



2015

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#### Recommended Citation

Shvidko, Elena (2015) "Beyond “Giver-Receiver” Relationships: Facilitating an Interactive Revision Process," *Journal of Response to Writing*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol1/iss2/4>

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# RW

JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

## Beyond “Giver-Receiver” Relationships: Facilitating an Interactive Revision Process *Teaching Article*

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Research has shown that in order to facilitate the development of students’ writing, teachers need to cultivate principles of effective feedback. However, revision is a joint process, and for the maximum effectiveness of this process, there should be more than just a giver-receiver relationship with the teacher giving the information and the student receiving it. Instead, students should be actively involved in the revision process by reflecting on and analyzing their own writing and meaningfully responding to teacher feedback. This teaching article describes a technique—*Letter to the Reviewer*—that facilitates collaboration between the teacher and the student. A *Letter to the Reviewer* is a memo that students attach to each draft, in which they provide a short reflective note to their reviewer by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their draft and ask for specific feedback on certain elements of the draft. The technique was implemented in two first-year composition classes for multilingual writers in a large university in the Midwest. Teacher observations of student work and students’ self-reports on this technique demonstrated that the letters helped students approach their own writing more analytically, ask the teacher and peers for focused feedback, engage in the collaborative revision process, provide more specific feedback on their classmates’ writing, prepare for writing conferences, and recognize the connection between classroom instruction and their own writing.

*Keywords:* Feedback, Self-evaluation, Reflection, Revision, Writing

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## Introduction

“Feedback has long been regarded as essential for the development of L2 writing skills, both for its potential for learning and for learner motivation” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p. 83). Research suggests that in order to make a positive influence on student writing development, instructors should improve the efficacy of their comments and strive to develop principles of effective feedback (Andrade & Evans, 2013; Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014).

However, if the goal of writing instruction is learners’ “long-term improvement and cognitive change” (Reid, 1993, p. 229), simply providing written feedback—no matter how good it is—is not enough. Even the most insightful comments that a teacher leaves on a student’s draft will hardly make any difference if the student doesn’t know how to attend to them. On the other hand, when students are taught how to effectively use teacher feedback, they develop awareness of their own writing abilities (Gebhardt, 1980; Johns, 2006; Penaflores, 2002), they increase their analytical and reflective skills (Braine, 2003; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009), and they eventually become better writers, who are able to improve independently, without teacher guidance (Andrade & Evans, 2013; Benson, 2007; Evans Nachi, 2003; Ferris, 1995; Gebhardt, 1980; Hyland, 2000; Milton, 2006).

The development of these skills is also supported by sociocultural theory and its notion of Zone of Proximate Development<sup>1</sup> (Vygotsky, 1978), which posits that through guided instruction and scaffolding student writers learn to solve their problems independently and develop autonomy in their writing (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; De Guerrero & Villamil, 1994, 2000; Hyland, 2000). Furthermore, the benefits of self-reflection and metacognition are extensively addressed in the literature. For example, research demonstrates that critical analysis and self-evaluation increase revising and analytical skills (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Yancey, 1998), facilitate the sense of agency and engagement (N. Sommers, 2013), enable the connection between writing classes and future student academic and professional endeavors (Beaufort, 2007; Downs & Wardle, 2007), and, finally, help develop self-regulated

writers (Andrade & Evans, 2013; Dörnyei, 2005). Similarly, research on metacognition provides evidence of students' better retention of material (Wenden, 1998), increased motivation (Lamb, 2001), and learning autonomy (Mizuki, 2003; Rivers, 2001).

