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# The Writing Process: Using Peer Review to Develop Student Writing

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THE WRITING PROCESS:  
USING PEER REVIEW TO DEVELOP STUDENT WRITING

by  
Jennifer M. Selting Troester

A THESIS

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THE WRITING PROCESS:  
USING PEER REVIEW TO DEVELOP STUDENT WRITING

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University of Nebraska, 2015

Advisor: Robert Brooke

The following thesis will explore how peer review through an online writing exchange influences student writers during the writing process. I propose that when students participate in this online writing exchange to peer review, it will assure that they will have a better understanding of the writing process, and more confidence in analyzing their own writing and in themselves as writers. It also makes these students more conscientious of the writing they share with peers because they have a wider audience than just their teacher, and this motivates them to improve their writing. The last part of the document features a narrative section describing how I have been using online peer review in the writing process with my students in eighth grade English classes at O'Neill Public Schools, and the influence this experience had on students involved.

“The writing process is not a solitary act. When writers share ideas and have an audience, the collaboration is the catalyst for growth.”

~Jennifer M. Selting Troester

## **Introduction**

As an eighth grade writing teacher, I have found that my students enter the school year with limited writing experience and a vague understanding of the writing process. The background in this process for students in our district consists of learning the parts of it, but not experiencing it. At the O’Neill Elementary School, writing instruction is inconsistent with no designated curriculum for writing and only approximately thirty minutes to teach English, which in most classrooms mainly focuses on grammar instruction. The one grade where they are required to write and go through the process is in fourth grade, and this is because they are preparing for the state writing assessment. When a parent of an O’Neill Elementary fifth grade student questioned the principal in 2010 about why students were no longer writing essays and reports, the principal stated that they are not assessed on their writing in fifth and sixth grades, so it is not something they focus on.

Most O’Neill teachers before eighth grade do give students guidelines for their writing assignments, and then have students hand them in when finished. Some have students do a quick prewriting activity to brainstorm and organize, and after that students write their paper and hand it in after proofreading it. When eighth grade students were given a survey (Appendix A) questioning them about their background with the writing process, several responded that they went through the stages of prewriting, drafting, and proofreading before handing it in for grading for a couple writing assignments in seventh

grade. Eighth grade student, Gabbie, described in detail what was echoed in other students' memories about years prior:

In fourth grade with Mrs. Griffin, we used the writing process all of the time. We wrote at least one piece of writing every two weeks. Fifth and sixth grade weren't involved in writing, just Daily Oral Language.

Nathaniel responded:

In 4th grade, the writing process was a huge learning experience, but only because of the huge test that year. We had no prior learning experiences about the writing process before 4th grade, and hardly any years after.

If used at all, the crucial steps that are missing from the writing process are revising while using peer review and publishing for an audience. Peer review helps students participate in the writing process in a deeper, more meaningful way. Spigelman argues that texts are social and public, so "if students are to learn to write effectively, they must be permitted to operate as 'real' writers do, seeking the advice, support, and cowriting opportunities that are intrinsic to the writing process" (4). A classroom that uses peer review gives students an authentic experience of the writing process. Trim writes that peer review can improve the effectiveness of student writing by having it "test driven" by a peer. But at a deeper level, she states that when students have a different perspective through peer review, they start to discover new ways of thinking about and writing about their topics (9).

Since 2008, I have been scaffolding the writing process in part through a collaborative online writing exchange with two to three other classes across the state of Nebraska and my eighth grade writing class. The online writing exchange provides my students with an authentic audience of readers other than the teacher and peer review prior to revision, editing, and publication to students' individual blogs. This experience has improved students' writing. Most students become more analytical about their own writing and the

writing of others through the online writing exchange. Spigelman provides the following analysis about writing response groups:

Writing teachers promote groups primarily to help students become better writers. Peer groups offer student writers a genuine audience that can ask for clarification, point to discursive gaps, find errors, and provide purposes for writing beyond performance and evaluation. As a result, in peer groups writers often make meaningful, even dramatic, revisions (Nystrand and Brandt; Danis; Drechsel). Furthermore, peer response groups help students to regard their drafts as unfinished and thus encourage them to revise as a natural part of the writing process (Gere 75). In addition, when students serve as critics for others, they develop the skills and insights needed to critically read and revise their own work (Bruffee, "Brooklyn Plan"; Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning: Some Practical Models"; Harrington and Cadmon) (15-16).

Forty-five O'Neill eighth grade students were given a survey (Appendix C) that asked them to rate their experience with peer review after taking part in an online writing exchange with students from different schools. One statement said, "After taking part in this Online Writing Exchange, I can now better analyze my own writing." 80% of O'Neill eighth grade students "strongly agreed" or "agreed" with this statement, and 20% were "neutral" with no one disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Another statement being rated was, "After taking part in this Online Writing Exchange, I can now better analyze other people's writing." 80% of O'Neill eighth grade students "strongly agreed" or "agreed", 18% were "neutral", and 2% disagreed with no one strongly disagreeing. Although I have found that some students still need to work on revising their thoughts, content, and organization, and not only editing their pieces of writing, their level of consciousness is raised because they have an audience other than their teacher when working with a peer review group. This gives students real-world writing experience because teachers are not an authentic audience. When students write to impress their teacher rather than to communicate, they are not learning the power of writing. Real

readers are different from teachers (Elbow 220). O'Neill eighth grade students were asked to rate the following (Appendix C): "After taking part in this Online Writing Exchange, I am more aware of writing for an audience rather than just writing for a grade, 74% of students "strongly agreed" or "agreed", and 26% were "neutral" with no one disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. When O'Neill eighth grade students participate in peer review through online or face-to-face writing groups, it does assure that they will have a better understanding of the writing process, resulting in them being more confident in analyzing their own writing and in themselves as writers. It also makes these students more conscientious of the writing they share with peers because it goes beyond writing only for the teacher and this motivates eighth grade students to improve their writing.

### **Language Arts at O'Neill Public Schools Junior High**

At O'Neill Public Schools our students are grouped into two buildings: elementary (K-6) with 384 students and junior high & high school (7-12) with 361 students. The junior high/high school is a one-to-one school with laptops for every student. In seventh and eighth grade, students participate in a one class period of reading and a separate class period of English, so they acquire a solid foundation of reading and writing skills and knowledge before entering the high school level.

Eighth grade reading classes are leveled based upon reading ability. Fusion reading is for learners that qualify for special education services or have very low reading scores; this class is team taught with one language arts teacher and one special education teacher. Then there are a middle level group and a high level reader group; one language

arts teacher teaches both of these groups. Placement for students in the later groups is determined using multiple test score information and teacher recommendation.

The English class serves the entire eighth grade class in two sections with team teachers instructing; therefore, it has a mixture of ability levels. Each class period is forty-nine minutes with twenty-six students in second period and twenty-three in fourth period at the beginning of the school year. By the end of the writing exchange, we had twenty-five students in second period and twenty in fourth period. Our school administration believes in including all students with special learning needs in the regular English classroom with mixed ability peers, so we use a team teaching model to accomplish this. It is difficult for us to ensure all students who qualify for special education in written expression are learning the writing skills and objectives they need at their level while including them in typical eighth grade curriculum without slowing down the rest of the class. For a few learners, the pace is far too fast, and this is something we try to accommodate on a regular basis. During the eighth grade English class, we are expected to teach conventions, sentence structure, different modes of writing, research skills, speech delivery, and the writing process all while infusing technology into the curriculum. In addition, there is the heavy burden of the eighth grade descriptive writing exam issued by the state of Nebraska at the end of January.

Students in eighth grade write several pieces over the school year. These range from personal narratives, descriptive essays, problem solution essays, persuasive speeches, poetry, letters to the editor, content writing over a social studies or science interest, and more. As a class, we work on each new type of writing for two weeks or longer; once we introduce it, as recommended in *Best Practices in Writing Instruction*,



students are given good models for each type of writing. The examples are analyzed and students are encouraged to imitate critical elements within the examples (256). It is important to identify the topic, discuss what the purpose is, and who the audience is for each piece of writing (148). For example, students are writing a letter to the author of a book that had an impact on them for a contest called Letters About Literature. We discuss where their writing will be sent, and we try to picture who will read their thoughts. In addition to understanding the topic and purpose, introducing the audience is key when teaching students who they are communicating with.

