Teacher-Talk and Student-Talk: Peer Response Strategies in Two Eighth-Grade Classes

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Teacher-Talk and Student-Talk: Peer Response Strategies in Two Eighth-Grade Classes

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to compare the relative effectiveness of teacher-controlled response groups on student writing performance with the relative effectiveness of student-controlled response groups on student writing performance. In the study, two eighth grade language arts classes, one with twenty-four students and the other with twenty-three, participated in a nine-week long writing exercise. Although the study indicated a similar degree of improvement between teacher-talk and student-talk response groups, both types of response groups appear to have their rightful place in the writing process. Students from both sections did show improvement in their writing proficiency. Moreover, both sections created mini-writing communities that encourage each other to write.

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Teacher-Talk and Student-Talk:
Peer Response Strategies in Two Eighth-Grade Classes

by
Charles A. Muether
B.A. Dordt College, 1987

Action Research Report
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Department of Education
Dordt College
Sioux Center, Iowa
April 1997
Teacher-Talk and Student-Talk:

Peer Response Strategies in Two Eighth-Grade Classes

by

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Teacher-Talk and Student-Talk: 
Peer Response Strategies in Two Eighth-Grade Classes

High school and middle school English teachers of writing have been inundated with books, seminars, and workshops on exploring the writing process, constructing a writing workshop, and empowering the student-writer. Those in the profession have leaned toward anecdotal confirmation, "stories of students and teachers who discover in cooperation what children can do, case studies rich with the context of the classroom that show mediated learning and all its flowers" (Atwell, 1991, p. 19). While agreeing that the writing process hinges on the interaction between the writer and reader, writing instructors, until recently, have done little to research empirically the impact small group interaction has on writing proficiency. One confounding factor that complicated the study of response groups was the initial disagreement regarding definition. Whereas some practitioners defined response groups as opportunities to think and write collaboratively, others viewed response groups as occasions for editing student writing; the latter has become part of the conventional definition that identifies response groups as opportunities for responding to one another's writing (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988).

Although a common definition has been achieved, the results of response groups on student writing have found little commonality. Teacher-researchers espousing the writing process, the unfolding of writing in five progressive steps, pre-writing, writing, rewriting, editing, and publishing, (DiPardo & Freedman, 1988) found peer groups conducive to providing ongoing response in the process of revision, but those favoring instructor-controlled classrooms (classrooms in which the teacher uses lecturing predominantly for whole class instruction)
cited response groups as an artificial means in gaining writing proficiency.

To determine the relative effectiveness of peer response groups, I set out to compare the use of peer response groups in two of my eighth grade language arts classes. In both eighth grade language arts sections, I divided the classes into smaller response groups. In my first eighth grade section, students met in their response groups, and I guided their responses to each other by *teacher-talk*, teacher suggested response cues. In my second eighth grade language arts section, students also met in response groups but were guided in their responses to each other by *student-talk*, student-initiated discussion without the use of teacher-provided detailed response sheets during peer response sessions. Throughout the course of nine weeks, students' writings were collected and filed in *showcase* portfolios, folders that held polished pieces of writing. Students in both classes were permitted to determine at what point a particular writing piece was polished enough to go into the showcase portfolios. A total of three pieces was collected from each student.

In this study, I asked the following questions about peer response groups:

1. *From teacher-talk*: Do response groups adhere to teacher suggestions? Has the quality of writing been enriched from the use of this response group type? To what extent are the response groups on task? Do they make use of the responses in revising their writing?

2. *From student-talk*: Do response groups adhere to student suggestions? Has the quality of writing been enriched from the use of this response group type? To what extent are the response
groups on task? How does spontaneous student response affect students in their revising process?

The purpose of my study is to compare the relative effectiveness of teacher-controlled response groups on student writing performance with the relative effectiveness of student-controlled response groups on student writing performance.

Review of Literature

A majority of writing teachers recommend peer response groups as an instrumental means in developing students' revision skills (Gere & Stevens, 1985). Cazden (1988) argues that peer discussion is meaningful in that it provides students with perspectives outside their own. Peer interaction furnishes an audience and creates opportunities for exploration beyond the rhetoric between teacher and student. Similarly, Gere and Stevens (1985) have proposed that student response is more personable, specific, and divergent than teacher response. Within the revision process, peer interaction allows students "to take on the reciprocal roles of author and editor, thus gaining practice in evaluating texts from a reader's perspective of both their own and others' texts" (Stoddard & MacArthur, 1993, p. 79). In response groups, students scrutinize writings based on their own perceptions and propose questions and answers arising from writing dilemmas.

