AGENDA FOR THE WORKSHOP ON INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP CONFERENCES:

1. Introductions; introduce packet of materials
2. Some general pros and cons
3. Individual conferences with student writers
4. Three ways to incorporate group conferences and peer review in writing classes
   a. Plus / minus / question mark
      i. practice session
      ii. discussion
   b. Conference Question Guide
      i. practice session
      ii. discussion
   c. Using student drafts as the center of class discussion
      i. practice session
      ii. discussion

SOME GENERAL PROS AND CONS

Group conferences are effective because they:
- emphasize that writing is a social act
- integrate multiple perspectives in the feedback loop; helps the writer become aware of a real audience/readers
- develop students’ critical/analytical thinking and writing skills
- make students responsible: they have to share their work with others

Group conferences can go bad when:
- they don’t have some kind of structure; they must be planned to be successful (if they’re too loosey-goosey, students won’t focus)
  o students give each other poor or confusing advice
- students aren’t sure what the purpose of group conferences is
- there’s not enough time—in or out of class—for students to do a thorough job
- one aggressive student dominates a group (the arrogant thinks-he-knows-it-all)
- all students in a group are very reserved

Group conferences are most successful when you:
- include reflection in the process
- ask students to focus on more global issues, like thesis, development, evidence/support, etc.
• if students treat the conferences as edit sessions, they will be reluctant to revise global issues later

• work out the logistics carefully:
  o When are rough drafts due?
  o How many copies of the draft should each student bring to class?
  o What guidelines for reading/reviewing do students need ahead of time or the day of the review?
  o Do you need to cancel class meetings so you can attend conferences? Do you even want or need to attend out-of-class conferences?
  o Will you assign students to groups or let them arrange their own groups?
  o Etc.
ONE-ON-ONE STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR CONFERENCES

Benefits:
- Individual conferences position the student as active learner and questioner
- “The big advantage is that they can better construct their imagination of you as an audience for their work and play with strategies for inventing an academic voice for themselves if you have a real conversation that can risk wandering a bit. You also can learn things that can help you understand what forces have made them into the writer you see before you. If you could do this at the start of the semester, it might create enough positive impact that you might not have to repeat it, or might only want to meet once more with them (maybe when they're working on their last assignments and you have no more class preparation to pre-occupy you.” — Arnie Sanders, 9/18/01, http://faculty.goucher.edu/writingprogram/some_thoughts_about_writing_conf.htm
- Nancy Sommers’ Harvard Study: we need to see students as “apprentice scholars.” It’s important to students that we take their ideas seriously.
  - For four years, Sommers conducted a longitudinal study of writing at Harvard, following 400 students (25%) of the Class of 2001 through their undergraduate years to get a glimpse beyond the classroom, behind the page, and between the drafts.
  - Feedback emerged as the hero and anti-hero of the Harvard study, powerful enough to convince students they could or couldn’t do the work in a given field, to push them toward or away from selecting their majors, and contributed, more than any other single factor, to their sense of academic belonging or alienation.
  - As the students in Sommers’ study taught her, feedback is the most significant contribution an instructor can make to the education of a writer, and yet much feedback does not shape either the writing or the writer. Too many comments go unread because, as one student reported, ”the feedback is written to the paper, not to the student.” At its worst, feedback gives students no hope in themselves as writers and leaves them confused, about both their strengths and their weaknesses. But at its best, feedback exposes students to the demands of a critical audience, and by doing so facilitates the transition from writing that is private and idiosyncratic to writing that is public and shared.\(^1\)

The downside:
- Meeting with students individually takes a lot of time and mental effort.

How to make them work:
- Collect copies of students’ rough drafts ahead of time. Ask students to write, at the end of their draft, one or two questions they’d like you to answer—or they’d like to discuss with you—at your individual conference. Read the papers but write very few comments on them. Focus your meeting on discussing the student’s question or questions. Try to have a conversation; avoid going through the paper and pointing out all the mistakes.
- Avoid harping about sentence-level issues. Attend to the ideas. Show the student you take his or her ideas seriously. Be welcoming.

