



Literacy Connects

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Teaching the Language of Written Response

Teaching students to respond to each other’s writing is an important, yet often neglected, part of teaching writing. It is one of the more difficult aspects of writing instruction. Often teachers lament their students’ inability to discuss writing in terms no more complex than, “I like it.” It is important to teach students the appropriate language to use, so they can comment on one another’s work in helpful and non-threatening ways. This will help to build trust among the response group members so suggestions are taken seriously and constructively.

When responding to writing, always begin with positive comments and objective observations about the work. Next, move to questions and suggestions for improvement. It is helpful to model this technique for students and provide them with sentence starters to help them frame their comments. A good strategy for encouraging response on early drafts is to have small groups (no more than five) read their work aloud to each other. The student can read his/her paper aloud while the rest of the group listens. Then the student reads the draft a second time while the group members jot down comments using a two-column format. The left column can be marked with a + for positive comments and the right side, with a ? for questions and suggestions. Once all group members have responded, students should collect their peer responses and write a second draft based on group feedback. Following is an example of this strategy and some sentence starters that will help students learn appropriate language for writing response.

+	?
(positive comments and observations)	(questions and suggestions)
I liked the part about.... I think the strongest part of your paper is.... I think the most interesting part of your paper is.. I like the way you described.... This writing reminded me of.... I think the (dialogue/plot/character/setting) is realistic.... I like the (lead/conclusion) because.... I think the main idea is I noticed.... I like _____ (a specific word) because I like how you vary your sentences, for example _____ I like how you use specific examples/details, for example _____. I think using first person point of view works well because....	Could you explain _____ more? What would happen if you? Could you leave out? How could you reword your lead to hook the reader? How could you rewrite your conclusion, so the reader feels satisfied? I had a question about _____. Could you explain what you meant? Could you use a different word for _____, because.... Could you start a new paragraph here? Could you combine these paragraphs? Could you combine these sentences to create a more complex sentence? Could you change these sentence beginnings to add more sentence variety?

This type of peer response works well in any content area where writing is encouraged. Teaching students how to respond to the writing of others will not only help them grow as writers, but it will greatly relieve the onerous chore of grading all those messy first drafts.

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