Notwithstanding the abundant descriptive research supporting response group usage, critics have questioned the peer response strategy. Harris (1992), a proponent of individualized approaches to writing instruction, has collected studies debasing the claims of response groups advocates:
I hear echoes of these research studies when I talk with students in tutorials or interview applicants for peer tutoring. Some students dismiss peer responses because they question the skills of the person offering the advice, because the group never gets beyond the level of 'The paper's OK' or 'You misspelled a word,' or because they too feel the peer pressure not to embarrass each other. 

(p. 378)

Other studies, which are exclusively based on the writing instructors’ own experiences in the classroom, have asserted that peer response groups suffer from student apathy, perfunctory discussion, and lack of preparedness (Vatalaro, 1992). What appears to work in one classroom may not be easily exportable to another. Coleman's ethnographic study (1987) found response groups serving a positive collaborative purpose:

For these students, being in a response group--collaborative learning situation--had served its purpose. They had moved farther away from being inexperienced writers and were doing more of the kinds of things that experienced writers do--experience dissonance, doing more self-monitoring, and beginning to write passionately and read critically. When they read their own papers, the papers talked back. (p.12)

Disagreement among teacher-researchers often centers on the logistics of peer response groups. Moffet and Wagner (1983) stressed the importance of teacher assistance in which student readers were instructed how to critique student writing. Elbow (1981) underscored the need for writers to be in control and guide the responses with little teacher intervention.
Freedman's ethnographic study (1992) on two ninth-grade response
groups sought to determine how response groups fit into teachers' plans for
writing instruction and how those plans affected the response groups. In
addition, she concluded that students' on-task performance was significantly
higher when response sheets were used as opposed to spontaneous discussion,
and that the success of peer response groups is dependent on the framework
which teachers use to construct the group interaction.

Despite the excess of descriptive research that focuses on the theories
behind response groups or the possibilities of peer interaction, there appears to
be a scarcity of empirical data. The literature reveals little about the
relationship between peer response and writing proficiency. Within the
research, the question of whether response groups improve student writing
appears secondary to the question of whether response groups foster writing
environments, and whether students are more interested in what they are
writing because of response groups.

Method

Participants

In the study, two eighth grade language arts classes, one with twenty-
four students and the other with twenty-three, participated in the nine-week-
long writing exercise. Twelve boys and twelve girls were in section 8A, and
twelve boys and eleven girls were in section 8B. Both sections made up the
entire eighth grade student body of Pella Christian Grade School. Both
sections were taught in two language arts periods of 42 minutes each.

Four teachers were integrally involved in the study. I taught both
sections of eighth grade students, and three teachers outside of the school system were chosen as teacher-raters, in order to objectively evaluate the student writings. All four teachers valued response groups as an effective strategy in creating writing communities.

**Design and Procedure**

In section 8A, I placed the participants in six groups of four students. In section 8B, I divided the participants into five groups, three groups of five students and two groups of four students. I formed the response groups by surveying seventh grade writing portfolios and determining students' writing proficiency using a writing rubric. I assessed the seventh grade student writings on the basis of ideas, organization, writing voice, word choice, sentence structure, and convention in order to ensure that each group included students with varied writing proficiency. For example, any one group included students who scored high on the rubric and students who didn’t score as high. The objective was to maintain a similar range of proficiency in each group. A similar rubric would later be used to assess student writing in this study. The previous year's Iowa Test of Basic Skills was also studied. Most students in both sections scored above the eightieth percentile in language arts-related skills. Based on a survey given at the beginning of the school year, eighty-five percent of the eighth graders responded to creative writing (writing short stories, narratives, essays, and poems) as an enjoyable activity.

Students in each eighth grade section were placed by the administration and two seventh grade teachers to ensure relative equality in gender and overall academic ability. A staff member blind of the research study arbitrarily assigned section 8A the teacher-talk method of instruction and section 8B the
student-talk method.

Students participated in a writing workshop program called "Ink Shop," a writing program that I have developed. In one quarter, students were immersed in the essay and short story genres. During a typical writing workshop week, students read writing models on Mondays and Tuesdays. These models ranged from professional literature to writings generated from last year's eighth graders. During this time, I presented the writing assignment for the week (see Appendices 3 and 6). This writing assignment would coincide with the English grammar units so that students could readily apply the selected skills. At different points in the quarter, mechanics, usage, and style were addressed in direct relation to the writing assignment. Wednesdays were used as pre-writing days in which students engaged in a variety of brainstorming writing strategies. Thursdays were devoted to free-writing, and on Fridays students met in peer response groups to discuss their work. Students were given six writing assignments in the quarter, five of which were personal narratives or essays and one a short story.

