

Workshops: An Alternative to Student Writing Conferences

by GRACIE FORTHUN

The writing conference, an opportunity for composition instructors to exchange class time for individual or small-group meetings with students, is a popular tool among writing teachers. Student benefits include individualized feedback, opportunities to ask specific questions, and an environment free from peer pressure, so it is not surprising that composition instructors often substitute individual or group conferences for class time—sometimes cancelling class for up to a week in order to meet with each student. Yet despite the benefits of this practice, instructors who choose to hold conferences with their students must grapple with the fact that not all students are willing or able to engage in this way. Students who come unprepared for their scheduled meetings—or miss them altogether—will miss as much as a week’s worth of instruction and receive little benefit in exchange.

As an instructor of first-year English composition (a mandatory writing course for beginning college students) at a midsized university in the United States, with writing classes populated by both native and nonnative speakers of English, I have learned to offer options to a diverse body of students with a diverse range of learning styles. Rather than cancelling class and requiring each student to meet with me to discuss his or her writing, I routinely hold a workshop day after I have given students feedback on their drafts. This workshop takes the place of scheduled conferences, although students are welcome to meet with me during my regular office hours. My students have four major writing assignments per 16-week

semester, and I hold workshop days four times during the course—once per rough draft.

On workshop days, students spend the majority of their time in the classroom, where they independently revise their drafts based on feedback they have gotten from their peers and from me. Students who want individualized feedback have the opportunity to join me one by one outside the classroom, where they can ask questions about the commentary they received, about their drafts in general, or about how they can improve holistically as writers. Those who do not wish to ask questions can work quietly on their own.

This approach ensures that personal attention is available to students who can utilize it, while also ensuring that students who choose not to engage in one-on-one discussion have a productive alternative: revising their work. Although I hold workshop days in an English as a second language (ESL) context, teachers in other contexts should also be able to make use of workshops for classes of up to 25 students. For larger classes, teachers might consider designating additional class periods as workshop days in order to allow time for each student to ask questions.

I have noticed that students who are nonnative speakers of English particularly benefit from workshop days. When I have given them feedback prior to meeting with them, they are often better able to articulate specific questions they would like to ask about their writing. (Students who have received feedback tend



to ask *how* to improve, rather than *what* to improve.) Also, the opportunity for them to ask one or two questions, leave to perform revisions, and then return to ask additional questions allows them to receive feedback multiple times before submitting a final draft. Being able to ask questions as they arise seems to be helpful in building the students' confidence.

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Holding a workshop day requires little preparation. However, instructors will probably find workshops most productive when they have recently given students feedback on their writing. Ideally, a workshop should be scheduled on the next class day after the instructor returns drafts with commentary; as mentioned earlier, receiving feedback often helps students decide what questions they want to ask. The instructor should ask students to review the feedback carefully before coming to class again, giving them notice that the next class period will be dedicated to revision based on that feedback. Additionally, instructors whose students write electronically, using laptops or tablets, should inform students in advance that they will need to bring their devices to class on the day the workshop is scheduled.

Note that even if students have been reminded to bring their devices, though, some may still forget, so deciding on a backup plan for forgetful students is helpful. Spare computers may be available for students to check out through the university, though I prefer to circumvent technological mishaps by asking students to submit paper copies of their essays, on which I provide commentary with a pen or pencil. In any case, providing feedback on the class day before the workshop is held ensures that students who forget to bring either hard or electronic copies of their work

have at least been able to view the feedback they have received.

At the beginning of class, the instructor should explain that the entire class period will be devoted to revision of the students' most recent drafts. Once students have read and reviewed the feedback they have received on their writing, they should begin revising, based on that feedback. The instructor should inform students that, while they revise, he or she will sit outside the classroom, where students can come individually with questions about their drafts or the feedback they received. While I welcome questions of any nature—related to content, mechanics, or style, and related or unrelated to the feedback I have already given—teachers may wish to specify questions that are most appropriate for their workshops (i.e., questions specifically pertaining to the feedback or questions about matters the feedback did not cover). If multiple students wish to meet with the instructor at once, they may queue and wait for an opportunity to ask questions. Students are free to return with further questions about specific passages they have revised, though a thorough discussion of revision plans during the first round of questions generally reduces the need for further feedback. Then, after giving instructions and exiting, the instructor should wait for students to come and initiate discussion.

Not all students will avail themselves of the opportunity for individualized feedback, but those who do will reap the benefits of a writing conference. Those who do not ask questions of the instructor will, at the very least, be given dedicated time to work on improving their writing.

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