



How to Write Meaningful Peer Response Praise

Ron DePeter

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3 HOW TO WRITE MEANINGFUL PEER RESPONSE PRAISE

Ron DePeter

OVERVIEW

Praise is an important element of peer and teacher feedback—it can, to quote Donald Daiker, “lift the hearts, as well as the pens” of student authors—but substantive praise is one of the most challenging modes of feedback to compose (112). How can writing instructors move student responders beyond standard comments such as “Great paper!” or “I liked it” or “Good details”? This chapter is a guide for students in composition classes, and aims to help them understand the importance of giving and receiving detailed, conversational praise; it presents scenarios for conceptualizing how to write praise, provides sample student writing excerpts that invite students to practice writing praise, offers and analyzes examples of different types of student-authored praise comments, and provides an array of approaches to writing praise comments.

In some first year writing classes, peer feedback days parallel the characters’ journey into the Appalachian caves in Neil Marshall’s horror film *The Descent*.^{*} A group of female friends goes on an annual thrill-seeking adventure, climbing their way through a complex, uncharted cave, only to encounter some ferocious monsters, as well as their own inner demons. Vivian Sobchack characterizes the chaos depicted in the film this way: “Eventually trapped within the cave system by a rock slide, the six women become separated, each person or little group fitfully lit through different means to allow us to see their struggles in stroboscopic glimpses—and then often to wish we hadn’t” (41).

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Comparing the film to a first year writing class, the “descent” into peer feedback can sometimes leave all parties lost and helpless: we teachers bemoan the ragged and inconsistent quality of some peer comments, and you, who often complain *only* to us when your peers do a slack job writing comments on your work. Too often, all of us “wish we hadn’t” wasted time at all doing peer response.

A few years ago, I had a student (we’ll call him Ray) whose peer response routine involved shuffling through his peers’ papers—which were to be responded to as homework—and writing generic comments quickly at the start of class. “Good opening,” he would write, then next to each paragraph, “Give examples,” and at the bottom, “I like the ending, but maybe expand.” I began to realize all his comments were the same, and a student who was in his group confirmed that he never read his partners’ essays before writing feedback.

Now, that’s a *descent*.

Why go into the cave at all, we might ask, especially if even one of your peers approaches the task with such disregard? Or, what about the fact that some writers ignore your feedback anyway, preferring to only pay attention to the instructor’s comments, because “they are the one giving the grade”?

Not too long ago, Fred, a student taking his second composition course with me, told his group as he handed his peer feedback to them: “You can ignore these; I’m just trying to get pluses on my feedback.” (I assign grades of Plus, Check, or Check Minus on feedback, with some brief commentary about how responders could improve next time.) I was struck by Fred’s admission, and his willingness to participate in writing peer responses that he didn’t fully stand behind.

The psychology going on in peer groups reminds me of some of the conclusions I drew working on my dissertation on peer response while a graduate student at Florida State University. I collected and studied my students’ peer feedback and their thoughts about the feedback they gave/received. I noticed that:

- Students placed greater value in professors’ feedback vs. peers’, usually ignoring peer responses unless they were forced to use them in revisions;
- Students often felt poorly qualified to write meaningful responses, since they saw themselves as merely adequate, “not good enough to tell someone else how to write;”

- Students were often reluctant to write questions, which they viewed as critical, because they did not want to be perceived as “judging” their peers’ experiences, thoughts, or feelings;
- Students would often judge their peers’ writing based on what they thought a teacher would want, rather than their own criteria for what makes writing good; and
- Students initially tended to comment on things that were easier to “fix” like grammar or spelling mistakes, and paragraph size.

You may see yourself in one or more of these attitudes, and you may have received or given feedback similarly to Ray or Fred. Such attitudes and approaches are natural: given how sensitive the act of sharing an essay can be, these attitudes and others create a complex dynamic in small groups, leading some of us to prefer to avoid peer feedback, especially if we have not established trust with our group. As a result of these ways of thinking, some writers become frustrated working in small groups, because they don’t put much faith in the process or in the weak comments they anticipate receiving.

As a way of free falling right into this metaphorical dark cave, let’s jumpstart your class discussion of peer response strategies. I recognize that there are additional types of feedback, such as asking questions, giving advice, and editing or correcting errors, but this essay is going to focus on one important type of feedback.