The week before the first Ink Shop session, students wrote a pre-workshop narrative that would serve as a baseline measurement against which later pieces would be compared. Following this initial set-up week, response groups met weekly for a total of seven sessions. In the seven sessions, response groups were scheduled; there were no impromptu meetings. Students knew in advance when the groups would meet. In the first six sessions for both classes, I defined the response group as an opportunity to share and ask questions about each other's writing content and to suggest possibilities for revision. In the seventh session, after students had chosen two of their
favorite pieces, the response groups focused less on style and content, and more on mechanics, spelling, and grammar.

In the teacher-talk response groups, I provided students with response prompts that pointedly directed students in their discussion after the readings (see Appendices 4 and 7). In the student-talk response groups, I distributed comment sheets with less specific suggestions for response (see Appendices 5 and 8). I encouraged students to comment generously on each other's pieces; however, I did not tell them specifically what to look for or what suggestions to make toward improvement.

The teacher-talk and student-talk response groups followed parallel steps. First, group members would rotate their writing portfolios clockwise so that the peer to their left would read their piece. Three or four comment sheets were attached to each writing piece. Second, students in each group would immediately respond to the author, writing on a comment sheet. At my cue, they would rotate the portfolios again, with each group member reading the writing piece and responding using an attached comment sheet. Students were instructed to write on a clean comment sheet and not to read what comments others had written. Students had ample time to read and to comment. When students finished reading and commenting on a portfolio, they were instructed to read from their novels until everyone was ready to rotate. On different occasions, four students in the teacher-talk response groups and two students in the student-talk groups felt they did not have adequate time to read and comment on a lengthy manuscript. This rotating process would continue until everyone in their group had read all the other pieces. Finally, after completing all rotations, each writer could orally respond to the group's comments or
request further feedback.

As students began the responding process, I monitored the peer response sessions. I collected the response sheets after the writers had opportunity to review them. To determine how on-task or how well students engaged themselves in the process of responding to each other, two comment samples of both response groups were later evaluated for specificity and relevancy. I collected the first and sixth writing workshop assignments and assigned each response sheet a rating of one, two, or three. A rating of three indicated the comment was specific to the writing and relevant in content. A rating of two suggested the comment was somewhat specific and somewhat relevant in content. A rating of one meant that the comment was too general and not directly relevant in content. For example, if a student responded with "very good" this would receive a one rating. Conversely, if a student specifically stated what was good about the writing and presented a useful suggestion for improvement, the comment would receive a three rating. For the "Of Rosy Cheeks and Rolling Eyes" essay assignment, students were to write a narrative about an embarrassing moment in their lives (see Appendix 10). In the response groups, one comment receiving a three rating stated, "Your opening paragraph reveals too much of the embarrassment. You were supposed to start off with a teaser and then lead up to the embarrassment later on. The final paragraph should have concluded the embarrassing moment." A comment rated as a two stated, "I really like your embarrassment story. I think you could show more details." A one-rated comment for this essay read, "This was funny. I'm glad it didn't happen to me."

At the conclusion of the nine weeks, I collected three pieces of writing
from each student, the beginning pre-workshop piece and the two chosen favorite writings. Each writing was photocopied three times, and the copies were submitted to three upper elementary English teachers for rating. In order to ensure that the teacher-raters were unaware of the study's purpose, student writings were identified by numbers, and writings from both sections, that is, from the teacher-talk section and the student-talk section, were mixed together. Each teacher-rater received 141 writing pieces, which included both the pre-workshop writings and the chosen favorites.

I chose the teacher-raters from a pool of ten experienced upper elementary and middle school English teachers who were willing to participate in the study. Out of the ten teachers, two decided to drop out and the eight remaining teachers evaluated ten writing samples using a standard writing rubric. Three teachers whose rubric evaluations were the most consistent were selected to be the teacher-raters for this study. After the teacher-raters were selected, I met with them to discuss more specifically the mechanics of the rubric.

For this study, the rubric contained six categories the teacher-raters were to evaluate: ideas and content, organization, voice, word choice, sentence structure, and convention (see Appendix 1). In each category, the teacher-raters assigned a rating number from one to five, with five suggesting excellence. On any given piece, the writing's final score was calculated by averaging the scores from all three teacher-raters. The average score of each pre-workshop piece was compared with the combined average of both favorite pieces for that student.
Results

All statistical tests for this research study were conducted with an alpha level of .05. Table 1 displays the mean ratings of the pre-writing scores. An independent samples t test revealed no significant difference between the teacher-talk average ($M = 3.24, SD = .312$) and student-talk average ($M = 3.23, SD = .420$), $t(45) = -.08, p = .935$ on the pre-writing assignment. The nearly identical averages suggest the groups were equivalent at the beginning of the study.

