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Teaching Students to Close Read Feedback

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One of the most significant challenges that instructors continue to face is helping students operationalize the feedback they receive on essays. Providing students with feedback on their work enables them grow as writers, but it is often difficult to discern exactly how students are responding to this feedback and the kind of feedback that they find most generative. From the student perspective, research shows that students do not always know what to do with the feedback they receive; as a result, students often passively incorporate feedback into their revisions, hoping it will lead to a higher grade. For example, Zhao (2010) produced a content analysis of writers' use of peer and teacher feedback and discovered that, while student writers incorporated instructor feedback more readily than peer feedback into their drafts, they did so without understanding why they were doing so. Other studies have suggested that students struggle to generalize feedback. For instance, Carless (2006) discovered that students perceived instructor feedback as highly specific to individual assignments and thus could not imagine ways that the feedback could transfer to future writing tasks. Because one of the pedagogical purposes of feedback is to promote writing self-efficacy and enable students to feel confident assessing their own writing (see, e.g., Cui et al., 2021; Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989), students at various stages of learning would benefit from exercises tailored to demystifying ways of approaching and acting on the feedback that they receive—whether from instructors or peers. Indeed, as Zinchuk (2017) suggests, “classroom

practices such as teaching students to use feedback for revision . . . can strengthen their metacognitive regulation” in ways that enable students to better understand their own writing and transfer the skills they learn in the writing classroom to academic and nonacademic contexts.

The exercise that I propose here positions close reading, a method foundational to literary studies, as useful for instructors interested in teaching students to think critically about feedback. Close reading involves careful, in-depth analysis of a text—usually a passage, stanza of a poem, or section of a short story. In practice, close reading requires zeroing in on specific moments of a text and making sense of these details in the context of the text as a whole. The exercise that follows similarly invites students to think critically about margin notes or other comments on their writing, to make connections between those comments, and to use those insights to craft a revision plan for future writing.

Context

This exercise can be implemented in any writing classroom in preparation for an assignment that invites students to revise a draft or incorporate feedback from a previous essay into a new one.

Learning Outcomes or Goals

- Students will develop strategies for making sense of responses to their writing.
- Students will examine, synthesize, and formulate a plan for revision or improvement on the basis of instructor or peer feedback.

Format

This exercise is suitable for a face-to-face or online discussion. The second half the exercise takes place in workshop form and can be done face-to-face, online, or in a hybrid learning environment.

Teacher Preparation

Teachers will need to have commented on drafts of student writing before the exercise. Teachers may also benefit from having examples of their own writing (and feedback they received on it) on hand to show the students, or they may find it more appropriate to run the exercise with a sample student paper (with feedback) from a previous class.

Estimated Time

This activity takes about 45 minutes to an hour.

Procedure

1. Begin by asking students to freewrite on feedback that they received in previous courses or stages of their education. How did they respond? Go around the room and ask each student to describe what the revision process looks like for them.
2. Invite students to take 10 minutes to review the feedback that they received on a recent assignment. What patterns do they notice? How can they begin to group some of the comments together into specific kinds of tasks, whether related to argument, evidence, or another area of academic writing?
 - a. Remind the students that, throughout the revision process, making sense of feedback can feel overwhelming.
 - b. Have students think about how to take ownership of the revision process and make decisions about what feedback to respond to and what this process looks like in practice. Make it clear to them that it is not necessary to respond to every item of feedback, and one person's approach to responding to feedback may differ from another person's approach.
3. Ask the students to think back to the freewrite they did in Step 1 and about the ways that they responded to feedback in previous courses. Invite them to consider how they might add to or adjust the approaches

that they relied on in the past to craft a revision plan given the comments they received on the recent assignment they are reviewing.

4. After this discussion, give each student 15–20 minutes to craft an individualized revision plan (see template below in the Appendix). Note that this template is meant to be tailored; it offers students a sense of how to organize the categories they noted in Step 2 and a means of turning those comments into actionable efforts, but they should adjust the chart accordingly and fill in categories of feedback based on the patterns they observed when sifting through the comments on their essay.
5. Follow up with students, and ask the class as a whole to reflect on ways that this exercise changed their understanding of working with feedback and revising.

Caveats and Alternatives

- Depending on the curriculum and timing of the unit, instructors can choose to complete only one of these activities, either the discussion or the feedback implementation workshop.
- Instructors may choose to start the discussion by asking students to share what they notice about a set of comments that the instructor received on some of his or her own writing, in the form of peer review responses or margin comments from colleagues. This can be especially helpful to highlight the point that, sometimes, feedback can seem contradictory, so the writer needs to assume agency and incorporate feedback based on his or her vision for the essay.
- This exercise can be added to the end of a peer review workshop—as a way of guiding students toward making sense of peer comments and coming up with ways to implement that feedback as they revise.

References

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Appendix

Moving From Feedback to a Revision Plan

Category of Feedback	Instructor Feedback	How I Will Implement the Feedback
Argument		
Key Terms		
Structure		
Evidence & Analysis		
Grammar + Mechanics		
Other		