Students are also given time to prewrite in order to generate ideas for topics which are generally student choice as well as time to organize their thoughts. It is also recommended in *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* to engage students in activities that help them gather and organize ideas for their composition before they write a first draft (255). We normally prewrite as a class activity: writing and then sharing ideas and thoughts with one another as we brainstorm and organize ideas. Students are taught strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions (248) which we do through the process of writing each piece. In addition, students are given time in class to write their first draft with their audience in mind. Robb explains that teachers need to reserve a chunk of time for students to write because extended writing time develops writing stamina, the ability to concentrate and block out everything but the writing (115). This not only gives students a quiet time to write, but a time to ask questions and conference with the teacher.

Olthouse writes that students need teachers who provide structured writing time and clear deadlines (117). An example used in O'Neill's eighth grade English classroom

is provided in Appendix F to illustrate the process we go through when students are given a new piece of writing to complete along with deadlines for each step of the process. It is important to have structure and clear expectations in the process approach to writing. Pritchard & Honeycutt illustrate this point in *Best Practices in Writing Instruction* when they state, “An overall finding of research on the process approach is that all the stages must be fully implemented if students are to build a repertoire of writing strategies. Students need structure and sequence and do not benefit from a pick-and-choose approach to teaching writing” (28).

After students are given class time to draft and complete revisions, they peer review both face-to-face and online. Students are also given class time to write author’s notes explaining where they are at with their piece of writing and what they need help with. Appendix G shows the template given to students to follow for writing their author’s notes. Students are encouraged to change the template and make it their own, but many fill in the blanks and use it as it is for their Author’s Note.

Before having students post their piece online, they have to peer review with a student in the classroom. Students used the form in Appendix H, with space to provide responses, to give feedback to their fellow writers.

After the face-to-face peer review in the classroom and time to make revisions, eighth grade students post their revised piece of writing to the online writing exchange forum. They are given class time to respond to group members on the online writing forum in the discussions section, although they need to do some of that on their own time since they all have laptops.

As described in Appendix F, throughout the writing process, teachers talk with the students about how to strengthen what they have written by teaching mini-lessons about things like enticing leads or thesis statements, depending on the type of writing we are doing. In *Best Practices in Writing Instruction*, Pritchard & Honeycutt write “Strategy instruction is best introduced during group mini-lessons based on examples from students’ writing and then reinforced in individual conferences (37). In addition, students were shown an example of the teacher’s writing and what it looks like to revise. Graves gives five reasons teachers should bring their own writing into the classroom:

- 1.) Writing with students builds relationships and nurtures respect among all writers in the room.
- 2.) Writing with students teaches them how to see things from a new point of view.
- 3.) Writing together creates energy.
- 4.) Modeling your decision-making process helps them see that the process is ongoing.
- 5.) Writing with your students saves time (48-49).

It is apparent this was effective because eighth grade student, Marissa, wrote in a reflection that “when Mrs. Troester showed us how when you revise you could change your whole story makes me notice that revising just doesn’t mean changing the grammar.” Another student, Sarah, explained, “After Mrs. Troester’s examples of how you can change your writing I know it’s okay to restart. I usually just change a line here or there and maybe a few words, but now I can change big paragraphs. These writing projects are definitely are making us better writers.” MacArthur writes in *Best Practices in Writing Instruction*, “When writers revise, they have opportunities to think about whether their text communicates effectively to an audience, to improve the quality of their prose, and even to reconsider their content and perspective and potentially transform their own understanding. To become proficient writers, students must learn to revise

effectively” (141). My hope is by showing students how to revise with examples from my own and past students’ writing that they will be able to carry this practice over to their own revisions. In addition, by using mini-lessons and peer review, students will learn strategies to improve their writing. MacArthur further states, “in an instructional context, revision provides an opportunity for teachers to guide students in learning about the characteristics of effective writing in ways that will not only improve the current piece, but also carry over to future writing. In learning to revise, students get feedback from readers on their work, learn to evaluate their writing, and discover new ways to solve common writing problems. Thus, revising is a way to learn about the craft of writing” (141). I feel the only way students will be able to improve their writing is to think critically about it, but as teachers, we need to support students with strategies and help them get to a deeper level of thinking about their writing.

The online writing exchange and face-to-face peer reviews help students because it teaches them that writing is a process. In addition, it teaches students how to analyze their writing. Peter Elbow makes an interesting association in his book, *Writing with Power*. He feels what makes revising hard is not using the revision skills learned, but using those skills on one’s own writing. He states, “Surgeons don’t learn cutting skills by turning the knife on themselves. It feels like cutting your own flesh to take your own writing apart, rearrange it, and throw away large chunks” (123). Elbow thinks if we use the knife on other people’s writing, we can learn the techniques of good revising for our own writing. This seems to hold true with our eighth grade students. After making revisions based on feedback from classmates and group members in the Online Writing Exchange, students have an adult proofreader do the final edits. Students must hand in

their signed sheets ensuring peer reviews were completed and an adult proofreader edited their paper (Appendix I).

Before publishing their piece of writing to their blog, teachers hand back papers with comments. If there are any suggestions or edits, students complete this before publishing. For most writing projects, a final grade is not written on their paper, rather it is recorded in the online gradebook where students can look up their grades. This helps students to focus on the comments and not on the final grade.

Our approach to the writing process is structured with reason because students need a framework or a sequence of steps to accomplish demanding assignments (Pritchard & Honeycutt 34). Even though the writing process and instruction throughout is structured, it does not mean that students do not have any choice. In Robb's book, she raises the question, "Why is giving students choice of writing topics important to their development as writers?" (20). Students in our classroom are given choice over their writing topic, but not the mode of writing. For example, in their personal narratives, students choose the story they wish to tell in their narrative. When writing for the Letters About Literature contest, students choose the author they want to write to based on a book that had an impact upon them. And although there are expectations students need to meet based on the writing mode, there is still an opportunity for them to have choice and to go above and beyond with their writing. Our goal in eighth grade English is to teach students how to write well, and they need strategies for how to put their ideas together in order to do this. It is difficult to break the rules of writing before one even knows what they are, so our emphasis in eighth grade is to teach students the strategies within each writing mode while encouraging them to explore and play with their writing. It is

idealistic to think that we could have forty-five students writing on any topic they wish within any writing mode they desire. It would be difficult to assess and help students understand the skills and strategies, especially when they come to eighth grade in our district with such limited writing exposure. Our goal is not only to have students write in different modes and learn the skills and strategies within each mode, but we also want them to write well. We make efforts to give them choices while supporting them as learners and writers.

With most pieces of writing, students complete a reflection of what they learned. This reflection can be in different forms. For the Letters About Literature writing eighth grade students completed, they wrote a learning letter for their reflection (Appendix J).

The Letters About Literature writing students completed was the final writing piece they posted for feedback to the online writing exchange. When asked what influenced their learning, many responses from learning letters stated the online writing forum had an impact:

Blair: “I really like getting feedback from all the other students from different towns. It was the best feedback that I got. I felt like they were a little bit more constructive.”

Shayne: “I think the thing that has helped me to write better and revise well was the writing forum. The reason I say this is because they told me what I needed to add. For instance I needed more personal stories that related to my topic. When I added that it all flowed better and my writing made more sense. I think the reason the online forum is best is because there are a lot of smart people giving me feedback. They also answer my questions that I have personally which helps me directly.”

Ehric: “I have found the feedback we receive over the writing forum to be the most useful revision tool we’ve used in any of our writing. What I like about that feedback is how the other people point out what was good about our writing, which improves our understanding of what our writing should look like, and how they give specific and opinionated details about what needs to be edited.”

Julia: “What has helped me learn how to write and revise on this piece of writing would be the feedback I’ve gotten on Canvas. (*The online writing exchange forum*) It helped me

because I get lots of feedback from kids my age and an adult that knows more about the writing world.”

When students were asked to reflect upon the influence on their writing since the beginning of the school year, they responded:

Wyatt: “I have improved on the revision step of writing. I used to just want to write one time and not change a thing and just be over, but now I have found out that revising your writings makes them a lot better and more interesting to read.”

Blair: “I feel like I have really grown as a writer. At the beginning of the year, I really didn’t see a need for the writing process. I just threw something down on paper and called it good. As I look back on one of my first journal writings, I have noticed how much I have grown as a writer. We have only been in school for a couple months, and I feel like I have learned more about writing in this class than I have in any other class.”

Aurora: “Since the beginning of the year, I have changed the way I write by a lot; but, the change is for the better. Before, the writing process confused me, and my outline and structure were sloppy. I didn’t see the difference between proofreading and revising.”

Shayne: “I used to just revise and get it over with, but when I revise now I change my writing completely so that it is a better piece and not the same piece with different words. I have also improved by using better word choice. At the beginning of the year I would chose average words, but now I am writing with words that have good meaning and add a sense of detail to my writings.”