An independent samples t test was used to analyze the means of the post-writing scores of both groups. The teacher-talk score of the two student-chosen writings ($M = 3.69, SD = .444$) was not significantly different from the student-talk score ($M = 3.71, SD = .257$), $t(37.13) = .19, p = .849$. Table 1 also shows the average improvement the post-writing scores reflected, that is, the difference between the post-writing average score and the pre-writing average score. The teacher-talk writings indicated no significant difference in the degree of improvement ($M = .44, SD = .428$) compared to the improvement of the student-talk writings ($M = .47, SD = .468$), $t(45) = .22, p = .826$.

Table 1
Mean Rating Before and After

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing Rubric Category</th>
<th>Teacher-Talk</th>
<th>Student-Talk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pre</td>
<td>Post</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Ideas &amp; Content</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>3.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Organization</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Voice</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>4.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Word Choice</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>3.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Sentence Structure</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>3.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Convention</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>3.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>3.24</td>
<td>3.69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A comparison of the six rubric categories indicated no significant differences in improvement between the two groups, as displayed in Table 1. However, comparisons in two of the rubric categories approached statistical significance in categories two (organization), $t(45) = 1.73, p = .091$ and three (voice), $t(45) = -1.99, p = .052$. This comparison indicates a possible trend that the teacher-talk students improved more in category three (voice), and the student-talk students showed more improvement in category two (organization).

Discussion

The statistical results indicate that there was no significant difference in either the average writing scores or the degree of improvement between the teacher-talk and student-talk groups. However, both groups' post-writing average scores were higher than their pre-writing scores, suggesting that either response group type could be effective in improving writing proficiency. The nearly identical pre-workshop averages would indicate that the two groups were equivalent at the beginning of the study. Moreover, students from both eighth grade sections had averaged higher than eighty percent on ITBS and students from both sections found writing overall to be an enjoyable activity. Since both response groups showed similar improvement, I concluded that proficient students in this study did not necessarily need the additional teacher prompting in order to increase their writing fluency. In further support of this conclusion, during the first two days of any given writing workshop week, I generated with students from both sections a list of questions writers ask themselves when they put together an essay. Depending on the essay topic,
students collectively thought out the mental process a writer may undergo prior to the actual writing of the piece. As one example, for the descriptive essay assignment "Celebrate Iowa's Sesquicentennial," we discussed how a writer connects the five senses in describing a special Iowa place (see Appendix 9). Subsequently, we read poems and essays by Michael Carey and Gary Paulsen. Students listed questions that were essential for the writer to answer in the piece. Such questions included: How did the metaphor add to the imagery? Is the description a universal one or is it unique to the writer's perspective? How does the first paragraph or ensuing paragraphs introduce the description?

As we read professional and student models, we also spent time studying writing recipes. Although some debate exists as to the advantages of using recipe writing or some type of writing model, I found in my experience in teaching writing to middle school students, that eighth grade students generally desire and even require some structure to a creative writing assignment. Middle school writers enjoy venturing out in the world of prose, but many students want a map to guide them through the composition. For this reason, I presented the same detailed introduction to both types of response groups. In another example of a writing assignment chosen for this study, Appendix 3 shows the explanation of the "I Got It!" essay along with a detailed writing recipe. The detailed introductions to the writing assignments and the reading of writing models may have prevented a statistically significant difference between the improvement of the two response groups. Much of the content on the teacher-talk response sheet was addressed in the introduction of the writing assignment. Perhaps if the student-talk students had been
encouraged to free write without any topical or writing methodology suggestions in the assignment introductions, I might have discovered more of a difference between the student-talk and teacher-talk response groups.

The results of this study may suggest that given a good introduction to a writing assignment, the reading of prose models, and the ensuing discussion that results from posing the kinds of questions writers ask, a teacher directed response sheet may not be any more necessary than a blank sheet of paper during response group sessions. A concern for many writing teachers is that students who are not guided through their personal responses to peer writings will fall into the "good job" syndrome. My definition of the "good job" syndrome is the propensity for some students to write a general comment without addressing the specifics of content or mechanics. In an attempt to avoid this problem, I reminded both types of response groups in the beginning of each response session to avoid using generalities or ambiguous comments. I specifically told each section to respond meaningfully, that is, to respond positively to the writer and to respond constructively, indicating detailed suggestions for how the writer could improve the essay.

