



Feedback Unlocks Reluctance

Gwendolyn Todd

As a high school English teacher, one of the most effective tools I had to engage reluctant writers was also a management nightmare: writing conferences. Embedding time into my lessons to meet individually with 30 students within a 45- or 90-minute period often felt like herding cats—chaotic and fruitless. After trying several models, I finally found tools that helped me manage the chaos and evolve my classroom into a safe place for writing. These tools are not my creation, but they are rooted in decades of research and applicable across content areas.

Conferences

Graves (1985) outlines a streamlined approach for teaching writing that emphasizes process over product. The two main tenets of this model—modeling thought processes and providing a highly structured classroom—combine to create a safe environment for writers to experiment and learn. Prior to conferencing on their papers, my students were prepped with focus questions like, "What aspect of your paper are you most worried about?" or "What paragraph are you particularly proud to show?" Although these questions are simple, my students arrived at the conference armed with frames for discussing their work, which meant I didn't have to ask "What do you need help with?" over and over.

Meanwhile, students not engaged in conferencing gave one another feedback in pairs. To make this feedback focused, I first modeled how to reflect on a peer's paper using [this graphic organizer](#) (PDF) to capture my thoughts. As students used this tool throughout the year, they found more worth in the comments from their peers.

By structuring student participation in conferences and peer feedback, I had more time to give individualized feedback to my writers. These personalized meetings revealed and alleviated students' anxieties, and they reveled in advice for organizing their topic or the structure of their sentences. Five minutes devoted to each student unlocked their reluctance and was time well-spent. The next step was opening this newly unlocked door.

Error Analysis

Without knowing which areas they needed help fixing, students would have found conferences less effective and merely a motivational conversation. To avoid this, I needed to analyze the common errors that students made on previous assignments. Fisher and Frey (2012) offer [qualitative data analysis charts](#) to make error analysis more manageable for secondary teachers. Once I knew students' common errors, I could better steer our conversations during conferences *and* better match students for peer conferencing to maximize the feedback from their classmates.

6 + 1 Traits

After the conferencing concluded, my next step was to provide feedback on their final product. At the beginning of my career, I equated final feedback with a recorded grade. In terms of the reluctant writer, I was wrong. For many students, grades only reinforce that their writing skills are subpar. To break this negative cycle, I adopted the 6 + 1 Traits model of writing instruction. In this model, teachers use a layered approach to scoring writing errors, choosing one convention of writing to grade per assignment (Education Northwest, 2011). By targeting one type of error instead of providing a buckshot approach to grading, my students viewed feedback as constructive rather than a reminder of their shortcomings. They knew what convention was being targeted and graded (for example, organizational structure), and my reluctant writers understood that the final grade offered instruction in a skill they needed for the next writing assignment.

Educators know that feedback is the greatest tool we can harness to engage students in our content, shape their understanding of it, and transfer their skills to new knowledge. Hattie and Timperley's (2007) research proves that feedback has a powerful effect size. However, knowing feedback's potential and using it are two separate things. To reach reluctant writers, we must use a variety of feedback tools to help them see their potential and work toward fulfilling and exceeding it. Student-teacher conferencing, peer conferencing, error analysis, and targeted evaluation using the writing traits are successful strategies for assisting *all* writers. These strategies are most powerful when integrated within a classroom that promotes reflective learning and creates a safe writing environment.

The strategies I discuss here are not exclusively tools for English teachers; all teachers can use the art of

conferencing, targeted feedback, and error analysis to reach the reluctant writers in their classroom. For example, in social studies, students must synthesize the effects of multiple events and perspectives in history, and they usually accomplish this through a written assessment. Social studies teachers can use the 6 + 1 Traits method to focus on a writing convention in addition to the assignment's assessed content. In science classes, students write technical pieces, such as lab reports and research essays, which require them to systematically tackle a large topic. Error analysis can make complex assignments seem more approachable and give teachable moments the biggest impact. Graves (1985) states it well: "Writing is a social act." To reach the reluctant writer, we must transform writing from an isolated, solo act and provide the tools and time for students to talk about and hone their craft.

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