The findings of these and other studies on self-reflection and metacognition are widely applied in pedagogy. For example, some instructors incorporate reflective or learning journals (e.g., Chirema, 2007; Lew & Schmidt, 2011; Mann, Gordon, & MacLeod, 2009; Moon, 1999; Thorpe, 2004) as a way of helping students develop their critical thinking (Mann et al., 2009; Selfe, Petersen, & Nahrgang, 1986; Sidhu, Kaur, & Fook, 2010) and problem-solving strategies (Moon, 1999) and "enhancing students' awareness of how and what they have learned" (Lew & Schmidt, 2011, p. 540). Similarly, a portfolio-assessment approach (e.g., Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000; Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005; Lam, 2013; Reynolds, 2000; Yancey, 1992) also includes a reflective component, which requires students to "explain their learning, how portfolio entries evolved, how entries compare to one another, and how writing has enhanced their literacy skills" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 218) and helps them to "gain a deeper understanding of their performance and abilities as writers" (Hirvela & Pierson, 2000, p. 113). Along the same lines, some composition instructors also utilize a "process note" (Giles, 2010), "student-teacher memo" (J. Sommers, 1988), or "writer's memo" (J. Sommers, 1989) techniques, thereby encouraging students to analyze and report on their ongoing writing processes.

Taking the benefits of reflective writing as a point of departure, writing teachers should not only strive to provide useful feedback, but they should also teach students to efficiently respond to this feedback. I believe that revision is a collaborative process (e.g., Goldstein, 2005; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Haneda, 2004; Hewings & Coffin, 2006; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; J. Sommers, 1985; N. Sommers, 2013; Villamil & De Guerrero, 2006; Weissberg, 2006) and that to maximize the effectiveness of this process there should be more than just a giver-receiver relationship between the teacher and the student—with the teacher giving the information and the student receiving it. In other words, for better success, both the teacher and the student should work collaboratively on the revision of a student's paper.

One of the ways to do this is to engage students in the reflection on and analysis of their own writing.

Engaging students in the reflection and analysis of their own writing can be achieved by inviting them to participate in a dialogue about their writing (N. Sommers, 2013). Such a dialogue assumes an exchange between the teacher and the student, in which they work collaboratively on the revision of the student's draft. One method to enable this dialogue is to ask students to compose and submit a *Letter to the Reviewer* for each draft they turn in.

I adapted the idea of *Letter to the Reviewer* from Dear Reader letters described by Nancy Sommers (2013). A Letter to the Reviewer is essentially a memo that students attach to each draft of an assignment, in which they provide the reviewer (their teacher or their classmate) with a short reflective note that identifies strengths and weaknesses of the draft and asks the reviewer for specific feedback on certain elements of the draft. The main purpose of these letters is to help students critically analyze their drafts, meaningfully respond to the feedback received from the reviewer, and foster an interactive revision process.

## Study

### *Context*

I implemented *Letter to the Reviewer* in two first-year composition classes for multilingual writers that I taught in a large research university in the Midwest. Both of these classes—fall semester 2013 and spring semester 2014—consisted of 15 students, primarily from China, with several students from India, the Philippines, and South Korea. The students were advanced English speakers and proficient writers in their native languages. However, for the majority of them, their writing experiences in English were limited to the composition of several short essays in high school English courses in their home countries.<sup>2</sup>

The syllabus of the course was based on the series of four sequenced writing assignments on a single subject of the student's choice. The purpose of this sequenced project was to help students improve their writing skills by giving them the opportunity to develop each new writing assignment

by building on the knowledge and experience gained from the previous assignments (Leki, 1998). The writing assignments in the sequenced project of the fall semester included a research proposal, a synthesis paper, an interview report, and an argumentative paper; the spring semester's sequenced project consisted of a resource report, a research proposal, an interview analysis, and a problem-solution paper.

### *Description of the Technique*

Each writing assignment that the students developed over the course of the semester required three drafts; therefore, for each paper, the students submitted three *Letters*, each having a particular emphasis. Figure 1 shows the order of the letters in the relation to the drafts the students submitted for each writing assignment.