As was previously discussed, response sheets from both groups were reviewed and assigned a rating of three, two, or one, depending on the specificity and relevancy of the comments. Of the teacher-talk responses, 44.4 percent received a rating of three, 44.6 percent were rated as two, and 11 percent were assigned a rating of one. The student-talk responses were evaluated with 37.9 percent three ratings, 39.8 percent ratings of two, and 22.3 percent ratings of one. From this comparison it appears that the teacher-talk respondents were half as likely to respond with general remarks than the
student-talk respondents. However, the fact that the teacher-talk responses were more frequently specific and relevant did not translate into a higher degree of improvement in writing scores of the teacher-talk group as opposed to the degree of improvement of the student-talk group. One reason for this similar degree of improvement may be that in any given student-talk response group writers received enough specific and relevant comments necessary to foster improvement in their writing.

Still, the study indicated possible improvement trends within two rubric categories: the teacher-talk improvement in category three (organization) and the student-talk improvement in category two (voice). One conceivable reason why students in the teacher-talk response groups excelled in rubric category voice is that the teacher-talk response sheets tended to prompt peers to comment on how the author's tone affected the overall writing. The teacher-talk response sheets seemed to encourage students to respond metacognitively, that is, to react to how they felt the writer conveyed his/her thoughts. In the writing rubric, for a writer to receive a five rating on voice, the writer must demonstrate how much he/she cares about the topic and demonstrate originality as well as show liveliness, humor, or suspense. Students were encouraged on the teacher-talk response sheets to indicate how well the writer created a tone in the writing.

The student-talk improvement in the category of organization could be attributed to the lack of directives on the student-talk response sheet. The response sheet did not ask students to respond to any given rubric category; hence, the students seemed to gravitate their comments toward structure or sequence. Since student-talk respondents were not encouraged to look for
ideas, voice, word choice, sentence structure or mechanics, their comments indicated a common concern with the sequence of events. The majority of the on-task comments focused on organization and transition. For example, one student stated, "The order of events doesn't make sense to me." Another student responded, "I don't think I understand what you are saying. You seem to jump around a lot." One respondent commented, "You are missing key transitional sentences that bridge the flashback to the present reality."

Although this study indicated a similar degree of improvement between the teacher-talk and student-talk response groups, both types of response groups appear to have their rightful place in the writing process. Students from both sections did show improvement in their writing proficiency. Moreover, both sections created mini-writing communities that encouraged each other to write. One of the outcomes of this study that I had not foreseen was the anticipation level of the students. Both sections seemed to be genuinely excited about sharing their writing with their response groups. Even toward the end when I thought that the response groups might have become routine, students continued to gear up for the response sessions. When revising and editing prose became a communal activity, these students realized that they would have a weekly audience for their writing.

Implications for Classroom Practice and for Further Research

In previous years when I was basically my students' only audience, the writing process became nearly an isolated exercise. The student wrote and the teacher commented. The response groups create a realm of authenticity that students find exciting. After each response session when students received
their portfolios, both sections encountered a period of silence. Students were busily reading the comments on the response sheets. I liken this post-response session activity to the annual yearbook signing. When students purchase yearbooks, they do so not just for the memories captured by the photographs but also for the comments they receive from each other. Both sections of eighth graders seemed eager to find out what their peers felt about their writing. From this study, I have found both types of response groups to be helpful in creating a larger caring audience that encourages its members to become better and more thoughtful writers.

This study provides one look at student response groups, a strategy for teaching writing that has become more common in recent years. My study is limited to two eighth grade classrooms with a population of highly motivated academic achievers. Moreover, the study examines response groups in light of a carefully regimented series of writing assignments. Based on these writing assignments, the study compares the assessments of one response group with another. The results of this comparison suggest questions for further research.

In particular, both groups began their respective writing workshops with the exact teacher-initiated writing assignment. In the student-talk section, students were not entirely free to talk about how they might write on a certain theme. Instead, they were given the same assignment as the teacher-talk group. A future study might explore a student-talk response section that experiences much less teacher intervention. What might happen if the student-talk section was given a theme or genre and from that point began to write without the considerations of a writing model?

Another question worth exploring is the issue of spoken response. This
study is more specifically geared toward written response. How might oral communication enhance the students' writing fluency? Studies in the past have examined the contribution peer talk has made in the creative writing process. Furthermore, how would response groups affect the pre-writing stage of the writing process? If students were to begin a writing workshop together and then later come together to respond, how might their writing be affected by a pre-writing response session in which students generate ideas within their groups?