Gloria: “I have grown as a writer in many ways. I was very bland at the beginning of the year I just put my thoughts down and that was it. Now I revise and I use more detail in my writing and I know how to embellish my stories to an extent. I do my revising the best when I look through my writing and I have other people look through my writing and have them give me feedback on things I could do different. Overall I have grown in the writing process most of all I pre-write all my assignments, I also revise, revise, revise until I get it to where I can’t revise anymore. That is way better than I did at the beginning of the year.”

## **Implementation of The Online Writing Exchange**

### **Setting up the forum and expectations for participants**

The first writing exchange was launched in the Fall of 2008 with Dr. Robert Brooke’s Preservice English teachers who attend University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Jenny Bahle Razor’s Omaha Burke Sophomores, and Jennifer Troester’s O’Neill eighth

grade students. This collaborative effort was supported under the umbrella of the Nebraska Writing Project. After a couple of years, Lincoln Public Schools teacher Sally Hunt and her classroom of students was added to the online writing exchange. This online writing exchange was created in order to address all aspects of the writing process and give students an audience for their writing for peer review. Pritchard & Honeybutt explain in *Best Practices in Writing Instruction*:

The literature on the process approach is based on the idea that writing is a social activity and is best learned in a community. Researchers have examined the connection between the writing process and the social contexts within which writing occurs (Gere & Abbott, 1985). They attribute the effectiveness of the writing process to an essential practice--the interaction of writers with teachers and peers during conferences and small-group work. In his review of research on effective strategies for teaching writing, Hillocks (1986) determined that writing practice alone does not improve writing; rather, having writing, *responded to using specific criteria for response* improves writing (34-35).

When the research for this thesis was conducted in 2013, we set up an online writing exchange between O'Neill students and students in three other classrooms across the state of Nebraska: University of Nebraska at Lincoln Preservice English teachers, Omaha Burke Sophomores, and Lincoln High Creative Writing students in grades 9-12. As with any unique learning experience students are part of, communication with parents is important. Students must first be granted permission from parents to be allowed to participate in the online writing exchange. I will not allow students to participate unless I have signed permission from their parents. The permission form they sign is sent home at the beginning of the school year to inform students not only of the writing exchange, but of the types of writing students in eighth grade will do (Appendix K).

Finding the right online writing space that is secure, malware free, approved by all districts involved, and can be used for discussions can be difficult. We received



permission from an Educational Service Unit to use a platform called Canvas. Teachers added students and set up twenty small groups. Most writing exchange groups had six participants total. Each had a UNL Preservice teacher to facilitate and usually two or three O'Neill students, two Burke students, and one Lincoln High student. Students were placed randomly with the exception that the O'Neill students were from different class periods if possible in order for them to have more exposure to different classmates' writing. Also, some consideration was taken on my part to place two O'Neill students with varying abilities in the same group. I did not want to place two students in the same group who have great difficulty with writing, and I felt it important for the Preservice English teachers at UNL to be exposed to different kinds of learners while keeping students' ability levels confidential.

All students met their group members online their group members through introductions and the ability to post pictures to Canvas. The schedule and general guidelines were given to teachers and UNL students (Appendix L).

Teachers guided their students through the process of using the online forum in order for them to learn how to navigate the space. Online etiquette and expectations for author's note and feedback were thoroughly explained in the eighth grade classroom before posting online (Appendix M).

Eighth grade students are given a colored handout of the author's note and feedback explanation and expectations that they keep in their English folders. They are expected to take them out when writing an author's note and giving feedback for guidance over what is expected (Appendix N).

“Writers need to initiate the feedback process by asking for responses” (Spear 141). The author’s note and feedback are crucial for making the writing exchange successful in improving student writing. Gallagher and Lee provide an outline of expectations for “Writer’s Notes” or author’s notes as a tool to use for successful student analysis during the writing process (128). Both the author’s note and feedback are tools to guide students through the process analyzing student writing in aim for them to independently think analytically about writing after the exchange. In eighth grade, students are given examples they can use for part of their author’s note. An example is provided in Appendix O for a personal narrative eighth grade students wrote.

Teachers tell students they can use this as a guide. The idea launched from research by Peter Elbow and his criterion-based feedback and reader-based feedback (*Teaching with Power*) as well as a handout created by Anita Archer about “Scaffolding Writing Instruction” and how students should give “focused feedback”. I thought I would adopt that idea and tailor it to my specific students’ writing needs. The reason students started using this specific template is twofold: we teach a mixed ability class and several students need more guidance because their have a learning disability in writing expression or they have a mild mental handicap, and this is the first time all of the eighth grade students have ever experienced a process approach to writing. The author’s notes guide made them feel more confident and taught them what was expected. It is a helpful model, if needed. Also, the questions posed in the author’s note reflected mini lessons or things specific to this piece of writing. The result has been that students give more clear guidance in their author’s notes for their readers than they had been in years prior, and they are using a model that helps them to understand the process. “We believe that the

combination of peer response and strategy instruction is an especially powerful procedure. Strategy instruction provides students with an explicit framework for responding to a peer's writing. Peer response provides a motivating social context for using the strategy, as peers work together to improve their writing" (Graham & Harris 63-64). The goal is to provide students with strategic writing instruction while giving them the chance to peer review in class and through the online writing exchange.

### **Eighth Grade Writing and Assessment**

#### **Writing**

For the first post, all students in the writing exchange submitted a poem choosing one of the following as a model: "I am from" inspired by George Ella Lyon or "Raised by" inspired by Kelly Norman Ellis. Both poems are a way for students to write about who they are, what they are about, and where they come from. This is yet another way of getting to know one another in this virtual world students had entered.

After this initial post and response, students followed their curricular guidelines, so there was a large variety of writing students were exposed to. This is something eighth grade student, Marissa, praised about the writing exchange stating, "I get to read other examples and types of writings." Since students from different schools are posting various types of writing, students are exposed to pieces they would not be if a writing exchange were done in the isolation of the classroom. The students at O'Neill posted a total of five different pieces of writing, including an "I am from" poem. Other types of writing they requested feedback on from their group were a Problem-Solution Essay, a Personal Narrative, a Patriotic Essay, and a letter to an author for the Letters About Literature Contest.

## Assessment

For a majority of major writing projects, eighth grade students are graded on both the process of writing and the final piece of writing itself. For the process grade, students are given a guideline of how the writing project will progress with expectations for what dates parts of the process are due. We also call this their “writing process grade”. An example of a rubric for the final piece and an example of how they are graded for the process for their Personal Narratives make this clear in Appendix P.

By grading both the process and the final paper, students learn the importance of taking all of the steps in order to finish with a strong piece of writing. When I first began to teaching writing, I did not implement grading both the process and the writing alone, and students would want to write a draft, proofread it, and hand it in calling it “good enough”. When students used peer review for revisions and knew that they would have their final drafts published to their independent blogs, they had more ownership and accountability of their writing. In Graham’s book, *Best Practices in Writing Instruction*, Pritchard & Honeycutt state, “An overall finding of research on the process approach is that all the stages must be fully implemented if students are to build a repertoire of writing strategies. Students need structure and sequence and do not benefit from a pick-and-choose approach to teaching writing” (28). In addition, “most of the research does support the use of the process approach as being more effective than other approaches in terms of improving writing attitudes and products” (29). I believe teaching them the process and holding them accountable for working through it teaches learners to take time to analyze their writing and find different audiences to give them feedback before publishing it. “Two important basic concepts need to be understood in developing lessons

that are integrated, sequenced, and scaffolded: (1) Writing is a cognitive task and, as such, is also developmental; and (2) writing is a social act and, thus, moves from egocentrism to larger audiences” (Graham 29). Working through the process with students gives us a chance to address writing issues we were seeing through mini lessons. Some may think this approach too structured, but in my experience as a writing teacher, young learners of a new skill need that foundation to learn how to approach writing, especially when it involves revision. MacArthur states in Graham’s book that improving revising skills is to teach students to evaluate their writing or that of their peers using specific criteria and then to revise their papers based on the evaluation (144). Students need models of the writing we will do and a clear explanation with specific guidelines, otherwise they feel confused throughout the project and the final piece of writing is a disappointment. When giving students a grade for the process and taking them through it step-by-step, it ensures the online writing exchange will be successful as well.