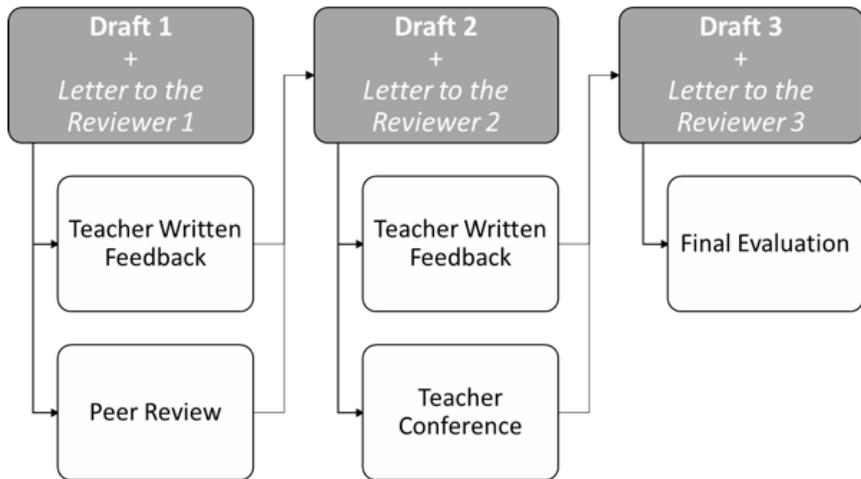


Figure 1. Draft submission and order of *Letter to the Reviewer*

In the first *Letter to the Reviewer*, the students had to focus their reflections on the higher-order concerns, such as rhetorical issues, content, organization, and development. In order to help the students compose their letters, I provided them with the following list of questions:

- What are the strengths of your draft?
- What are the weaknesses of your draft?
- Does the draft have sufficient support or does it lack support?
- Is the organization of the paper effective? Briefly explain.
- What part of the draft is in most need of further work?
- What would you like your reader to pay close attention to while reading your draft?
- Are you expecting feedback on any particular elements of your draft? If so, what are they?

The students were instructed not to be restricted by these questions, but to use them as guidelines, rather than as a checklist, in constructing their *Letter to the Reviewer*.

By giving the students the list of questions, I wanted to make sure their letters were informative, focused, and specific. In other words, I wanted the students to avoid broad and generally useless phrases such as “I corrected a lot in this draft” or “I need to improve my grammar” or “I have lots of weaknesses in this draft.” Since the experience was new to the students, I gave them a few examples of effective (Figure 2) and less effective *Letters to the Reviewer* (Figure 3) to further help them with their letters.

Dear Reviewer,

My paper is about the negative influence of smart phones on students' academic success. I think it's a very important and also a current topic, as I believe many students nowadays use smart phones too much, which can distract them from their studies. The strength of my paper is the personal examples that I used as evidence. However, this may also be the weakness of my draft because I did not include other types of evidence, such as facts or statistics. I am still trying to find more information to support my claim. I think that many of my readers will disagree with my point of view, and that's why I need to find more convincing pieces of evidence to refute their arguments. So far, this is the most difficult part of writing this paper.

I also think that I should expand my introduction to include more discussion on the topic rather than jumping straight to my thesis. How can I make my introduction more effective? Should I acknowledge both sides of the issue to show my readers that I am being fair?

Thank you for your suggestions!

Sincerely,  
Daniel Park

Figure 2. Example of an effective *Letter to the Reviewer*.

Dear Reviewer,

I improved a lot in this draft. I think my thesis is good now. Please help me with grammar!!!

Sincerely,  
Daniel Park

Figure 3. Example of an ineffective *Letter to the Reviewer*.

I made a rule for myself to read students' *Letter to the Reviewer* before providing my feedback. Only after I had become familiar with the content of a student's letter and the concerns raised in it did I read the draft and respond to it. In my end remarks, I frequently referred to the requests

or comments mentioned in students' letters to let them know that I paid particular attention to the certain elements of their writing identified in their letters and responded to their requests. Thus, students' requests and my responses to their letters created reader-writer dialogues for each writing assignment of the course.