In this particular study, the distinction between the teacher-talk and student-talk response groups is more apparent in the use of the actual response sheet device. In subsequent studies, creating more distinction between the teacher-talk and student-talk response groups may be useful in determining not only how relevantly students respond to each other's writings but also how effectively students collaborate with each other with progressively more or less teacher intervention.
References


Appendices
Appendix 1
Title of Manuscript

Name

***Remember to staple this rubric sheet to the manuscript immediately after completing the assessment***

Instructions: Please circle the number below all six categories as you evaluate the writing.

# Writing Rubric

## I. Ideas and Content

- **5 paper**
  
  The writer chooses vivid and interesting details and the subject is clear.

- **4 paper**
  
  The writer holds the reader's attention well and the subject is basically clear.

- **3 paper**
  
  The writer's content, although interesting, is not consistently clear.

- **2 paper**
  
  The writer has not developed ideas that are clear and interesting.

- **1 paper**
  
  The writer's content has not been sufficiently explored nor effectively communicated.

## IV. Word Choice

- **5 paper**
  
  The writer selects words that are accurate, strong, specific, and original.

- **4 paper**
  
  The writer selects words that are accurate and precise.

- **3 paper**
  
  The writer selects words that are general and ordinary.

- **2 paper**
  
  The writer uses slang or cliches and may use words inappropriately.

- **1 paper**
  
  The writer uses words that are vague, flat, and non-descriptive.

## II. Organization

- **5 paper**
  
  The writer uses transitional sentences that flow smoothly. The writer has an inviting beginning and an appropriate ending.

- **4 paper**
  
  The writer introduces and concludes well, although may need to provide transitional sentences.

- **3 paper**
  
  The writer may have used details out of place or has written too much on a given detail.

- **2 paper**
  
  The writer does not provide a beginning or ending or a consistent sense of direction.

- **1 paper**
  
  The writer is not coherent with points out of place.

## V. Sentence Structure

- **5 paper**
  
  The writer uses a variety of compound/complex sentences.

- **4 paper**
  
  The writer uses a variety of simple and compound sentences.

- **3 paper**
  
  The writer uses simple sentences effectively.

- **2 paper**
  
  The writer uses sentences that may be wordy or tend to be run-ons or fragments.

- **1 paper**
  
  The writer uses sentences that are awkward, confusing, and choppy.

## III. Voice

- **5 paper**
  
  The writer cares about the topic and demonstrates originality, liveliness, excitement, humor, or suspense.

- **4 paper**
  
  The writer is in tune with the topic and demonstrates some creativity.

- **3 paper**
  
  The writer may not be well in touch with the subject and may lack some creativity.

- **2 paper**
  
  The writer is distant from the topic and writes impersonally.

- **1 paper**
  
  The writer does not care for or about the topic, writing in a flat, lifeless tone.

## VI. Convention

- **5 paper**
  
  The writer's punctuation, spelling, grammar, and mechanics are commendable.

- **4 paper**
  
  The writer's work is basically clean of mechanical error.

- **3 paper**
  
  The writer has included some errors in grammar, capitalization, punctuation, or spelling.

- **2 paper**
  
  The writer has included many errors in grammar, capitalization, punctuation, or spelling.

- **1 paper**
  
  The writer has not adequately proofread for his/her
September 2, 1996

Dear Parent:

The education and psychology departments of Dordt College support the practice of informed consent and protection for human participants involved in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you will allow your child to participate in the present study.

Your child will be participating in a writing workshop in which he/she will be sharing his/her writings with other peers in a group. This would be typical any year in the seventh grade English class. Some students will receive writing prompts and other forms of teacher assistance whereas other students will not receive the same assistance. Pella Christian Grade School assures that all children will receive an equitable study in writing composition. For the purpose of this research study, teacher Chuck Muether will experiment with different types of writing environments. The study will not exceed nine weeks.

If you have any questions concerning this study before or after it is completed, you may contact the teachers or the school.

Sincerely,

Chuck Muether
Language Arts Chair

Dan Netz
Principal

Please sign informing consent of participation in the study
The "I Got It!" Personal Essay

The Explanation: The "I Got it!" essay is a personal narrative that shows through a series of events how the writer comes to really understand something. In Bret Pruehs' essay (see other side of this sheet), he comes to realize what perseverance is all about, what the rewards are, and when the moment arrives, how he becomes instrumental in sharing the experience with one younger than he.

The Writing Recipe: Understand that the steps below are meant to guide you through this style of writing. Feel free to religiously follow them or use them as mere reference points.