With specific criteria in place and a structured approach to the process as well as grading students on both the process and the final piece, the eighth grade writers have been successful within the writing forum. It is a combination of a structured approach to the process with special attention to how to analyze writing using author’s notes and feedback using the in class peer review and the online writing exchange that has helped eighth grade students become better writers. Students are given time in class to form their author’s notes and post them to the forum as well as time to read and respond to group members, but often times students are gone for various reasons or we run out of time in class. Having the writing process grade in place holds them accountable to participate.

### **Factors for a Successful Writing Exchange**

Working as part of a group with people from across the state has been something eighth grade students look forward to and learn from, but it also has challenges. There are several factors that play a role in how well a group participates and how much they feel accountable to one another. These include the UNL Preservice English teacher facilitator, the expectations of the teachers for their students to post and give feedback, and the individual student's motivation and ability level.

### **UNL Preservice Teacher Leader**

In my experience, a strong UNL leader who encourages the group to write and gives helpful feedback is influential on my students' experience with the forum. After posting his first piece of writing, a student came to me with wide eyes explaining that the Preservice teacher had given him helpful feedback and that he could not get over how much she wrote to him. He stated that he did not realize someone could comment so much on a piece of writing, especially his, and that if she took the time to write helpful feedback to him, that he wanted to do the same.

In 2013, before the launch of the online writing exchange, teachers from the different schools meet with the UNL Preservice English teachers via Google Hangout. It helped to meet with them because we were able to explain our teaching situation with a mixed ability classroom and discuss our hopes for what we would like to see from them as leaders of their small group. We encouraged the Preservice teachers to remember they are interacting with students as young as 13. We also explained that we could not give out personal information about students, so we could not tell them who received special

services. In addition, we encouraged them to contact us with any concerns or problems they may see.

The Preservice teachers “police” the exchange because even though teachers try, there is no way to read all of writing on the forum even though we have access to everything. Over the years there have only been minor incidences when a Preservice teacher has contacted me. One was over a piece of gory writing a student had written. She thought it was violent and wanted me to be aware of it. The student had posted it as an extra creative writing piece that he had written in the mood for Halloween. After seeing the piece and knowing the student, I reassured her that there was no need to worry about him acting out. Another time a student of mine posted an inappropriate joke. His Preservice teacher leader alerted me to it and it was deleted immediately. After visiting with him about it, he never posted anything like that again and used appropriate etiquette on the forum; it was a good learning experience for him. When there are Preservice teachers who take on a leadership role, it helps the small group run more smoothly and it encourages students to participate more.

During the 2013 writing exchange in Group 4, UNL Preservice teacher, Jeff, posted the following at the beginning of the writing exchange:

Hello, everyone! I am here to greet you and explain all of the guidelines and things that we will be doing this semester on the online writing exchange.

1. First, I ask that you check out each other's bios on the "people" tab. Read everyone's and get to know one another. The more we know about each other, the more that we will be able to relate to each other's writing and critique it to their benefit.
2. Next, I would like to stress the fact that this is an academic environment, and such, there are some protocol for critiquing each other's writing. First, you need to remember that the writing is the author's, every comment you make is a suggestion that can be taken, ignored, or changed by the author. Feedback should be constructive, which includes a mixture of positive feedback and suggestions on how to improve. I know many of you have worked on the "3 stars and a wish" format. This is perfect! It highlights the good things about the piece, so the author knows what works, and then gives the author

one point where the reader isn't quite getting what they need out of the piece. Strive for this when giving feedback.

3. While there is protocol for giving feedback, there is also protocol for taking it. I highly recommend that you take each bit of feedback and consider it. Don't write anything off right away. If another writer gives a suggestion, think about what it might add to your paper, poem, or story. Additionally, some of us are older, while others are younger. No one person's feedback is more or less valuable than another's. Keep in mind that we are your audience, at least for this viewing of a piece. What an 8th grader gets out of a poem will be wildly different than a Senior in high school. However, each is a valid interpretation based on that person's age, background, gender, or experiences. Please keep this in mind when looking at feedback.

4. This is a place to share your writing and try new things with it. If there is something you aren't quite sure of, feel free to post it here. I hope to check this page every day, even if you guys can't quite get on that often. So feel free to post whenever and expect a reply somewhat soon.

5. When you post a new piece of writing, we are going to try posting it in this "pages" section. Please post the title as "(your name) writing (the date)". So if I were to post a new piece of writing right now, it would be "Jeff ----- writing 9/16". That will help with organization of dates. If this doesn't work too well, we may move this over to the discussions tab.

That is all I have to say for now. Thanks for reading and good luck writing!

Jeff

This preservice facilitator had a successful group in part because he gave clear expectations about the procedures on the forum, and he was encouraging to group members to participate. In his response to an eighth grade student from O'Neill, and her "I am from" poem he stated:

First of all, congrats on writing your first poem for the exchange. It's always scary to post your writing for others to read. To answer your questions, I absolutely get to know you and your background a lot more by reading all of this. By showing the movement from house to house, I can really get a sense of how you grew a little in each house and how each house had an effect on your life. I really like the rhythm of the poem, as it flows well. One question I have: How old were you at house 6? It feels like you might be kind of young, and thus, you've lived there for a while. If this is the case, I could see making this stanza a bit longer. This would add a little variance in the rhythm of the poem as well



as provide a sense of belonging and staying power. This is obviously just a suggestion, as I don't know exactly what you have to offer just yet. I do like the fact that you made the poem rhyme. I'm usually against rhyming for the sake of rhyming, but it really works with this rhythmic structure. Good job!

Jeff

Preservice teachers like Jeff who gave guidance and reliable feedback that students could use had the most successful groups.

### **Teacher Expectations**

The expectations of teachers with students participating in the writing forum is crucial. Gere states, writing groups “are more likely to succeed when groups are sufficiently prepared and committed, when appropriate tasks are clear and/or agreed upon by all participants, and when debriefing or evaluation is built into the life of the group” (112). When eighth grade students were asked: “How do you feel the writing forum is going so far? List some frustrations and some “cheers” or things that are going well with your online group.” Gabbie responded:

Some people in my group aren't giving me any feedback and aren't posting their work. This makes me frustrated because I want to know what other people think of my writing. My favorite part about the writing exchange is the feedback I get. It helps me revise my work and make it better.

Eighth grade students value the forum when they have an active group. In my research, I have also found that students expect and desire to get feedback that will help them truly revise their writing. Eighth grade student, Nikki, commented, “I have learned about revising and I feel that I have improved. I liked putting my writing on Canvas and seeing what others thought.” Amanda stated, “I learned that it helps a lot to get many different points of view on my writing to improve it [using the online writing exchange].” For

other students, if their group was not active it was frustrating. Eighth grade student Marissa stated that some students “hardly tell me anything except good job.” If teachers do not set the expectations for students to post and respond or make time for them to do this, students will not make efforts to participate in the writing exchange. It is also important for teachers to check to make sure students are posting and giving feedback. In the eighth grade classroom, we would have students show us their post before signing their writing process checklist. Checking to make sure all students in the eighth grade had given feedback was more difficult, so our solution was to check with their other O’Neill group members. We took time during class to check the forum on the day after feedback was due. Students checked all new posts to make sure they had given feedback and that their classmate had given feedback as well. This held everyone accountable. If students had not given feedback, we waited to sign their checklist and gave reduced points until they showed us their feedback on the forum. This is a crucial management task because it shows students that teachers value their time in posting and giving feedback, and it holds them accountable to do so.

### **Student Motivation and Ability**

Another factor in making the online writing exchange successful is student motivation and ability level. Because we have a mixed ability classroom including students who qualify for special education in written expression, there were a couple of students writing at a second or third grade level during the 2013 writing exchange. One student who wrote at the second grade level was eager to participate in the forum and was willing to post his work, but giving feedback was overwhelming for him, so we only had him respond to the other O’Neill student in his group. We had him respond to the O’Neill

student because he knew the content and expectations of the assignments. Having him respond to only the O'Neill student was a disadvantage for his group, but we needed to accommodate him. For some students, at times the two factors of ability level and motivation were linked because if a student did not feel confident to post writing or give feedback, then they were not motivated to do so. One student in particular who has limited writing ability for an eighth grade student was not as willing to participate in class or on the forum. It was difficult to even get him to engage and try to write. Another student had a difficult time navigating the forum because he had difficulties with his memory. He would often forget his password and where he wrote it down. We gave both of these students extra time and guidance on days we had students post or give feedback on the forum. In another case, we had a student who is extremely bright and an outstanding writer, but he often chose not to turn in homework. The writing forum was not exempt from this behavior. By the end of the semester this behavior had improved dramatically, but initially it was difficult to get him to post and give feedback in a timely manner. Student motivation and ability level can be an obstacle, but with solid classroom management, follow through, and accommodations when needed, a majority of students can be successful within the online writing exchange.