HOW TO WRITE MEANINGFUL PRAISE

Think of a favorite food (I’m sure you have many, but pick one for now.). Why do you like it? What can you say about that food that conveys why that food is enjoyable to you? It is not enough, really, to say that you like it “because it tastes good.” In this sense, *good* just becomes an empty word that doesn’t really say anything.

I like pepperoni pizza. My two favorite places are Angelone’s in Portland, Maine, and Burke Street Pizza in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. What I really like is how, on theirs, the slices of pepperoni curl up just a little and get crispy around the edges, leaving a tiny bit of oil residue inside. I also like how their pepperoni slices can easily be bitten into, rather than the big round slabs of pepperoni that some pizzerias use, which sort of slide off whole when you chomp into them, pulling along large segments of cheese. Sure, there are plenty of places that offer adequate pizza, but only rare places like these make pepperoni pizzas that I *really* like.

It is easy (and somewhat distracting!) to come up with details to describe the foods we like; but, what about writing we like? *Why* do we like it? What does it mean to “like” an opening sentence, an image, an insight? Since you don’t want to be that student who just jots generic comments down the margins in a hurry, like Ray made a habit of doing, I encourage your class, before workshops even begin, to do an inventory of what makes you like (or dislike) certain features of writing. Not just what makes writing “good,” but what makes writing really *work* for us, as individual readers.

Are you a reader who likes detail in the form of facts and data—such as a newspaper article about Dustin Pedroia’s injury, one that provides statistics showing how well the Red Sox play when he has been in the line-up compared to their win-loss record without him? Or are you a reader who likes to “discern” by reading in between the lines what an author *might* mean? Do you like to learn about new things, places, people, ideas, when you read, or do you prefer to read about that which is familiar? Do you like writing that makes you feel sadness or frustration, or do you prefer to read stories that look on the brighter side? It is good to know these things about yourself, as you approach any new text.

Now consider this: Is it even possible to *like* the writing that you and your peers have to do for classes? Not always. But, I would argue that you don’t have to like the academic writing your peers share with you (i.e., enjoy it the way I enjoy most any article about the Boston Red Sox) in order to praise what’s *working* for you as a reader.

Meaningful praise, then, is feedback that recognizes something that is working for you as a reader, that gives you an opportunity to have a dialogue with the author, and that expresses some sort of appreciation for the work the writer has done, or for the writer herself.

I remember when my student who wrote about his football experiences included a detail about coaches making him run up and down the bleachers with garbage bags wrapped tightly around his torso so he could get “in condition” for the upcoming game (I believe this is not allowed anymore). He did not use extensive description or need to. Through one well-chosen detail, he was able to illustrate what the players had to do *and* reveal some of the complexities of being a competitive athlete: his detail allowed the reader to imagine the exhaustion, and to question the methods the coaches used to get some players into shape. Praising the student’s use of detail had to involve more than just telling him “nice detail.” It meant explaining, as succinctly as I could fit in the margin, what made it work, for me as one reader: “A nice detail. You’ve already got me appreciating the physical and

emotional stress an elite athlete experiences. It must have been draining. How do you feel now about the coaches' methods?" Here is an alternative praise comment, from a peer who likes the passage because he can relate to it: "Good description. Our coaches used to do this too. I like how you make people who don't know what it's like understand what we go through to compete."

PRACTICE SESSION 1

Let's practice writing praise in response to an actual sample of student writing, the beginning of a personal exploration by Lili Velez. As you read the following excerpt, consider what praise you could write:

Examinations Outside the Classroom

We panic, we pack, we get to college, and then panic again, moaning, "I wish I had known I'd need this!" "This" could be anything from that extra pillow to the answers to a high school test on *Hamlet*, or it might be something more abstract, like how to deal with issues we never thought we would encounter outside a classroom. For example, when a philosophy professor asks us to examine what is evil and what is good, that's okay; we're getting graded on it. But do we ask such questions in the cafeteria? In the dormitory? At home? Who needs to ponder academic questions outside of class? It's an invasion of our private lives. I thought so until a question followed me home and shook up my ideas on what belonged in the classroom and what I should never be without.

It was English 102, in small group discussion of my friend Donna's paper, which was about whether fighting was a natural tendency, as it is in other animals that live in groups. (337)

It would be easy enough to write next to Lili's first paragraph "good opening." It would be simple enough to say that the opening is "descriptive" or "captivating." But, if you like the opening of this essay, what really causes your positive reaction? Even just as a draft, why does this opening *work* for you, as a reader? Take a moment to write two or three sentences describing what it is you like about Lili's writing so far, and imagine you are writing these words directly to her in a conversation.

