author, a classmate, and the teacher each their own identical copy.

The Other Days of Writing

Although the Monday/Wednesday sequence is the heart of my written conversation system, students write other pieces with

different sets of expectations, generally designed to produce fragments, notes, early drafts, sketches, or possible thoughts that may or may not turn up in the three major writings for the semester: a narrative piece, a research report, and a persuasive argument. In the interest of space, I’ll briefly explain each of the other days in my writing-to-learn schema.

Since the class itself meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays, I do a five-minute “free-writing” in their writer’s composition notebook to a prompt, such as “an early memory of reading” or “my driver’s license.” These free-writings allow them to discover that one learns to write in the process of writing (Britten, 1993; Macrorie, 1985; Murray, 2011/1972). Conversation doesn’t come with assignments; they simply happen as a response to something that is said: one learns to converse in the act of conversation. As Brannon and colleagues (2008) tell us, we must “give class time for writing [to give] class time for thinking . . . and class time to share bits and pieces of this writing . . . so everyone can hear how a writer thinks or feels or makes sense of experience” (p. 14). And so, once time is up, I ask if someone would like to read their free-writing. If I wait long enough, I can usually get three or four people to share without having to call upon anyone. Although I write along with them, I don’t read my free-writing because I don’t want mine to

CONSTRUCTIVE COMMENTARY IN PEER RESPONSE

Strategies for Using Peer Review to Help Students Improve Their Writing, Washington University in St. Louis

8 Tips for Giving Great Peer Feedback, Hubspot

be perceived as the model, and I feel students are more reluctant to share their writing if they know I’ll fill the void. As with the Monday/Wednesday writings, I don’t evaluate, but **I do respond with a positive**

conversational comment. Their classmates participate in the conversation through implicit listening and the occasional comment.

Also, as part of the course, I ask them to read a novel of their own choice, the only limitation being that someone else in class must be willing to read the same title. This semester I have students reading *Gone Girl*, *The Help*, *The Art of Racing in the Rain*, *House Rules*, and *Calico Joe*, among others. Their Friday journal writing—outside of class and submitted to the Dropbox—is a conversational response to a simple prompt about the novel they are reading: *tell about the characters so far, describe the plot so far, offer a personal connection, make a connection to the world*, and so forth. I ask them

to share the Friday response that they submit to me with a classmate reading the same novel, sharing in a way that models book club conversation. My students tell me in their end-of-the-semester reflections that even though they were initially nervous about the weekly writings, they enjoyed and felt confident sharing their thoughts about the novel rather than answering questions.

The final piece of their journal is the Sunday weekend writing, either ending the week or beginning the next, that addresses a problem that has been suggested by the subject of the week's textbook reading or one that relates to the previous or upcoming writing assignment we are working on. For example, if the topic for the week includes teaching summary writing, the Sunday problem will give students directions on how to do a summary and ask them to summarize a practice article I've chosen, including answering several brief questions about the author of the article, information that can be quickly found by an internet search. Some weeks' responses are shared in Discussion Boards, allowing further conversations with classmates and their responses.



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All in all, I believe asking students to write daily and share that writing is important in helping them view writing as a tool for learning and responding to their learning and to each other. Journal writing supported by organized responses is helping my students learn to converse about writing and, hopefully, to begin to respond to writing as both readers and writers. As Cindy Urbanski, Associate Director of the UNC Charlotte Writing Project, says, we “write together [to] . . . learn about writing, not for some assessment, but as people who are writers” (Brannon et al., 2008, p. 25). The conversation continues, since the only way to get better at writing is by writing; there are no shortcuts.

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