

## Peer Feedback in Second-Language Writing Classes: “Dear My Friend ... ”

by ÖZGE YOL



Peer feedback is an essential component of writing classes, as polished writing and improved writing skills are products of multiple revisions. However, teachers and students may sometimes find the peer-review process frustrating and might even question the benefit of it. To positively shift my students' perception of peer feedback and transform it into an effective component of their writing process, I designed this “write a letter to your friend” activity. It replaced

the traditional in-class peer-feedback task, during which students switched their papers with each other, read the papers, and then discussed the issues they noticed.

The problem with this traditional way in my class was that my students mostly focused on fixing language problems rather than commenting on content and organization. This peer-feedback letter activity facilitates students' engagement with a peer's paper

through the use of guiding questions. Students use their answers to those questions to form constructive feedback, expressed in a letter. They then have a one-on-one conversation to better understand the points made in the letter and discuss further questions and issues.

## INTRODUCING THE TASK

The detailed description of the task is below. Teachers should feel free to adapt the task based on their learning context and the needs of their students. This task can be implemented in stages, depending on the class schedule or the level of the students. Providing students with enough time for a real engagement with their peer's paper is important, so I recommend that the main task (i.e., the first five steps) be assigned as homework and that the one-on-one feedback conversation take place in class.

It is crucial to introduce the activity in class. In fact, the activity should first be practiced in class by walking students through each step (starting from Step 2). In this way, the teacher can immediately deal with questions and concerns of the students and clarify the expected outcome of the tasks. Teachers who use a student rubric for the writing assignment can go over the rubric with students, make sure they understand it, and encourage them to use it for their feedback.

Note that the activity below is described for paper-based exchanges of essays. However, teachers can easily adapt the activity for online or digital exchanges—if the students are digitally savvy. Students can exchange essays via email and provide feedback by using the Review feature of Microsoft Word. They can attach the reviewed essay to an email along with their letter. Digital exchange can also be implemented through Google Docs, which allows multiple users to access the same document. In any digital exchange, though, it is crucial for teachers to demonstrate how to use that certain program or platform in class so that students know how to access the essays, make comments, track changes, and accept or reject changes.

Below is the introductory part of the peer-review assignment I have used in my classes.

### Take-Home Peer-Review Assignment

**Assignment:** You will read your peer's essay and provide feedback (comments) to him or her in a letter. In your feedback, you will focus on major content, such as the development of ideas and the organization of paragraphs. This assignment will help you to understand and practice the revision process in writing an essay. Your feedback will also help your peer improve the essay.

**Directions:** Please help your peer improve his or her essay draft by following the steps described below. *Please do not mark or correct any grammar on your partner's paper while following the steps!*

**Important:** Please provide quality feedback. That means that your comments need to be thoughtful and helpful. Remember, if the essay is already well-written, you still need to provide constructive feedback on the strengths of the paper.

## THE STEPS TO FOLLOW AT HOME

The task itself is composed of seven steps. Students are guided from the beginning step, exchanging their essays, to the last one, discussing the feedback with their peers. Below are the steps that students need to follow as their homework. (Again, these steps are written for the exchange of paper copies; as explained above, teachers can use a similar procedure with exchanges of digital versions of essays.)

### Step 1: EXCHANGE

*Exchange* essays with your partner and take your peer's essay home with you.

### Step 2: SKIM

*Quick read:* At home, skim your partner's essay all the way through without a pen in your hand. Then, briefly write your first thought about the content of the essay in your notebook or on a sheet of paper. Consider whether and in what ways the essay answers the essay prompt. Think

about the strengths of the essay—the parts that were most interesting to you as you read. Also, think about how the content can be improved. You can check the rubric to better understand the expectations for the content of the essay.

### **Step 3: SCAN**

*Detailed read:* Scan the entire paper and prepare a brief outline of the essay by checking the essay’s thesis statement and the topic sentence, supporting ideas, examples, and conclusion sentence in each body paragraph. On the outline you prepare, mark “N/A” if any of these components is missing. Put a question mark (?) if any of these components is not clear.

### **Step 4: REREAD**

*Reread* your partner’s essay one more time, focusing on strengths of the essay and points to consider for improving it. You can take notes on the essay if you like.