Is it the word choice? The arrangement of sentences? Her use of detail (the pillow, *Hamlet*)? Does it have something to do with the voice or tone? The way she uses questions? It could be any or all of these things, or

something else altogether. I liked the commas and repetition in the first sentence, which create a sense of tension in the writing. (I am the kind of reader who likes some tension in what I read.) I also liked the feeling of momentum. Even just a little bit into the second paragraph, I am curious to hear more about what happened in her small group and the discussion about Donna's paper. As Keith Hjortshoj describes in *The Transition to College Writing*:

Beginnings are points of departure, when readers expect to learn what this writing is about and the general direction it will take. Even if these beginnings do not explicitly map the routes the writing will travel, they tell us where this journey will start, point us in a certain direction, and provide some bearings for the next move. (115)

Lili is trying to do just that: engage the reader, point us in a specific direction, and pose a central question that will guide the exploration forward.

Elaine Mamon, Lili's instructor in the class, praised Lili for her courage to tackle a challenging topic and for making the reader "feel like getting into the conversation" (Velez 340).

PRACTICE SESSION 2

When writing meaningful praise, you might consider using a technique associated with rhetorician Donald Murray, who was known for writing his praise to students using this format: "I like the way you..." (qtd. in Daiker 111). By including some praise written this way, you help writers enhance their audience awareness. As you read the following excerpt, the opening of a personal essay my student Nick wrote about declining wildlife in Pennsylvania, write 2–3 praise comments in Murray's "I like the way you..." format:

Where the Wild Things Roamed

And there we found ourselves, on my hike in the woods with my dog Loki, his eyes fixed upon a herd of deer who stared back at him with the same intense interest. You could see it stir within them, the ancient war between their kind, Loki likely thinking "Must chase! Must bite!" though he probably does not know why, and the deer screaming in their minds, "The wolf! The wolf!" despite the ironic fact that these deer have never seen a wolf. For there are no wolves in these woods, nor in all of Pennsylvania.

Gone are the days of wolves and mountain lions prowling through these woods giving the deer something to truly fear rather than this would-be predator at the end of my leash.

And here I am looking at these deer and wondering, “How are you all that’s left?” (Brewster 1)

After completing your praise comments, I recommend talking with others in class about what you praised, how you worded each comment, and what it was like writing responses this way.

Donald Daiker believes that writers become less apprehensive when they “experience success” and that “genuine praise can lift the hearts, and the pens, of the writers who sit in our classrooms” (106, 112). After receiving fifteen sets of feedback from his classmates throughout the semester, which all had to include several praise comments, Nick explained his emerging confidence: “I ended up deciding to let my creativity loose despite how uncomfortable it made me. I ended up finding myself greatly enjoying some of my later works. The more confident I became in my writings the more I experimented with my creativity.” In one of his final peer comments on a classmate’s meta-essay, Nick acknowledges the role positive peer feedback had played in their mutual development: “Great point and I agree. We helped one another write about more personal feelings and dilemmas.”

EXAMPLES OF PEER RESPONSE PRAISE

Let’s look at several other praise comments Nick writes on his classmates’ essays. For context, most of the papers students wrote in this class revolved around animals, or writing, and sometimes both:

- Repeating the questions was an effective follow-up to your intro sentence
- Nice allusion. Very creative way of describing your writings.

Notice how Nick refers to specific choices the writer had made. Here are some comments Nick writes on Carolyn’s essay about six cats she has owned throughout her life. Sometimes, Nick praises Carolyn for the choices she makes as a writer, and sometimes he praises her personally, but all of them are conversational:

- Good details that add to each cat’s character
- Interesting how everyone ended up getting their “own” cat

- The font change is a good touch [Carolyn had switched fonts for a passage that recreated a letter she would have written as a child to her cat who had passed away]
- Recognizing how you've changed over time and looking back on your younger self is such a human thing to do and extremely relatable. I think we've all been there.
- Great imagery and comical, picturing this level of organization from a child
- LOL! Nice touch and some comic relief after the passing of Chester

Occasionally, Nick writes what Rick Straub and Ronald Lunsford refer to as combination comments, wherein a praise comment is joined with a question or tentative advice. For example, in response to Jordan's essay about his dog Quinn, Nick writes:

- Good descriptions [of Quinn]. Maybe could add more? Hair type, face, size?