\(^1\) http://www.ncte.org/profdev/conv/ccce/speakers/119106.htm
ONE-ON-ONE STUDENT-INSTRUCTOR CONFERENCES/2

We believe that our students benefit greatly from small group and individualized discussion of their work-in-process as well as effective feedback on their written products. We accomplish these goals by occasionally canceling classes in order to hold one-to-one or small-group conferences with our students. These conferences typically last 15-30 minutes, and students must be prepared for these intensive meetings by having their work completed and turned in on time.

http://www.catawba.edu/academic/english/FYWriting.htm
Sample syllabus/class schedule:
Friday, May 20
Today I’ll bring a sample rough draft of a previous student’s paper (name removed), and we’ll practice listening and responding to the draft. This is a practice session for Monday’s in-class group conferences. I’ll also assign you to your small groups today.

Monday, May 23
Due today: three copies of your rough draft to share with your group mates. Bring a copy for yourself, as well. I’ll ask you to conduct group conferences about your drafts, following the process I discussed and you practiced last Friday.

Friday, May 27
Due today: your revised draft (please attach copies of commented-on drafts from Monday, as well as your own comment log). In-class: reflection

The process:
1. Groups of three to four students sit in a circle or around a table.
2. Students exchange copies of their drafts.
3. The students in each group decide who’ll go first, second, third, and fourth.
4. Student #1 reads her entire paper aloud, slowly, and without interruption.
5. As Student #1 reads her paper aloud, the other three follow their copies of her draft.
6. As Student #1 reads, the listeners/readers make occasional marks in the margin:
   - a “plus” sign (+) if they have a favorable response to anything (word choice, idea, transition—anything)
   - a “minus” sign (-) if they have a negative response to anything (word choice, idea, etc.)
   - a question mark if they’re confused by anything.
7. Once Student #1 finishes, she reads the paper aloud again. This time, the listeners/readers interrupt her whenever they see one of their marks in the margin. The listeners/readers elaborate on why they had a given reaction.
   - As the listeners/readers describe their reactions, Student #1 keeps a log that looks like this, on which she records plus, minus, and question-mark comments:
8. Only after the students finish giving Student #1 their comments may she ask questions, ask for revision suggestions, and so on.
9. Student #2 reads his paper aloud, and the process is repeated.
PLUS / MINUS/ QUESTION MARK/2

Benefits of this method:
- Students read aloud and approach their texts in a new way.
- Students develop careful listening skills.
- Writers receive instant feedback.
- It’s easy to set up for your class: the logistics aren’t complicated.
- It only takes up one class meeting per paper.

Drawbacks:
- The instant feedback can preclude deep thinking about revision.
- It can put too much emphasis on how a reader feels about or instantly reacts to another person’s writing. To counteract this tendency, have a conversation with the class about the kinds of feedback that are most helpful to writers as they move their paper toward a thoughtful revision.

Note to workshop attendees: on days when students turned in their final drafts, I’d ask them to attach their rough drafts—the copies their peers commented on—to their final draft, and to write on the back of their own final draft answers to questions like these:

- What major changes did you make to your paper after your group discussed your rough draft? Why did you make those changes?
- What comments came up about your draft? Which were most useful to you, and why?
- If you had more time to work on this paper, what additional revisions would you make, and why?
- What specific kinds of feedback would you like from me as you think about revising this for your final course portfolio?
CONFERENCE QUESTION GUIDE

In reading through each group member's rough draft, please keep the following questions in mind. Try to gear your comments to address these issues, though feel free to comment on other areas that you think will help the writer to transform his or her rough draft into a more lively, convincing, and credible paper. Write your comments on the back of the last page of your copy of the draft and sign your name to them (part of your participation grade comes from the quality and quantity of these written comments). Please remember the golden rule as you read generously and "with the grain," as well as "against the grain."

Please be very specific in your responses to the questions below.

1. What's this paper about? What's the general topic?

2. What is the purpose of the paper? What point do you think the writer is trying to make? How do you know? Is it stated explicitly or just hinted at?

3. Does the writer consider the needs of his/her audience? That is, is it evident to you as a reader that the writer of this paper thought about what a reader—you—might need to know?

4. Where would you like to see more support of a position or simply more detail? Be specific.

5. What did you like best about this paper? Be specific. Show places in the text of the paper itself that you especially liked, and indicate your reason for liking them.

6. Look at the introduction/lead. What kind of "promise" about the subject does the writer make to you? What do you expect the writer to talk about in the body of this paper? Is the paper actually like the paper that the introduction hints at? How can the writer better gear the introduction for the paper that he/she has actually written?

