

## Writing Across the Curriculum

# Small Group Writing Conferences

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## What Does Writing Studies Research Say?

Several cases studies of undergraduate writing in the disciplines suggest that student writing improves in multiple ways but have the highest rate of growth when students engage in content-specific, peer-group writing collaboration (Beaufort, 2007; Brandt, 2001; Carroll, 2002; Hawthorne, 1998; Light, 2003; Paxton, 2003; Rogers, 2008, Wake, 2010). Light's study from Harvard University and Rogers' study from Stanford University demonstrate that proactive, out-of-class peer-group writing has the most impact on student success in university writing. Small group writing instruction both helps improve student writing, and allows instructors to deploy their time more efficiently than one-on-one writing conferences would otherwise permit. Further, writing studies research shows that having students perform peer-review leads to higher caliber writing from both reviewers and those having their work reviewed (Bean, 2011).

These types of conferences draw on socio-cultural learning theory (Burke, 1941; Bakhtin, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Bruner, 1996; Riegel, 1979; Volosinov, 1986) and socio-cognitive theories of writing development and knowledge construction (Artemeva, 2008; Beaufort, 2007; Flower, 1994; Freedman, 2008; Geisler, 1994; Herrington & Moran, 1992; Scardamalia, 1981; Purcell-Gates, Jacobsen & Degener, 2004). Such theories originate in the work of L.S. Vygotsky (1978), who claims that social interaction is the most important part of the learning process. Educational theorist Gordon Wells (1999) takes Vygotsky's claim a step further by suggesting that learning processes are most effective when students understand how to complete required tasks and proactively share responsibility for learning in their major discipline. Small group writing conference are particularly useful for

clarifying assignment requirements, modeling approaches for responding to the assignment description, presenting multiple ways of structuring drafts, and work-shopping student ideas.

Bean (2011) suggests that small group conferences can have the largest impact when begun in the early stages of completing writing assignments, and continue through the drafting process with peer reviews of drafts. Such review can be response-centred, where responders describe reactions to the piece rather than give explicit advice, or advice-centred, where responders give direct advice on how to improve aspects of the draft. The former tends to be more process-focused, leaving responsibility for draft with its author, while the later is more directive and product-focused. In either case, Bean emphasizes the importance of leaving ownership for the session with the student participants.

### Small Group Writing Conferences:

1. Allow students to share disciplinary knowledge and skills with each other, which promotes student responsibility for learning.
2. Provide models and opportunities to practice discipline-specific writing skills.
3. Emphasize a collaborative and process-based approach to writing, and position student writers within a discipline-specific writing community.
4. Work best when split between instructor-designed content and student-led questions and discussion.
5. Offer an opportunity to clarify instructors' expectations for specific assignments and writing in your course more generally.

## Good Practices For Holding Small Group Writing Conferences

1. Make the session student-focused: begin with an outline of topics you will cover or skills you will work on, but allow student questions and discussion to guide the session as much as possible.
2. Provide ample time for student questions about the specifics of your assignment(s) and writing in general.
3. Be clear in reviewing any assignment descriptions, rubrics, scoring guides, and the like: these conferences can provide an excellent opportunity to check-in on student comprehension of assignments and assessment criteria. Encourage students to describe assignments in their own words, and compare them against their colleagues' understanding.
4. Model discipline-specific writing practices and processes: show students different approaches to the writing task, problem, or product that are often taken within your discipline. For example, discuss different ways to structure a research paper, to develop an argument, or to draw on and integrate evidence.

## References And Resources

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