### **Step 5: WRITE A LETTER**

After reviewing your notes, list what you feel are the essay’s strongest points and explain the reasons why you find them strong. Then, choose points that need improvement. Carefully write or type an explanation of each of these points and provide suggestions for how to improve each one. This feedback must be written in complete sentences in a letter form. You can check the provided example letter (see Figure 1). Make sure your letter is well-organized and understandable. *Again, remember not to mark or correct any grammar on your partner’s paper.*

### **Step 6: BRING YOUR LETTER TO CLASS**

On the due date, bring two copies of your letter to class (one copy for your partner and one for your teacher), as well as your peer’s essay.

## **FEEDBACK EXCHANGE IN CLASS**

After composing the feedback letter at home, students bring two copies of their letters to class. In my course, I graded peer-review work as a part of the writing assignments, so I collected one of the copies for evaluation and for providing feedback to the feedback givers. Students share the other copy with their peers, as explained in Step 7 below. Depending on the length of the

writing assignment, five to ten minutes of peer-feedback exchange can be provided in class. The teacher should supervise this feedback-exchange session in case students need guidance.

### **Step 7: SHARE WITH YOUR PARTNER**

In class, you and your partner will talk about your feedback. Give your letter to your peer and let him or her read it. Then, provide a brief explanation of the points you made in the letter. If your partner has difficulty understanding your comments, try to explain them in a different way. You may also ask me (your teacher) for help. Please remember that your goal is to help your partner notice the essay’s strengths and the points to improve in order to continue to develop the essay before the final draft.

## **SOME POINTS TO CONSIDER FOR TEACHERS**

It is important to provide scaffolding for the students during this task. As the teacher, you can provide guiding questions for the skimming, scanning, and rereading steps, as in the examples below. These questions should be adapted, depending on the genre of the writing task and the learning context. Students do not need to respond to all of these questions, and of course other questions are possible.

- o Is the main idea of the essay clear? Why do you think so? If not, how would you change it?
- o Is the main idea of each paragraph clear? Why do you (not) think so?
- o Do the topic sentences of the body paragraphs introduce the main points of the paragraphs? If not, what could the writer do to improve them?
- o Is the main idea of each paragraph supported by sufficient supporting details? If not, what would you recommend to the writer?
- o Are the details related to the main point? What is the proof? If not, what would you suggest that the writer change?

- o Does the essay follow the conventions of the assigned genre (informative, argumentative, prospectus, and so on)? How do you know that? Provide examples.
- o How does the writer make transitions between ideas? Do you think those transitions are effective? If not, what would you suggest the writer change?
- o Does the writer discuss interesting, challenging ideas? How does he or she do that?

Providing a sample peer-feedback letter can help students understand its structure. However, some students may take the example too seriously and try to replicate its exact structure. To prevent this problem, the teacher should clarify the purpose of the sample.

Figure 1 shows a sample letter that I introduced in my classes.

## CONCLUSION

As a freshman-composition instructor, I implemented this activity with adult learners of English as a second language and received positive comments from the students, but the activity can also be implemented in diverse contexts with various learner groups. You can modify the language of the task, the questions, and the sample letter based on the proficiency level and the needs of the students and on the expectations of the writing task. One reason this activity worked well in my classes is that students realized that peer feedback does not equal error correction. Writing a letter personalized the feedback and added a meaningful communicative writing task to the peer-review process.

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Dear Asma,

I enjoyed reading your essay about environmental pollution. I think your hook is captivating! You also ended your essay with an interesting anecdote. Not only did you remind us of the main points, but you gave the reader a final, related idea to think about. In addition, I really liked that you varied your use of words and phrases to express the key points. Your language was clear and to the point.

I would like to make suggestions on how to improve your essay for the final draft. First, I think that you should be careful not to make this expository essay sound like an argumentative essay. In this genre, you are expected to explain only the facts, and you should not argue your opinion. Your reader needs to be informed, not persuaded. At some points, you revealed your viewpoint on the issue. For example, in paragraph 3, you say that the environmental law is “a strange, silly rule.” However, you should avoid using words that show emotion and opinion. Another point to work on is repetition. I found that body paragraph 1 contained at least three sentences telling the impact of using plastic bottles. If you have a different point to make, you should use different language or provide other examples so that your readers notice the difference. Lastly, in the second body paragraph, you should elaborate on the main idea, as that paragraph ends abruptly. One way to do this could be by providing more examples of the areas where water pollution is high.

This is my feedback on your paper. Thank you for sharing it with me. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me. My email address is \_\_\_\_\_.

Best,  
Xu

**Figure 1. Sample peer-feedback letter**