7. How does the author show that the ideas in the body of the paper fit clearly together? Are you convinced? How might the writer rearrange the text for clarity and "flow"?

8. Look at the conclusion. Does it come as a surprise, given the rest of the paper? Does the evidence in the paper lead reasonably to this conclusion?

9. Given the above—the paper's purpose as you see it, evidence to support this, and the conclusion—was this text successful? Why or why not? How, specifically, might the writer gear this paper to better fit your needs as a reader?

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2 I received a version of this handout during my initial TA training by the Composition Program at the University of Minnesota.
**CONFERENCE QUESTION GUIDE/2**

Note to workshop attendees: the day students turned in their final drafts, I asked them to attach their rough drafts—the copies their peers commented on—to their final draft, and to write on the back of their final draft answers to questions like these:

- What major changes did you make to your paper after your group discussed your rough draft? Why did you make those changes?
- What comments came up about your draft? Which were most useful to you, and why?
- If you had more time to work on this paper, what additional revisions would you make, and why?
- What specific kinds of feedback would you like from me as you think about revising this for your final course portfolio?

**PART OF MY FRESHMAN HONORS COLLOQUIUM SYLLABUS THAT ILLUSTRATES HOW I INTEGRATED PEER REVIEW WITHOUT USING CLASS TIME**

**Monday, October 14**
- *Due:* four photocopies of your rough draft (3-6 pages, typed, double-spaced, normal margins) of Paper Two for three classmates and me. Keep a copy for yourself. I'll ask you to share these photocopies with the other folks in your writing groups at the beginning of class, and I'll tell you which questions from the "Conference Question Guide" I'd like you to answer in writing on each person's draft.

**Wednesday, October 16**
- *Due:* bring back the rough drafts you received from classmates last time (i.e., the ones you've commented on in writing); exchange drafts.
- For class, read the assigned sections from Ovid; in addition, prepare answers to the discussion and "food for thought" exploratory writing questions.
- *Reminder:* the final draft of Paper Two is due next Monday
- I will distribute a handout that describes your midterm retrospective essay.

**Friday, October 18: Fall Study Break (no classes today)**

**Monday, October 21**
- *Due:* final typed draft of Paper Two; attach to it all copies of your rough draft(s), including the comments you received from classmates.

**AND PART OF ANOTHER UNIT WHEN STUDENTS DISCUSSED DRAFTS FACE-TO-FACE:**

**Friday, November 8**
- For class, read the assigned *lais* for today and prepare answers to the assigned questions.
- *Reminder:* three photocopies of the rough draft of Paper Three are due next Monday.
Monday, November 11
- Due today: three photocopies of the rough draft of Paper Three; distribute to people in your writing group. I'll talk about which questions to answer from the Conference Question Guide. In-class writing workshop.
- The student in charge of launching Dante's *Inferno* will deliver a handout with questions, etc.

"Writing is pretty crummy on the nerves."—Paul Theroux
"Fear ringed by doubt is my eternal moon."—Malcolm Lowry

Wednesday, November 13
- For class, read the assigned sections of Dante's *Inferno* and prepare answers to the handout questions.

Friday, November 15
- For class, read the assigned sections of the *Inferno* and prepare answers to the handout questions.
- The student in charge of launching Boccaccio's *The Decameron* will distribute a handout with questions.

Monday, November 18
- Due: final typed draft of Paper Three; attach to it all earlier rough drafts, including the ones your group mates commented on in writing.

**Benefits of using the Conference Question Guide for peer review:**
- You can adapt it: it works for peer review of drafts even when students don’t meet face to face to discuss their comments; it works to prepare students for in- or out-of-class small group conferences in which they discuss their comments on other writers’ drafts.
- It provides structure: you can assign specific questions for students to answer, or, later in the term/semester, you can let writers tell their group mates which questions they’d most like to have people respond to.
- You can adapt it to your stated evaluation criteria and tie it in to the assignment.

**Drawbacks:**
- Some students will write only cursory responses to the questions. You can counteract this occasional tendency by valuing written comments: tell students up front that they receive a grade for the quality and quantity of comments they give to their group mates. Then do it.
USING STUDENT DRAFTS AS THE CENTER OF CLASS DISCUSSION

We expect our students to read the assignments carefully. We expect them to be able to explain how they read the assignments and how their work constitutes a response.