### **Results, Implications, and Conclusion**

According to my research, peer review through the online writing exchange does assure O'Neill eighth grade students understand the writing process. It also teaches them how to analyze others' writing and their own. In addition, it gives students a wider audience which improves writing. Two of the pieces of writing students shared on the online writing exchange were the Patriot's Pen Essay and the piece written for Letters

About Literature. Both were for contests and students from O'Neill's eighth grade were recognized for their efforts. Sam and Amanda were local winners for the VFW's Patriot's Pen Essay; both advanced to districts where Sam was District Runner-up. Wyatt was the Alternate Winner in Level II for the Letters About Literature Contest. On the state writing assessment, the percent of students proficient or exceeding writing expectations in eighth grade was 85% with six of our eighth grade students scoring a perfect 70 out of 70 points on the assessment. In contrast, fourth grade students in our district during the same year were 73% proficient or exceeding with one student having a perfect score, and our eleventh grade students had 74% proficient or exceeding on the writing assessment with three perfect scores.

There are some things I would do differently when implementing the online writing exchange in my eighth grade writing class. After reading feedback from students and seeing their frustration, I want to make sure the other schools involved in the online writing exchange are committed to making it a priority. The most active groups had the most student success and satisfaction. Students from all schools need to post and respond according to the schedule and in a more uniform manner. If this does not work, one remedy may be to restructure the writing exchange to have the UNL Preservice teachers act as writing coaches to students who post online, rather than have students from other schools respond to everyone. If we did this, I would have my eighth grade students post online to one another for peer review within our school site called Blackboard, so they understand how to analyze writing and give feedback. Then I would have them post on the online writing exchange to their UNL Preservice teacher writing coach for feedback.

Because students are exposed to a variety of writing on the online writing exchange, one thing I need to take more time for in my classroom is to discuss the different types of writing students are seeing. We should have a short discussion at the end of class on the day they give feedback, or perhaps do a “ticket out the door” activity describing what surprised them, a favorite line or piece of writing, and so on. We could discuss these thoughts at the beginning of the next class period. I think that these changes would help all students value the online writing exchange even more.

Prior to eighth grade, students at O’Neill Public Schools had limited writing experience or exposure to the full writing process along with rare opportunities for analyzing writing or publishing it to a wider audience than their teacher. One student, Emma, states,

“Before 8th grade, my papers were very unstructured and all over the place....My papers that I write now are much more easy to understand now that I know how to use the writing process. Also, Mrs. Troester made us write often so we knew how to use the writing process. Doing this helped me to understand and memorize the writing process.”

Understanding the process of writing and using peer review with an authentic audience for their writing has assured eighth grade students to be more conscientious and analytical of their writing. When asked how learning the peer review in eighth grade helped students become better writers, students responded,

Wyatt: “It has helped me learn to not settle with being alright. My writing has gotten a lot more efficient because of the peer review steps we used as eighth graders.”

Julia: “Learning about peer review during 8th grade helped you as a writer. Peer review makes me look over my writing more often than I used to.”

Marissa: “Peer review has helped me a lot. I realize how important it is to look over my work and to have others look over it too.”

At the beginning of the eighth grade school year, I see students approach writing with fear because they have rarely been given the opportunity to break it down into pieces or learn how to analyze their writing through peer review. In addition, they have just been writing for their teacher and not a wider audience. By teaching writing as a structured process with the final product in mind for publication, students are given a solid foundation they can use as a springboard for writing in high school and beyond. When asked as Freshmen (Appendix E), do you feel you can write better because of the structured approach to the writing process in 8th grade? Students responded:

Ehric: “During 8th grade, I really started to have fun with my writing and as a part of that I began to explore different aspects of the art that I had left untouched before.”

Gloria: “I feel like 8th grade was a great kick start to my writing, the different types of writing and structure really helped me explode this year. It helped me because I have some background now about different types of writing, and I can really get lost in my writing this year.”

When students have a foundation for the process and skills of writing, they have the confidence and ability to explore and play with their writing. They can look at their writing analytically and make decisions about audiences who would appreciate it.

## Appendix A

### Student Feedback 1

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ 10/17/13

#### *The Writing Process*

What is your background with the writing process? In other words, did you use the writing process in previous years? If so, which steps of the writing process did you use and for what kinds of essays? Which teachers did you write the most with and what steps of the writing process did they use with you?

The Writing Process Includes: 1.) Understanding the topic, audience, & purpose; 2.) Prewriting (Brainstorming & Organizing); 3.) Drafting; 4.) Peer Reviewing; 5.) Revising; Proofreading/Editing; 6.) Publishing

**On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, we went to Lincoln and met with your online writing groups. Please answer the following questions about that day:**

What activities did you do when you met with your small group?

After meeting with your online writing group, do you feel you know them better? Has anything changed on the writing forum? Do you feel more obligated to respond to other group members' writing after meeting them or were you doing that regularly already

How do you feel the writing forum is going so far? List some frustrations and some "cheers" or things that are going well with your online group.

## Appendix B

### Student Feedback 2

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Writing Questionnaire

The first paper you wrote was the personal narrative. We posted it to Angel's discussion forum and gave each other feedback on how to make it better. Did you revise your paper based on that feedback from your peers? Why or why not?

Then your teachers gave you feedback on your personal narrative. Did you revise your paper before handing it in for a grade based on the feedback from your teachers? Why or why not?

Next, you began using the NeWP forum with students from Lincoln and Omaha to share your writing. The first piece of writing that you posted was your "I am from" poem. You asked for feedback in your author's note, so you could revise it. Your teachers did not make it an assignment to revise your poem, but did you do it anyway? Why or why not?

The last writing assignment you did was your Letter About Literature. You had several opportunities to revise it before handing it in for a grade. First, you wrote an author's note and posted it to the forum. You gathered feedback from the forum. You used a checklist from your teacher. You had a peer review your paper based on guiding questions. Then you self-evaluated your writing using the grading rubric. Some of you had adult help. What was most helpful to you in the revising process? Please explain.

What motivates you to revise your writing? Possible answers could be:  
 because I want to earn a better grade,  
 my group on the writing forum,  
 to become a better writer,  
 because my parents want me to get good grades,  
 or your own answer.

Yes, you could choose more than one. Please explain your answer.

What is most helpful to you when revising? Choose your top two numbering them 1 & 2:

\*Writing an author's note so you can start to evaluate your draft.

\*The feedback on the forum is most helpful.

\*The rubric the teacher gives me so I know how I'll be graded and what is expected.

\*A checklist from the teacher so I know that I've included everything that is expected.

\*Having a peer review my writing and give me feedback using the questions our teachers provide.

\*Doing a self-evaluation on your writing using the grading rubric.

\*Having an adult sit down and help me with my writing.



Have you posted anything on the NeWP forum that was not required by teachers? For example, the 55 word story or anything else you have written on your own. If so, what did you post?

## Appendix C

### Student Feedback 3

#### Evaluation – NE Writing Project – PUR Writing Exchange

Thank you for completing this survey. We want you to take it seriously and be honest. As teachers, we care about what you think and hope to improve this exchange for future students. We can't do this without your help.

Name:

Grade:

School:

Please circle the best answer.

\*1. After taking part in this Online Writing Exchange,

I feel more confident as a writer.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I have been exposed to different types of writing that will benefit my future writing.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I can now better analyze my own writing.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I can now better analyze other peoples' writing.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I can give quality feedback to other writers because of this writing exchange.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I took advantage of my group members' feedback and used it to revise my writing.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I now know some strategies for how to better revise my own writing.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I am more aware of writing for an audience rather than just writing for a grade.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I feel this writing exchange helped me experience different cultures and environments in Nebraska.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

\*2. Compare the process of writing and peer review in the Online Writing Exchange with more traditional ways. I would rather peer review:

Face-to-face                      Online

\*3. Compare the process of writing and peer review in the Online Writing Exchange with more traditional ways. I would rather write and peer review:

With people I know              With people I don't know

Other (please specify):

\*4. In your own words, tell what the writing process means to you.

\*5. Tell what you have learned or benefited from as a result of the writing exchange.

\*6. On the in-person meet-up in Lincoln, I benefited as a learner.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

I added to my skills as a writer.

Strongly Agree      Agree      Neutral      Disagree      Strongly Disagree

How did you benefit as a learner and a writer as a result of the meet-up?

\*Did you feel your group had stronger participation and presence on the writing forum after meeting? Why or why not?