Paragraph One: The introductory paragraph should be a short one that invites the reader into the immediate action. It is all showing. Notice how Pruehs shows the action. He teases us with sudden activity using an exaggerated simile. There's nothing to tell here, but everything to show. He doesn't overdo it, but throws out a bite for the reader.

Paragraph Two: This paragraph is what writers call exposition. It is a paragraph that gives a little history that will lead up to the climactic discovery of the I got it (the discovery). It is a paragraph that explains how it all began. Read Pruehs' piece and see how his second paragraph sets up the stage for the impending drama.

Paragraph Three: This paragraph is commonly known as a transition paragraph; it bridges paragraph two with paragraphs three and four. Transition paragraphs are extremely important if you, the writer, are going to jump in time to a next series of events.

Paragraph Four: This paragraph is what I call the "climax next door neighbor" which is really a paragraph that brings the reader right into the neighborhood of the climax. Pruehs has us sitting in Comiskey Park and just moments away from the I got it.

Paragraph Five: The climax! The words are different but the action here is the same action with which the writer begins the essay. Read Pruehs' fifth paragraph again and then read his introductory paragraph.

Paragraph Six: I call this the "Icing on the cake" paragraph. After the climax, the writer explains how the event has made an impact on his/her life. In Pruehs' case, he shares with the reader what he learned from the experience, and (this is a big AND) he tells us how he was able to help someone else realize his dreams. "I Got It." Permission to Copy (McDougal, Littell).
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Writers' Workshop 8

Teacher Talk - The “I Got It!” Personal Essay

Fill in with as much detail as possible each section of this critique sheet.

This “I Got It!” essay is a personal narrative that shows through a series of events how the author comes to really understand something. Tell the author what you thought he/she understood through that series of events.

The introductory paragraph of this essay should be short but inviting. Tell the author if you think he/she is showing the action or telling the action. Also, tell the author what you thought or didn’t think was interesting about the first paragraph.

Paragraphs 2 and/or following should be expository, that is, this(these) paragraph(s) should give you the history that leads up to the climactic discovery of the “I Got It!” Tell the author how clearly you thought he/she has led up too the climax.

Find the climax paragraph and tell the author your feelings about the climax.

The final paragraph should either conclude the essay or somehow show what the author has learned through the “I Got It!” experience. Tell the author how clearly you thought he/she has concluded the essay.

Finally, state as specifically as you can what you thought of the essay overall.
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Writers' Workshop 8

Student Talk

The "I Got It!" Personal Essay

Write out comments in the space below that you believe will be useful to the writer. Avoid using ambiguous phrases like "That was really good." State specifically what was good about the piece and what you think could improve it. Please put your initials at the end of your comments.
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Writers' Workshop 8
The Character Sketch

The Explanation: Each of us has known someone who has made a great impact on our lives. The purpose of this essay assignment is to verbally sketch that someone, showing vividly his/her character traits.

The Writing Recipe: Understand that the steps below are meant to guide you through this style of writing. Feel free to religiously follow them or use them as mere reference points.

Paragraphs One and Two: The first paragraph should descriptively state who the character is. In Anaya's character sketch, he writes, "My grandfather was a plain man, a farmer. . . ." In the second paragraph, Anaya clues the reader into the physical characteristics of his grandfather. Such details will have bearing on the rest of the narrative. Later in the same paragraph, he sets up the beginning of a special memory: "For me it was a magical place."

Paragraphs Three and Four: These paragraphs take the reader into the writer's special memory of the character. Anaya writes, "I remember once, while out hoeing the fields. . . ." Paragraph four's memory dovetails with paragraph three.

Paragraph Five: This paragraph is commonly known as a transition paragraph. Anaya uses this paragraph device to bridge the two memories in paragraphs three and four with the memories in paragraphs six and seven.

Paragraphs Six and Seven: These paragraphs contain significant memories that paint a fuller perspective of the character.

Paragraphs Eight through Ten: These paragraphs shift away from the memories and description of the character. The writer takes more liberty to share how he/she feels about the character. Anaya writes in paragraph eight, "We were all sons and daughters to him." In paragraph nine he states, "I am glad I knew my grandfather. I am glad there are still times when I can see him in my dreams, hear him in my reverie." Be sure that you, as the writer, finish the character sketch with a personal salute to your character.
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Writing Workshop 8

Teacher Talk - The Character Sketch

Fill in with as much detail as possible each section of this critique sheet.

This character sketch is an essay that describes the physical and mental characteristics of the subject. Tell the author what you know and/or appreciate about the physical and mental characteristics of the subject.