After students submitted their first drafts and first *Letter to the Reviewer*, I used the information provided in the *Letter* to write a response to their drafts. In addition, each student received feedback from a classmate as part of peer review. At the beginning of the semester, I provided the students with a brief peer review training and encouraged them to read their classmate's *Letter to the Reviewer* before reading the actual draft. These peer review activities were done in writing workshops, during which the students received their classmate's draft along with a peer review worksheet that they filled out to provide their feedback. In these worksheets, the students identified specific areas of the draft that needed further revision. At the end of the workshop, students received a worksheet from their peer reader and used it as guidance for their subsequent revisions. These worksheets were also submitted along with the second draft as a matter of accountability.

The second draft was revised based on the comments that the students received from myself and their classmate. Accordingly, in the second *Letter to the Reviewer*, students were instructed to evaluate the improvement they made on their first draft and identify the areas that were revised based on the feedback from classmates and myself. Additionally, in this letter the students were advised to focus on the lower-order concerns in their paper, such as grammar, word choice, mechanics, and documentation of sources. The students were given the following prompts to guide them through this reflective-evaluative process:

- Briefly identify the major revisions that you have made in this draft based on the feedback that you received from your teacher and your classmate.
- What difficulties did you encounter while revising this draft? What was the most challenging part of revising this draft?
- What makes this draft stronger than the first one?

- In what ways does this revised draft better fulfill the purpose of the assignment than the first draft?
- What parts of this revised draft still need further work? Identify specific problems that you feel need to be addressed.
- Are there any particular places in your draft you want your reader to pay close attention to?
- Are there any language concerns (e.g., grammar, word choice) that you would like your reader to help you with?

Because in the second *Letter to the Reviewer* the students were primarily reporting on the revisions they made in their draft, reading their letters prior to reading the drafts helped me pay more attention to the revised parts, as well as have a better understanding of students’ perspectives on their revision processes. In addition, the students had the opportunity to further discuss their revisions during writing conferences, which were held after the second drafts were submitted.

In their last *Letter to the Reviewer*—submitted with the final draft—the students had to identify some of the major changes they had made based on my feedback provided in the second draft. The students were also instructed to analyze the overall effectiveness of their paper by pointing out the major changes that were made throughout the composing and the revising process from the beginning to the end. As in the case with the first two letters, the students were given several prompts to respond to (with some overlap with the first two letters’ prompts):

- Briefly identify the major revisions that you have made while composing this final draft.
- What difficulties did you encounter while working on this paper?
- What makes this final draft stronger than the previous ones?
- What are the major strengths of this final draft?
- Are there any weaknesses in this draft you want your reader to be aware of?

Similar to the second *Letter to the Reviewer*, reading the last *Letter* helped me focus on the changes the students made in the draft as well as see the

entire revision process from students' perspectives. *Letter to the Reviewer* was implemented in all writing assignments of the course and was included in the grading rubric for the final drafts (i.e., the students could lose points for submitting *Letter to the Reviewer* that lacked analysis and reflection).

### ***Data Collection***

This experiment, conducted in both of my composition classes, was primarily done to improve my own teaching and thus can be defined as *action research* (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988), which is described in the literature as “practically motivated,” “context-specific,” “process-oriented,” and “cyclical” (Mackey & Gass, 2012, p. 63). The study followed a four-step model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988): planning, action, observation, and reflection. Accordingly, on the initial stage of the study, I did necessary planning, such as creating questions for *Letter to the Reviewer* and developing my own understanding of how this idea would be implemented in the courses. During the action and observation stages, I gathered data through my personal observations of student work and through students' comments about *Letter to the Reviewer* that they provided in reflective journals upon the completion of each writing assignment. In addition, some students also commented on *Letter to the Reviewer* in their final class evaluation. Finally, the last stage—reflection—included the evaluation of my observations, the analysis of students' comments, and the comparison of individual students' letters over the course of the semester.