\*7. Please describe your participate on the writing forum.

\*8. Please add any additional comments or suggestions for future improvements?

## Appendix D

### Student Feedback 4

*Given in February 2014 after the state assessment. The online writing exchange had ended at the beginning of December 2013, but students still stated the online writing exchange impacted with writing when they completed this survey.*

### Learning Letter

**Write a letter addressed to Mrs. Troester & Mrs. Morrow that is double-spaced and in 14 pt. font, Times New Roman that explains the following:**

**Influence on learning** – What are some of the things that you learned about The Writing Process that are new? What are some things you learned about in 8<sup>th</sup> grade that you didn't know before about writing? Before starting your letter, make a list of activities we have done in this class that have helped you learn about The Writing Process. (Think about pre-writing – brainstorming & organizing, rubrics, drafting, peer review - author's notes & feedback via the writing forum and in class, revising, checklists, proofreading, and publishing.)

**Influence on writing** – How has your writing improved, changed or been impacted by learning about The Writing Process and all the proper components that are necessary for it? How did your writing change or improve or the course of this semester because of The Writing Exchange?

**Influence on your statewide assessment** – How has the Writing Exchange helped some of your specific writing? What are some examples of things you have done well with your writing because of The Writing Exchange or because you understand The Writing Process better? What could you have done differently or better in regards to your writing?

The goal of this learning letter is for you to be reflective and analyze what you have learned about The Writing Process and The Writing Exchange. You need to put some thought into this in order to summarize what you have learned.

**Just begin at the top of the paper like this:**

Dear Mrs. Troester & Mrs. Morrow,

XX  
XX.....

Then sign off at the end and type your name.

## **Appendix E**

### **Student Feedback 5**

*Given in February 2015 to students who were part of the 8th grade class when research was conducted.*

How has learning about peer review (author's note to analyze your writing and feedback to peers by analyzing their writing) during 8th grade helped you as a writer as a Freshmen?

What can you do as a writer now that you could not before 8th grade?

Do you feel you can write better because of the structured approach to the writing process in 8th grade? Why or why not? (Even if you don't use a structured approach as a Freshmen, did what you learned as an 8th grader help you as a writer after you left Mrs. Troester's class?)

## Appendix F

This is the online handout students are given on the first day a writing project called “Letters About Literature” begins:

**Letters About Literature: A Contest for Young Readers  
Sponsored by the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress**

**Writing:** You will write a persuasive letter stating your opinion and support that opinion with specific details. For this contest, it must be 300-1,000 words.

**Purpose:** Letters About Literature is a reading and writing contest for students in grades 4-12. Students are asked to read a book and write to the author (living or dead) about how the book affected them personally. Letters are judged on state and national levels.

**Audience:** The people judging your letter, your teachers, people reading your blog, your peer reviewers.

### Timeline:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Prewrite – Due Thursday, November 14**  
**Draft Finished for Peer Review & Writing Forum**  
**– Due Friday, November 15**  
**Feedback on the forum – Due Wednesday,**  
**November 20**  
**Revisions – Due Thursday, November 21**  
**Peer Reviewer & Adult Proofreader Paper**  
**– Due Thursday, Nov. 21**  
**Final Paper: Printed & Posted Your Blog**  
**- Due Friday, Nov. 22**

### Examples:

National Winner Letter:

<http://www.read.gov/letters/contests/winners/2009/letters/levelthree-joshua.html>

National Winner Letter:

<http://www.read.gov/letters/contests/winners/2013/letters/leveltwo-berke.html>

**Rubric: How we will grade your writing.**

| <b>Letters About Lit.<br/>100 pts. total</b>    | <b>Exceeds Expectations<br/>25 points</b>   | <b>Meets Expectations<br/>20 points</b>  | <b>Below Expectations<br/>15 points</b>   | <b>None<br/>0 points</b> |
|---|---|--|---|--------------------------|
| Key Components                                  | -300-1,000 words<br>-Student has written in proper letter format<br>-Proofread the letter for errors of spelling and punctuation  | -Missed the word count mark, but still a cohesive essay<br>-Mistakes in conventions are apparent, but overall meaning is still able to be understood   | -Not even close to the target length,<br>-Mistakes in conventions strongly distract from the message of the essay   |                          |
| Content   | -Describes how a work of literature changed the reader's view of the world or self<br>-Corresponds with the author<br>-Provides explanations or examples, anecdotes or other specific details to support the reader's point of view | -Does not have compelling reasons for how this novel changed the reader's view of the world or self<br>-Corresponds with the author, yet it compliments<br>-Not many strong supporting details | -No compelling reasons for how this novel changed the reader's view of the world or self<br>-Has many compliments<br>-No supporting details                                   |                          |
| Reader Response/<br>Originality &<br>Expression | -Dialogue with the author rather than summarizing the book's plot<br>-Relates the book to him/herself rather than summarizing the novel<br>-Voice is convincing   | -Has more summary of the book instead of a conversation with the author<br>-Has some connection to the book, but not enough<br>-Voice is weak  | -Provides a summary of the book<br>-No connections to personal experiences are included<br>-Voice does not give the audience reason to believe this book has affected him/her |                          |
| Clarity of Ideas with Organization              | -A beginning with a hook, a middle with supporting details,   | -The hook, supporting details, or ending were  | -Writing is disorganized, random, or hard to  |                          |

|  |  |      |        |  |
|--|--|------|--------|--|
|  | & an end that bookends the beginning paragraph | weak | follow |  |
|--|--|------|--------|--|

**Rubric: How we will grade the process of writing.**

|          |   |  |
|----------|---|--|
| 15 pts.  | Prewrite:<br>Due Thurs., Nov. 14  |  |
| 20 pts.  | Draft:<br>Fri., Nov. 15   |  |
| 20 pts.  | Feedback:<br>Wed., Nov. 20  |  |
| 10 pts.  | Revisions:<br>Thurs., Nov. 21   |  |
| 15 pts.  | Peer Review & Adult Proofreading Paper:<br>Thurs., Nov. 21  |  |
| 20 pts.  | Final paper printed and handed in with peer review papers & posted to your blog:<br>Fri., Nov. 22 |  |
| 100 pts. | Total   |  |

**Mini-lesson:**

*Books that Make You Think, Books that Make You Feel*

**Prewrite:**

| <b>Thoughts</b>   | <b>Emotions</b>   |
|---|---|
| List specific details from the book that triggered a new realization or way of thinking about people or groups of people or a place or something. | List specific details from the book that triggered your emotions. |
|   |   |

What link did you discover between your thoughts and your emotions and the characters or events in the books?

**Answer the questions in the boxes.**

|  |   |
|--|---|
| What did the book show you about your world that you never noticed before? | What did you realize about yourself as a result of reading this book? |
| Why was this work meaningful to you?                                       | How do you know the author's work influenced you?                     |



**Mini-lessons:**

*Correspond, Don't Compliment!*

Write notes about what you learned below.

*Synthesize, Don't Summarize!*

Write notes about what you learned below.

**Draft:** Write a draft 300-1,000 words long. Make sure you model it off of the Letter Writing Format Handout.

**Mini-lessons for Revisions:**

*The Lead Paragraph – How to Hook the Reader in 25 Words or Less*

Write notes about what you learned below.

*Bookends (...or how to close your letter)*

Write notes about what you learned below.

*You Be the Judge!*

Write notes about what you learned below.

*A Few Words about Vocabulary* Handout

Complete Two Peer Reviews in Class

Post to the Online Writing Forum

**Edits:**

Read it out loud (or use Text-to-Speech on your Mac) to listen and look for a variety of sentence structures (Simple, Compound, Complex, & Compound-Complex).

Correct any run-on sentences.

Look for transitions between paragraphs, time changed, or thought changes.

Look at your rubric to make sure you are meeting the expectations.

Use a thesaurus to think of strong verbs, specific nouns, and descriptive adjectives.

Double Space, Cambria in 12 pt. Font

Indent all new paragraphs with no extra line space between paragraphs.

Use the Spelling and Grammar Check Tool to look for mistakes.

Read through the letter to look for tricky homophone words that a spelling check won't find.

Adult Proofreader should check for these things, too.

**Ideas adapted from *Letters About Literature* <http://read.gov/letters/>**

## Appendix G

Students – Use this as a guide for your author’s note. Please fill in the blanks and change or add anything you wish. Make it your own. This is just a guide.