The first two paragraphs of this essay should establish who the subject is and what the subject means to the author. Tell the author what you think he/she feels about the subject based only on the first two paragraphs. Also, tell the author what you think the tone of the essay will be based on the first two paragraphs.

In the early stages of the character sketch, a few memories are shared by the author. How do these memories differ from the later memories described by the author in the later paragraphs? What do you know in the later memories that you didn't know in the earlier ones?

In the final paragraph or two, what does the author say about how the subject has influenced him/her? Is this influence clear to you? If not, what questions do you have for the author to assist him/her in improving the clarity of the influence?

Finally, state as specifically as you can what you thought of the character sketch overall.
Write out comments in the space below that you believe will be useful to the writer. Since this essay is a character sketch, focus your comments on how successfully you felt the character was portrayed by the author.
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Writers' Workshop 8

CELEBRATE IOWA'S SESQUICENTENNIAL

The Explanation: This week we are going to celebrate Iowa's sesquicentennial by writing a descriptive essay or personal narrative about Iowa. There are many different possibilities but some ideas could include describing your favorite Iowa place, Iowa activity, Iowa food, or other Iowa cultural topics. In the past, students have written about farm experiences, the Iowa Cubs, the Des Moines Buccaneers, the Hawkeyes, the Cyclones, the State Fair, Tulip Time, etc.

The secret of success for this essay topic lies in two areas. One, is your theme distinctly Iowan? Two, did you describe that theme using the five senses: sight, touch, taste, hearing, smell? One student once wrote about his experience at Kinnick stadium; he basically wrote about the statistics of a football game. Interesting? Not really. Conversely, another student wrote about his first experience at Kinnick stadium and described the smell of the steaming hot dogs, the saltiness of the soft pretzels, the shouts of disappointment (they lost the game) and a plethora of other senses. Another student wrote about her sanctuary deep in the fields of her father’s farm. The building was basically a decrepit corn crib, but it was her place, her Iowan place, to escape the anxieties of adolescence. Whatever the topic, be sure to use the five senses. SHOW, DON'T TELL! Avoid flowery adjectives and adverbs and use vivid nouns and active verbs.

The Writing Recipe: Understand that the steps below are meant to guide you through this style of writing. Feel free to religiously follow them or use them as mere reference points.

Paragraph One: This paragraph gives the reader his/her first taste of the Iowa magic. Don’t begin sluggishly by telling about the place or event, but show a little foretaste of what is to come. Here is an example: "I sit in the center of a dilapidated barn. I am alone, but the spirits of my ancestors are still milling about, carrying hay bales and preparing for the winter months ahead."

Paragraph Two through Next-to-the-last Paragraph: These paragraphs basically unfold that special Iowa "thing" you treasure. They don’t TELL the reader, but SHOW him/her (possibly metaphorically) the beauty and the thrill through the five senses.

Final Paragraph: The final paragraph may conclude by recapping the special memory or it may end with a personal touch. The writer concludes by adding himself/herself into the memory if you haven’t already done so.
**The Explanation:** You’ve had it. I’ve had it. We have all had it. We have all had an embarrassing moment. The enjoyable thing about embarrassing moments is that after the embarrassment has worn off, the event becomes a great story to be told over and over again. Sometimes, our retelling of personal embarrassments is tainted with a little embellishment.

**The Writing Recipe:** Understand that the steps below are meant to guide you through this style of writing. Feel free to religiously follow them or use them as mere reference points.

**Paragraph One:** This paragraph is commonly known as the teaser. It starts right off with action but the paragraph purposely leaves the reader hanging. In other words, the writer does not complete the action—particularly in this case, the consequence of the embarrassment.

**Paragraph Two through Next-to-the-last Paragraph:** After the writer purposely cuts off the action, he/she provides the antecedent action. This is basically a fancy way of saying that the writer begins with a history before the embarrassing incident and takes that history right up to where the first paragraph was cut off.

**Final Paragraph:** The final paragraph picks up where the first paragraph left off, concluding the embarrassing moment and also ending the narrative with personal reflection.
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Dordt College  
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VITA  

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Home Address: 310 Prairie Street, Pella, Iowa, 50219  

Note the colleges or universities attended, the years attended, the degree earned, and the major field.  

Dordt College - 1983-1987 - BA English Secondary Education  
University of Iowa - Iowa Writers Project - Summer 1993  

If you have had any special honors or awards, please note them here. If not, go on to the next item.  

Central Iowa Golden Apple Award - 1994-1995  
Who's Who Among America's Teachers - 1996  

If you have published, please note the articles or books.  

Christian Schools International Media Studies - October 1992  
Christian Educators Journal - April 1993