## **Discussion**

My own observations of and reflections on student work, along with the students' comments about *Letter to the Reviewer* allowed me to identify a number of benefits of this teaching technique. As a disclaimer, I must say that the outcomes described below should be considered the results of my own understanding and analysis of the observed action, as no formal procedures were deployed to measure these benefits.

### ***Meeting Students' Needs***

Because *Letter to the Reviewer* often contained questions about the concepts that the students did not fully understand or needed more help

with, I was able to identify the most common concerns—the ones that appeared in several letters—and thereby adjust my lessons to address these concerns. This, I believe, helped me provide meaningful instruction to better meet the students’ needs. For example, in their letters for one of the course writing assignments—an interview report—several students addressed their difficulty in appropriately integrating quotations. Another time, a few students asked me in their letters to help them with essay-level transitions. These concerns served as guidance for my lessons, in which I also used students’ drafts to address these issues.

### ***Providing the Appropriate Amount of Feedback***

From my pedagogical experience I learned that different students need different amounts of feedback. Some may perceive teacher comments as overwhelming, while others complain about insufficient feedback. It is definitely not easy to provide the appropriate amount of feedback. *Letter to the Reviewer* could, to a certain extent, give me a better grasp of the quantity of comments that the students expected from me. One student, for example, attached a very detailed letter to every draft she wrote over the course of the semester. In her letters, she would provide in bulleted paragraphs a list of concerns she had about her draft, ask particular questions about certain sentences or words, and she would also reply to my feedback given in the previous draft. In addition, she would bring my attention to the parts of the draft where revisions were made, asking whether or not her revisions were appropriate; finally, she would direct my attention to the highlighted parts in the draft where she needed further help. This student, I knew, expected detailed and comprehensive feedback on her writing.

### ***Helping Students Become Reflective Readers***

By being engaged in the systematic analysis of their own drafts, the students became more attentive and reflective readers. For example, by midterm, I noticed that during peer review activities, the students were able to provide more insightful comments on each other’s drafts. Their feedback became more specific and less isolated from classroom lessons. Eventually, the peer review activities became more meaningful because the students learned to be open to their classmates’ comments and receive them not as personal attacks or as pointers of their wrongs but as

instructive suggestions for further reflection and revision. Consider the following student's comment: "I was always afraid to judge other papers. I didn't know how to give feedback to my classmates. Writing my *Letters to the Reviewer* helped me to understand the importance of feedback, and I think I can give better suggestions now than before."

### ***Fostering Collaborative Revision***

Each assignment included three *Letters to the Reviewer* as well as my responses to the letters and further guidance for the next draft, which allowed the students and me to establish a continuous correspondence during the revision process. Thus, revision became a collaborative effort, a mutual process, in which the students and I were partners. Although this process obviously maintained my supervising role as teacher, the students were no longer the mere receivers of my instructions, directions, or guidelines and instead became active participants in this dialogue by reflecting, analyzing, asking, and revising.

### ***Helping Students Become Reflective Writers***

Because the students were engaged in the systematic analysis of each draft produced in the course, they were gradually developing the ability to analyze and reflect on their own writing. This was evidenced by the specificity and elaborated nature of the letters they composed later in the semester. For example, instead of asking me to help them with organization, they would indicate the lack of strong discourse-level transitions or the incoherence in paragraph structures. Moreover, some students proposed their own suggestions on how to improve their writing.

### ***Guiding Students Through the Revision Process***

As I anticipated, in the letters submitted with the first draft of the earlier writing assignments, many students commented on or asked questions about their grammar. The following statements were not uncommon: "Having some grammar mistakes might be my weak point of this paper" or "Please help me with my grammar" or "I think my sentences are not correct." However, on early drafts, teachers are encouraged to "primarily assist writers in revising content and addressing the writing task" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 249). Accordingly, in my response to their letter

attached to the first draft, I would normally comment on rhetorical issues, content, and organization and let the students know that sentence structure, spelling, and word choice would be the matter of discussion for the second draft. Eventually, the students paid more attention to the higher order concerns at the initial step of the revision process and left language-related issues to the latter stages of the process.