### Author’s Note: Letters About Literature

Each student in my class gets to choose an author, dead or alive, to write a letter to about a book they wrote that had an impact on us. I am writing a letter to \_\_\_\_\_ about his/her book \_\_\_\_\_. This is my first draft of the letter. The letter can’t be a complimentary letter to the author or summarize the book he/she wrote. I MUST correspond with the author things he/she wouldn’t know otherwise & shares some personal things about me as well as synthesizes my connection and response to the book (weaving my experiences with the books content or making connections in my life to that of a character in the book). Please make sure I do this and let me know if I could do better on corresponding and synthesizing. Also, please give me feedback about my lead. Did it hook you and make you want to read more? And I would like feedback on my conclusion. Did I make a connection with the lead and wrap things up well? Did I make my point about what was learned?

Please give me feedback in the following way:

1. Praise or Address my ability to correspond with the author.
2. Praise or Address my ability to synthesis the book’s content & characters with my own life.
3. Praise or Address my lead.
4. Praise or Address my conclusion.

\*\*By praise I mean – tell me what was good about it and by address I mean, tell me what I could improve.

Thank you for giving me feedback that will help me to later revise my letter.

## Appendix H

### Letters About Literature Peer Review

**NAME:** \_\_\_\_\_

**NAME OF YOUR PEER REVIEWER:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### Writer's Job

Print off your letter.

Give your letter and this paper to your partner.

#### Peer Reviewer's Job

Read through the letter, and then answer these questions:

*\*Does the letter describe how a work of literature somehow changed my view of the world or self? If yes, how so? If no, how could I improve this?*

*\*Does the letter correspond with the author and provide explanations or examples, anecdotes or other specific details to support my point of view? Where did I do this best? What are your favorite parts of my letter?*

*\*Do you feel I made a connection with the contents of the book and/or a character in the book? Did I show that I changed my thoughts or had emotions triggered because of this book? Where did I do this well? What could I change or add?*

*\*Is my essay well organized with an excellent hook and a conclusion that wraps up my thoughts well? If not, how could I make it better?*

*\*Does my "voice" connect with you as a reader throughout the essay? Are you convinced that this book really changed my thoughts or emotions in some way? Write down some quotes from my letter that demonstrates this. If not, how could I change it? Look through the essay again. Highlight any weak verbs that could be changed. Also, highlight places where stronger nouns or adjectives could be added.*

*"Grade" the essay using the rubric.*

**Appendix I**

My Name:

English 8 - Letters About Literature

I have looked at that grading rubric, listened to the essay read aloud, and offered feedback for revisions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

English 8 - Letters About Literature

I have looked at that grading rubric, listened to the essay read aloud, and offered feedback for revisions.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature\_\_\_\_\_  
DateEnglish 8 - Letters About Literature -  
Adult Proofread

I have helped proofread the essay and offered any additional advice for edits in spelling & grammar.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix J**

Learning Letter: Letters About Literature

Write a letter addressed to Mrs. Troester & Mrs. Morrow that is double-spaced and in 14 pt. font, Times New Roman that explains the following:

1. Influence on learning – What has helped you learn how to write and revise this piece of writing best? (*In class peer review; adult proofreader; the online writing forum feedback you get; mini-lessons about things like “correspond, don’t compliment”, “synthesize, don’t summarize”, writing a good lead or a solid conclusion; using a thesaurus; and so on.* Discuss which of these revision strategies worked best for you in reference to LAL as a learner & writer and WHY.

2. Influence on writing – Major writing pieces we have done in 8<sup>th</sup> grade so far include personal narratives, problem-solution essays, patriotic essays, fractured fairy tales, and now Letters About Literature. You are all growing as writers and we have been impressed how much better your writing gets with each lesson. Think back to the beginning of the year, how do you think you have grown as a writer since then? Be reflective and provide details. Think about the different steps of the writing process and how you do those better, and you need to think about how you’ve improved your writing overall since the beginning of the year.

The goal of this learning letter is for you to be reflective and analyze what you have learned from writing for the Letters About Literature Contest. You need to put some thought into this in order to summarize what you have learned.

Begin at the top of the paper like this:

Dear Mrs. Troester & Mrs. Morrow,

XX  
XX.....

Then sign off at the end and type your name.

## Appendix K

### 8<sup>th</sup> Grade English Syllabus

#### **Class Writing Projects**

##### PERSONAL WRITING:

Personal Narratives  
 Descriptive Writing  
 Persuasive Patriotic Essays  
 Poetry Unit  
 Place Conscious Writing  
 Creative Writing

##### RESPONDING TO LITERATURE:

Letters about Literature  
 Fractured Fairy Tales

##### NON-FICTION WRITING:

Persuasive Speeches  
 Expository Writing over a topic in Social Studies or Science  
 Problem-Solution Essay  
 Cause & Effect Essay

Students will have a class blog and personal blogs to share happenings in the classroom and their own writing. In addition to this, students will do a unit over Sentence Writing Strategies and begin Daily Grammar Practice after that, so they have a foundation for conventions.

For the past several years, OHS 8<sup>th</sup> grade students have participated in an Online Writing Exchange. The goals for this exchange are to have students learn the writing process, and for students to analyze their own and others' writing. The following students will make up this exchange:

Rural – O’Neill 8<sup>th</sup> grade students

Suburban – Lincoln High Creative Writing Students Grades 9-12

Urban – Omaha Burke Sophomores

Preservice – Pre-teachers in their final English preparatory class at UNL

This will be a virtual writing exchange on a secure site. Each student will be put into a group of 5-6 in order to share writing and receive feedback about their writing. It will be like having a virtual pen pal with an academic purpose. The way students will share writing is through a safe and password protected site. This will be a great opportunity to share and get feedback about different writing pieces. Students will be informed that all teachers can observe all forum interaction. We will go over proper “netiquette”, rules, and guidelines for the secured site.

In addition, participating students will take a trip to Lincoln to meet their writing group friends, share writing, and participate in an “open mic” read around. There will be more information sent to you as this event draws closer.

This exciting project will begin in mid-September. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to email me [jtroester@esu8.org](mailto:jtroester@esu8.org)

Writing beliefs that we hope to instill:

1. We are all writers!
2. Writing is important for students to explore their identity and their feelings.
3. Author’s Notes & Feedback are important to the writing process.
4. Audience! Audience! Audience!
5. Write something every day.

**Detach at the dotted line and return this form by Monday, August 20.**

-----

Yes, I am aware of the Online Writing Exchange my child will participate in. I know if I have any questions I can contact Mrs. Troester.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student’s Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent’s or Guardian’s Printed Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Parent’s or Guardian’s Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Basic Schedule: Week of...

Sept. 16 - Post Introductions with I am from/Raised By poem

Sept. 23 - Respond

Sept. 30- Post (recommendation: personal narrative)

Oct 2. WEDNESDAY NOON MEET AND GREET IN PERSON

Oct. 7 - Respond

Oct. 14- Post (recommendation: revision of poem or narrative)

Oct. 21 - Respond

Oct. 28 - Post (recommendation: persuasive piece)

Nov. 4- Respond

Nov. 11 - Post (recommendation: revision)

Nov. 18 - Respond (final responses to your group)

Nov. 25 – Post favorite piece in Virtual Coffeehouse before

Turkey Day

December 2: Respond to three writers in Virtual Coffeehouse that aren't in your group

Limits on Posts:

- 1) Length limit: 500 words maximum per piece (to keep UNL writers from overwhelming)
- 2) Virtual Coffeehouse only at the end. \*\*This is the name we give the online space where all students post their favorite piece of writing from the semester to share with the entire group, not just their small group they are placed with for the semester.

Reminders:

- 1) Each of our cooperating classes will have different lab days and home internet access, so be aware you'll need to check in more than once a week to reach everyone.
- 2) Please use the social media features of Canvas to create a comfortable and inviting space for your group, while maintaining a focus on writing as the main purpose for the space.
- 3) Please be school appropriate for a middle school level in all Canvas interactions. \*\*No inappropriate language. Consider the content for young students ages 13-14. If you have to question it, then it is more than likely not appropriate.



## Appendix M

### Proper Netiquette & Responses

We suggest practicing the following etiquette to help you and others make the most of our forums:

1. Create a concise subject/title that adequately summarizes your topic.
2. Be patient. All the participants of this forum are using the forum and participating in discussions on their own time.
3. Help others. The forum is a community, and works best when people share information.
4. Give feedback. If someone helps you by answering your question or giving you feedback, try to add a follow-up response letting them know if it worked or not.
5. Welcome newcomers. Do not chastise them for not reading the forum etiquette. Make them feel welcome in the community.
6. Please refrain from posting meaningless threads, one word (or short) nonsense posts, or the such.
7. Be careful how you say things - It is often times very hard to write in a way that shows how you're feeling or how you mean something to come across. Even if your intentions are good, the way you write something may be taken the wrong way. A very popular way of making sure your feelings are expressed in the way you intend them is to use familiar smileys. Although it may seem silly, it is a very good way to help show your feelings and intentions. It is also considered rude to use ALL CAPITAL LETTERS when typing. It's considered a way of showing that you are yelling and shouting and should only be used to emphasize that feeling.