On Rose's essay, which analyzes the effects of a social media influencer who hoards animals (particularly rats and reptiles), Nick combines praise, analysis, and a rhetorical question:

- Good point. It does certainly appear we care about some animals more than others. Would people care more if it was a room full of puppies, for example?

Notice how in responding to Rose's argument, Nick has joined the conversation as a reader. The best peer feedback does not just inflate the writer's ego but keeps the conversation about the writing, and about the topic, moving forward. The praise you receive can help you understand what goes on in your readers' minds, and better shape your writing for an audience.

In his article "Responding—Really Responding—To Other Students' Writing," Straub encourages you to "Challenge yourself to write as many praise comments as criticisms. When you praise, praise well. Sincerity and specificity are everything when it comes to a compliment" (192). Nick includes a good deal of praise in his sets of feedback, and his comments are specific and sincere.

FINAL ADVICE AND THOUGHTS

You may try to write your peer response using different color pens—for example, green for praise, orange for combination comments, or green

to praise stylistic techniques and blue to praise ideas. Also, give yourself enough space and time to write conversational praise. As an example, Andrea writes in the space next to Jordan's title "The Unwritten": *I really like your title—it fits well with the theme running through about things we must accept in life that are too complicated to be written in a rulebook. Since you only mention writing a couple times in the piece, it's nice and subtle.* In the left margin of Carolyn's essay "Alone," Andrea writes, *I like the repetition of the two phrases "but I am alone" and "my cat who is on my chest." Even though there are multiple metaphors in this piece, keeping the repetition going grounds the reader to where the narrator is and really creates the feeling of what it's like when your body isn't moving but your brain is going a million miles an hour.* Andrea writes small and can fit this comment in the top margin, but you may want to write lengthier praise on the back of the page or in an endnote/letter to the author.

Although it takes a bit more time to write such conversational praise, compared to "Good title," or "I like the repetition," Andrea's comments say so much more to Jordan and Carolyn. They are examples of what Donald Daiker would describe as "genuine praise" (112).

Being a peer responder is not just about being a good one or a bad one, it is, just as it is with your writing, about your investment in joining a real conversation with others. When combined with additional types of peer feedback that you will practice—such as asking questions, giving advice for revision, critiquing an argument's shortcomings, and/or making corrections—praising well and with sincerity will help your classmates improve their writing and enhance their desire to write with a specific audience in mind. Together, you will avoid "the descent" and develop as writers and readers, and maybe even enjoy the journey together.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR HOW TO WRITE MEANINGFUL PEER RESPONSE PRAISE BY RON DEPETER

INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

Instructors could assign this essay in a first-year or upper-level writing course or workshop, during the early part of a semester when students are practicing peer feedback. The essay is in some sense an indirect sequel to Straub's "Response—Really Responding—To Other Students' Writing," looking more in-depth at one specific mode of peer response. It is recommended that students have opportunities to practice writing feedback—perhaps on one or more sample essays that the instructor has collected from previous students. Ideally, students should practice writing each mode of commentary (for example, 1–2 sessions writing praise, 1–2 sessions writing questions/advice, 1–2 sessions combining several modes) before diving into small group or whole class workshops. Ideally, the instructor can give some feedback or grades on the practice feedback, letting the students know how they are doing and how they might improve (e.g., write more comments, make comments more specific, etc.). After each peer feedback practice session, and in the "real" workshops with classmates, students can reflect in their journal/class discussion on how they feel they are coming along as responders, as well as how they feel about the comments received. Such meta-writings are essential threads that facilitate the students' growth as readers and responders.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Do any of the attitudes about peer response that DePeter discusses in the beginning of his essay apply to you (e.g., not wanting to "judge" others or regarding a teacher's feedback as more important than peers'? Where do you imagine these attitudes come from?
2. How do you think Nick (or any peer) would feel hearing the praise comments written in the Donald Murray style of "I like the way you..."? What effect would such praise have on the writer, compared to just seeing "Good" next to a passage?
3. Do you feel there is a difference between what you feel is "good writing," and that which teachers have identified as "good?" If so, what accounts for these different expectations? What is your definition of "good writing?"

4. Can you think of ways that Nick or Andrea's peer response praise could be even sharper, or more helpful to an author?
5. Discuss experiences you have had in other classes sharing peer response. Have they been a metaphorical "*Descent*," or enjoyable journeys? What made your peer response sessions in the past work, or not work?