We regularly reproduce student essays and use them (often in pairs) as the center of class discussion. Instead of having a general discussion of “When We Dead Awaken,” for example, we would focus on two specific readings by two different students. Rather than talk about revision generally, we would use those same two papers to discuss how and where and why they might usefully be revised. As we have already stated, revision is a central part of the course. Students revise as part of their weekly schedule of assignments, not on their own or for extra credit; they do one of the writing assignments one week, receive our comments, then revise it the next week. Revision in this case is represented as something other than “fixing” an essay. We ask students to put in the same amount of time as they did on the first draft. Their goal is to rethink the essay they have begun and to take it on its next step.

David Bartholomae’s syllabus for a basic writing course that uses *Ways of Reading* focuses on writing practice and revision:

You can expect to write regularly, at least one draft or essay each week. You will need to develop the habits and the discipline of a writer. You will need a regular schedule, a regular place and time for writing. There is nothing fancy about this. You need to learn to organize your time so that there is time for writing, so that it becomes part of a routine.

You will be writing, but I will also be asking you to revise—to step outside your writing, to see what it might represent (not just what it says), and to make changes. I will teach you how to read your own writing, how to pay close and critical attention to what you have written, and I will teach you how to make this critical attention part of the cycle of production, part of your work as a writer.

A writer learns most by returning to his or her work to see what it does and doesn’t do, by taking time with a project and seeing where it might lead. The course will be organized so that you will work a single essay through several drafts; each essay will be part of a larger project.

Class participation: I will regularly reproduce your papers (with names removed) and use them for class discussion. Most of our class time will be spent discussing copies of your essays. This is as important to your education as the time you spend alone working on your writing.

Writing Groups: I will form you into groups of three. Few writers work alone; they rely on friends and colleagues to listen to ideas, to read drafts, and to help with copyediting.

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You will be responsible for commenting on one group’s member’s essay or draft each week. When you do, you are to sign your name to your comments.

As we have said elsewhere in this manual, the one surprising feature of our classes is the small amount of time we spend, as teachers, talking about the readings. Almost all of our discussion of the readings takes place through the discussion of student essays, which we reproduce and use to represent specific acts of reading and writing. Most of the questions we address to the assigned texts, in other words, are delivered through questions we ask about writing. Rather than talk generally about introductions, for example, we would talk about the ways a writer has introduced a project or a text or a quotation. Rather than talk about examples in the abstract, we would discuss the use of examples in a student essay—what examples were chosen from the assigned reading; what examples were ignored; what use was made of the examples; what counterexamples there might be; where and how the writer might bring in examples not prefigured in the assigned text.

A question that Bartholomae and Petrosky ask students to think about, as they read and discuss another student’s draft, is this: how does enact a reading of something? Put another way, what way of reading does this paper represent?—KE

Classroom discussion of their papers gives students opportunities to explore the possibilities and problems involved in moving from writing to rewriting, from a reading that has noticed something significant to a reading that can better articulate and account for the significance of what has been noticed. The revised paper on Rodriguez I looked at earlier grew not only out of what the writer was able to do with my comments on her first version but also, as it happened, out of a class discussion of the original paper. Students generally liked and were impressed by the paper, but they were puzzled at times by the reading. One student wondered what the writer meant by saying that Rodriguez “jumps from thought to thought” in “The Achievement of Desire.” A second student said that, whatever the writer meant, she should have shown how this “jumping” works. Someone else said that she wasn’t sure why Rodriguez’s jumping from thought to thought, if he does, might be important in the first place, but a fourth student said that obviously it could indicate, as the write says, Rodriguez’s “unease,” an “anxiety,” just as Rodriguez’s “questioning himself” could—provided the writer demonstrated that. “But self-questioning doesn’t always mean anxiety,” said a fifth student. “I don’t think I’m very anxious, and I question myself all the time. Self-questioning could mean that a person doesn’t know enough.” “Right,” said another student, “or that he knows too much.” The conversation continued. This sort of discussion provides not so much a chance for writers to hear that they haven’t said what they meant (though it may do that), as an occasion for writers to become more curious about just what they do mean. The writer of this paper, as she learned from the discussion, couldn’t do a rewriting of her paper, not in any important sense, without doing some more reading, getting back into Rodriguez’s text and hers.