If you do feel the need to be critical, make it constructive criticism. If you're addressing the behavior in the forum, do address the behavior, not the person. Personal attacks (flame wars) are bad form. Ask yourself: would you say the same thing if you were face-to-face in person?

Avoid profanity: you know what the words are. If most people wouldn't say it in front of their mothers, it doesn't belong in this forum. Even posts which are not flames and which may contain great technical information may be removed because of offensive language.

Remember: you can have a sense of humor, but maintain a professional tone. Your friends may be reading the forum, and there's no sense in giving them the impression you're too temperamental to ride with!

8. Since the forums are an educational space, please use Standard Written English as much as possible.

9. Please do not use these forums for personal disputes, heated debates, flame wars etc. You are expected to treat each other with respect in the forums and take any personal disputes to a private mode of discussion off the forums. If you should find that your discussion is becoming too heated or someone is becoming far too passionate about their argument, please take the discussion to private message or email.

10. Sometimes people can write something that you may find offensive. Before launching into a public condemnation though, please consider that the person may not have intended to cause offence. It is very easy to misinterpret a post on forums. There is absolutely no need to resort to insults. Respect others' views even if you disagree with them.

\*Created by Cyndi Dwyer

## Appendix N

### Explanation & Expectations Author's Notes

**AUTHOR'S NOTES** – This helps you analyze your writing. It also helps your readers have some direction for the feedback you need.

An Author's Note, oral or written, gives responders the crucial context they need to know how to respond. It should include three sorts of information.

1.) A statement of where the text is in the process of development (first draft, ninth draft, based on an idea I got last night, an attempt to fix the second half by switching it to dialogue, etc.).

2.) Your own writer's assessment of the piece (I like this about it because . . . I am worried about this about it because . . . ).

3.) Any general sort of response you want, any specific questions you want answered.

("Today I think I need Support and Encouragement because I feel fragile about this piece." "Please tell me how you imagine the narrator of this scene, because I'm trying to create a specific kind of voice here and I need to know what kind of voice you get." "I'm worried about how I describe my grandmother here, so I want you to tell me how you imagine her from what I give you.").

Author's Notes are the primary way to focus on the specific feedback you, as writer, need to improve your writing. Consequently, in writing author's notes my advice is to provide as much information to readers as you can, and then to experiment with what response to ask for.

### **Author's Note**

\*Explain this piece of writing by telling what type of writing it is and what draft you are on, along with anything else you feel is important for the reader to know.

\*Any Likes/Dislikes about the writing you have done (Be specific).

\*Explain what you want to make better and ask four questions about what you want help on in order to improve your writing. You will choose three questions from the ones your teachers give you and create one or more question(s) on your own. Make sure you number them.

1.)

2.)

3.)

4.)

### **Explanation & Expectations Feedback**

#### **FEEDBACK**

Good feedback shapes the writing into something better. In any small writing group, whether it's online or in person, you must give excellent feedback so the writer has something to work with. Nothing is worse as a writer when you ask for feedback and everyone just says, "It's great!" In order to make sure everyone is giving constructive feedback, we will use the format below.

"Two Stars and a Wish" response format. To use this kind of response, you do the following:

1.) You point out two specific things you see in the writing that you really liked or that impressed you. These might be an idea, a particular word choice, or a "thinking move"

the writer used, or anything else you really liked. These two specific things are the "two stars" of the response format.

2.) You then mention one thing about the writing that you wonder about or wish you understood better. This might be an application of the idea or something you didn't understand or an organizational choice that surprised you. This one thing is the "wish" in the response format.

3.) Address ALL questions posed in the Author's Note.

**Feedback – BE SPECIFIC**

**\*2 Stars**

1<sup>st</sup> Star:

2<sup>nd</sup> Star:

**\*1 Wish/Wonder**

I wonder.....

or

I wish...

\*Address author's note:

1.)

2.)

3.)

4.)

**MY GROUP NUMBER:** \_\_\_\_\_

**GROUP MEMBERS:**

## Appendix O

### **Personal Narrative Author's Note: Format & Questions**

This week we started our personal narratives. We talked about writing about a moment in time when we learned a lesson or learned something about ourselves.

(In this paragraph tell specifically what you like about your essay and what you feel you need help with).

Now list four questions you want your readers to address in their feedback. You may choose from the following or write questions of your own.

\*Do I have an excellent lead that hooks my audience? If so, what do you like about it specifically. If not, how could I make it better?

\*Do I have a good conclusion that wraps up my thoughts about the lesson learned?

\*Is my essay well organized with a solid topic sentence and three main ideas with supporting details?

\*Can you hear my "voice" throughout the essay? If not, how could I change it?

\*What do you think of my word choice? Where could I add more detailed, vivid, and/or natural language?

\*Do you feel my essay is clearly focused, and makes you feel like you're experiencing this moment in my life with me?

\*Are there mistakes or inappropriate choice in usage?

\*Do you feel like this is a solid personal narrative? If not, how can I make it better?

## Appendix P

### Personal Narratives The Writing Process

#### **Prewriting: Think & Plan**

**20 Points:** Choose your topic, have ideas ready, and an outline  
by \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) Points Earned: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Drafting: Write**

**20 Points:** Have your first draft ready for in-class peer review  
by \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) Points Earned: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Revising: Making It Better**

**20 Points:** Post your writing to the online writing forum & give feedback  
by \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) Points Earned: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Proofreading: Make It Correct**

**20 Points:** Turn in your peer review and adult proofreader signature sheet  
by \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) Points Earned: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Publishing: Share The Finished Product**

**20 Points:** Post your finished piece of writing to your blog  
by \_\_\_\_\_ (Date) Points Earned: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **How your final piece of writing will be graded**

|                     | 20   | 15  | 10   | 5   | 0   | Points Earned | Comments |
|---------------------|--|---|--|---|---|---------------|----------|
| <b>Ideas</b>        | The narrative tells about an unforgettable experience. The details make the story truly memorable. | The writer tells about an interesting experience. Details help create the interest. | The writer tells about an interesting experience. More details are needed. | The writer needs to focus on one experience. Some details do not relate to the story. | The writer needs to tell about an experience and use details. |               |          |
| <b>Organization</b> | The organization makes the narrative enjoyable   | The narrative is well organized, with a clear                                       | The narrative is well organized. Most of the                               | The order of events needs to be correcte  | The narrative needs to be organized. The                      |               |          |

|                    |  |   |   |   |   |  |  |
|--------------------|--|---|---|---|---|--|--|
|                    | and easy to read.  | beginning, middle, and ending. Transitions are used well.                             | transitions are helpful.  | d. More transitions need to be used. One part of the narrative is weak. | beginning, middle, & end run together. The order is unclear.  |  |  |
| <b>Voice</b>       | The writer's voice creates an unforgettable experience for the readers. The writer's voice sounds natural and creates interest in the story. Dialogue is used. | The writer's voice creates interest in the story. More dialogue is needed.            | A voice can usually be heard. Dialogue is needed.                               | The voice is weak. Dialogue is needed.                                  | The writer has not gotten involved in the story. Dialogue is needed.                                    |  |  |
| <b>Word Choice</b> | The writer's exceptional word choice captures the experience.  | Strong nouns and verbs along with well-chosen modifiers create vivid, clear pictures. | Modifiers are used. Strong nouns and active verbs would improve sensory images. | Strong nouns, verbs, and modifiers are needed to create sensory images. | General and overused words do not create sensory images. The writer has not yet considered word choice. |  |  |



|   |   |  |  |   |   |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|---|---|--|--|
| <b>Sentence Fluency &amp; Conventions</b> | The sentences are skillfully written and original. The narrative is error free. | The sentences show variety and are easy to read and understand. The narrative has a few minor errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar. | The sentences are varied, but some should flow more smoothly. The narrative has several errors in punctuation, spelling, or grammar. | A better variety of sentences is needed. Sentences do not read smoothly. Some errors confuse the readers. | Incomplete and/or short sentences make the writing choppy. Many errors make the narrative confusing and hard to read. |  |  |
|---|---|--|--|---|---|--|--|

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