### ***Helping Students Prepare for One-On-One Writing Conferences***

For both of my courses, one-on-one teacher-student conferences were held after their second drafts were submitted (see Figure 1). Because the students identified their drafts' strengths and weaknesses as well as asked specific questions in their *Letter to the Reviewer*, they were able to better point out for themselves certain aspects of their writing that needed to be addressed during the conference, so most of them would come with a specific agenda to each conference. In their reflections, many students commented that these one-on-one conferences were one of the most helpful and productive elements of the course.

### ***Increasing Students' Motivation***

Students knew their revision efforts were taken seriously because of my responses to the questions in their *Letter to the Reviewer* as well as my comments on the issues raised in their letters. In addition, since *Letter to the Reviewer* required students' "reflection on and critical analysis of their own writing" (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014, p. 262), the awareness of their own writing skills increased from draft to draft. This, I believe, had a positive impact on students' confidence and self-esteem. To illustrate, one student from the spring course stated, "I am so inspired and motivated now because I learned how to evaluate my own writing, and this is very useful for my future study in college."

### ***Connecting Lessons With Student Writing***

Oftentimes, students' letters contained statements that evidenced their understanding of the concepts introduced in class. Here are some examples of such statements: "I used the turnabout type of introduction that you taught in class," "I tried to connect my paragraphs how you showed us," "To support my argument, I only provided two types of

evidences from the handout, so I think I need more.” These comments indicate that the students learned to apply the knowledge acquired in class to their own writing. *Letter to the Reviewer* also gave the students opportunities to ask questions about something they did not understand from the lesson. The following students’ comments are cases in point: “I am still confused about the in-text citations,” “I don’t know if I introduced the quotes correctly. It’s hard for me,” “Do I need to write a thesis statement for every paragraph?” Some students seemed to feel more comfortable asking clarification questions related to their writing in their *Letter to the Reviewer* than in class.

### Applications

Overall, I believe the *Letter to the Reviewer* technique implemented in my first-year composition classes for multilingual writers was effective, as it involved the students in the revision of their drafts, which in turn allowed them to better understand the purpose and the function of teacher feedback. Although I initially anticipated encountering some students’ resistance to the amount of reflections required by *Letter to the Reviewer*, in general they seemed to favor this technique and understand its value.

I was satisfied with the outcomes of the implementation of this approach, and I encourage teachers to try using *Letter to the Reviewer* in their own classes. Certainly, as in any action research, the outcomes of this study are “specific to a particular classroom at a specific point in time” (Mackey & Gass, 2012, p. 64). However, the simplicity and flexibility of this technique makes it possible for writing instructors to use it in various teaching contexts with different populations of learners, including both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, first-language (L1) and mixed first-language/second language (L1/L2) classes, and foreign language classrooms. I also believe that with ample scaffolding, teachers can adapt and apply this technique to classrooms with beginning-level writers. Finally, although I trust that students in any writing course should learn to reflect on their writing process, a *Letter to the Reviewer*

approach can be particularly valuable in courses that implement the process approach to teaching writing.

Finally, the *Letter to the Reviewer* approach can be further investigated in future research. Despite some valuable practical outcomes that have emerged from the implementation of this technique, I did not seek to examine the connection between students' letters and the improvement of their writing. Indeed, the ultimate goal of any writing course is to help students develop their composition skills and improve the quality of their writing. Therefore, future research could investigate the link between the *Letter to the Reviewer* technique and students' gains in writing proficiency.

## Notes

1. A Zone of Proximate Development is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).
2. In their first assignment—a writer's autobiography—the students described their writing experience both in their native language and in English.

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