

## Peer Review of Student Writing Examined ...

October 6, 2006

Welcome to the first in a series of *Assessment Briefs*. This publication highlights Academic Assessment results and provides updates on assessment at USF. Our goal is to present important assessment issues in a manner which fosters discussion and exploration. We hope you will find the articles informative and useful. Please feel free to [contact us](#) with suggestions or questions.

---

Improving student writing is a labor-intensive, time-consuming responsibility for the instructor. This *Assessment Brief* reports that, in our pilot study, faculty and students alike found peer reviews of student writing potentially useful.

### Writing: A Critical Student Learning Outcome

Important goals of the undergraduate curriculum are improving student writing and developing better thinkers. The revised General Education curriculum at USF (implementation set for 2008), *Foundations of Knowledge & Learning*, specifically advocates process writing (writing with feedback and revision) and the need for “learning to write effectively and writing to learn deeply.” Many classroom instructors, although having a strong desire to improve their student’s writing performance, lack the time to assess writing or to provide suggestions for improvement beyond the content presented in written work. In fact, students often report receiving little formal feedback on their writing and having little chance to rewrite assignments following comments and suggestions, even though these activities are known to contribute to writing development.

A focus of Academic Assessment at USF is quality student writing and the thinking developed through writing. Over a five-year period our assessment results suggest that, for many students, writing is weaker than expected, especially at the upper undergraduate levels. In addition, the weakest

elements pertain to reasoning, quality of evidence supplied, and other elements related to thinking. These findings suggest student writing and thinking should be emphasized throughout the undergraduate curriculum

### A Tested Solution

In light of the above, Academic Assessment has recently explored ways of assisting faculty in improving student writing. Recognizing resource constraints such as large classes and limited time, a peer review process was pilot tested in a number of classes during the spring and summer terms of 2006.

Generally, students are reluctant to evaluate their peers’ papers, and when asked to do so, often give unhelpful and nonspecific comments. However, when given a structured method for reviewing the work, students offer meaningful comments which, when followed, improve the quality of their fellow student’s writing. To provide a structure for feedback, the Cognitive Level and Quality of Writing Assessment ([CLAQWA](#)) instrument was modified for student use in reviewing their peer’s work.



Using the [revised CLAQWA](#), students are taught to read their peers' writing assignments and to label weakness in specific areas. Rather than being asked to give an evaluation of the quality of writing, they are only asked to note specific areas in which there are identifiable problems. The following table contains excerpts from the feedback guidelines used by the students to make comments.

---

### Excerpts from Feedback Guidelines for Peer Review of Student Writing

---

#### Assignment Parameters

- The paper addresses each aspect of the assignment thoroughly.
- The paper clearly has and maintains a main idea throughout.

#### Organization & Development: Structural Integrity

- Opening captures the reader's attention and prepares the reader for the paper.
- Transitional words, phrases, sentences and paragraphs (coherence devices) smoothly connect the paper's elements, ideas or details, allowing the reader to follow the writer's points effortlessly.
- Closing synthesizes the main idea.

#### Organization & Development: Reasoning & Focus Consistency

- The essay exhibits a logical progression of sophisticated ideas that support the focus of the paper.
- Details developing the main idea and provide supporting evidence necessary to explain or persuade effectively.

#### Language: Contextual & Audience Appropriateness

- All sentences are understandable.
- Vocabulary reflects a thorough grasp of the language appropriate to the audience. Word choice is engaging, including sensory language and metaphors.
- Point of view is consistent and appropriate for the purpose and audience.

#### Standard Edited English

- Sentences are grammatically and mechanically correct.
  - References are consistent, and citations reflect an appropriate style.
-

## Results

Though more research is needed, results of the pilot project revealed improvement in student writing. And, just as importantly, faculty members were excited about the observed improvement, and students were appreciative of the assistance in improving their writing. Consider the following comments from two faculty members who participated in the project...

“When introduced to the peer review process, I was somewhat skeptical as to how much, if any, it would improve the quality of the students’ writing. I was doubtful that the results would justify the effort put into the review process. After several semesters of participation in the Peer Review Pilot Project, I have seen **substantial improvement** in the organization and structure of most of the essays evaluated. I have also observed an **increased level of collaboration** and interaction among the students in non-writing assignments, which I am confident, is a result of the peer review training. I will continue to integrate the peer review process into my courses to allow my students to continue to improve their communication skills.”

--Dr. Ralph Fehr, College of Engineering

“I first became aware of the peer review process using a modified form of CLAQWA while attending a C21CTE session on Assessment last semester. **I was very impressed with the potential** of the review process to engage students and increase their writing and thinking abilities. During the semester two of my classes received peer review of writing workshops, after which the peer review process was included in all writing assignments. The writing of the students did, indeed, improve -- and, perhaps more importantly, their **ability and willingness to engage and help each other also showed clear development**. I am using peer review of writing in three classes this semester. I have every expectation that providing students the opportunity to write short essays, have them reviewed by peers, and then rewriting the essays will have a marked affect on their ability to reason cogently, think clearly, and develop an argument with appropriate support. I think that their writing skills (grammar and mechanics) will also improve as a consequence of focusing on the organizational, structural, and content aspects of the writing. I believe other courses could successfully adopt the peer review of writing process -- and that whatever time is given up in class to make the reviewing possible, will pay off in the greater success that students will have in their learning.”

--C. David Frankel, College of Visual and Performing Arts

---

A workshop for using peer review is being offered through the Center for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Teaching Excellence on November 6<sup>th</sup> from 2-4:30 in SVC 1072.

---

For information on Academic Assessment or how your class can participate in the peer review project, contact:

For Background on CLAQWA & Assessment:  
Dr. Terri Flateby, Director  
974-3077  
[TFlateby@admin.usf.edu](mailto:TFlateby@admin.usf.edu)

To Arrange an Orientation Session for Peer Review:  
Ms. Marisa Inglesias  
Peer Review Coordinator  
[marisacarmen@gmail.com](mailto:marisacarmen@gmail.com)