And class discussions of the papers students write can offer substantiations of the assumption that there are multiple ways, and many good ways, to read. … Discussions of student papers, texts articulating readings of other texts, parallel the practice of looking at one thing through something else, which most of the course’s assignments ask students to perform. For a class to examine student papers with the same attention and care brought to discussions of the anthology
selections by themselves augments students’ belief in the value of the strong reading they are being asked to pursue.

I have found that student papers duplicated for distribution and class discussion can focus on the acts of reading and writing represented by the papers rather than on uneasy exchanges governed by diffidence about or defense of the emotional investments that the papers also represent. Generally speaking, students adapt to the convention of authorial anonymity quickly and easily. As much as possible, I try to choose papers for discussion that will give the class opportunities to notice, wonder about, and question efforts of performed understanding—rather than papers that I think exhibit little effort, nonperformance. Ideally, I want my students to see a discussion of papers as an occasion not for sniping at lousy work but for talking about how good work might be extended.

Sample syllabus/class schedule:

Friday, May 20
Due today: four copies of your rough draft. Exchange three of them with the other folks in your small group (I’ll announce groups today, as well), and give a copy to me. If you would like me to consider copying your draft for all-class discussion, please write “OK” at the top of the draft you give me. If I use your draft, I will remove your name.

Monday, May 23
All-class discussion of two sample drafts, which I’ll provide at the beginning of class. These questions will motivate our discussion: how does each draft “enact a reading” of the text or texts he or she is writing about? how does each draft “enact a reading” of the assignment? For next time: comment in writing on your group mates’ drafts, specifically, respond to questions 1, 4, 5, and 8.

Wednesday, May 25
Due today: commented-on drafts for your group mates. Please return drafts w/your comments to the writers in your group.

Friday, May 27
In-class small-group conferences. Please get together with your group mates in small circles and thoroughly discuss each writer’s draft, one at a time. Initially, the writer whose draft is being discussed should simply take notes on his/her copy. Once everyone in the group has finished giving his/her comments, the writer may ask questions (e.g., ask for clarification, revision suggestions, etc.).

Monday, May 30
Due today: final drafts of Paper #4. Please attach to the final draft all the commented-on drafts you received from your group mates. In-class writing: reflection on the comments you received and how they affected your revision (re-seeing) process.
Benefits of using this approach:

- The all-class discussion of two drafts allows students to enter into very productive discussions of the assigned readings from the text, as well as the writing assignment.
- The all-class discussion of the drafts, used in combination with in-class small-group conferences, creates a rich environment of revision (re-seeing, not editing).
- Students tend to develop a confident, rich language to talk about writing (their own and others’).

Negatives:

- Logistics are a bit more complicated.
- Students have troubles at first when they try to discuss a draft as a class. They’re not sure what kind of language to use at first. If you’re not careful, the discussion can turn into a feeding frenzy.
Once writers have a working draft down on paper, they need to figure out what kinds of revision seem called for. Clearly, feedback from readers can be useful at this point. To get the most useful kind of feedback to your own working drafts, make sure your readers know they’re looking at a work-in-progress and not a final draft.

There are different kinds of commentary you can get from readers at this point. Your readers can:

- Describe the function of the paragraphs in your draft.
- Analyze the organization of the essay.
- Evaluate the argument.

Each kind of commentary provides different information to help you plan revisions. Sometimes you’ll want just one kind of commentary; at other times you’ll want more than one.

The following sections describe the different kinds of feedback, explain their purposes, and provide guidelines.

**Guidelines for Describing the Function of Paragraphs**

- What is the writer’s main point? Identify the sentence or sentences in the working draft that express the main point. If you don’t find such a sentence, write your own version of what you think the main point is.
- Write a statement about each paragraph that explains what function it performs and how it fits into the organization of the working draft. Use words that describe function, such as “describes,” “explains,” “gives reasons,” “proposes,” “compares,” and so on.

**SAMPLE DESCRIPTION OF THE FUNCTION OF PARAGRAPHS IN A WRITER’S DRAFT:**

Main point: The “only family quality time left is that shared on the TV.” Families have substituted fictional for real life.

Para. 1: Tells a story about her family that introduces the main problem. Asks a series of questions.

Para. 2: Generalizes from her family’s experience to point out that they aren’t exceptions. Gives two further examples of the problem. Explains how families have substituted fictional for real life.

Para. 3: Raises a question about why the problem has developed. Offers a theory to explain the problem....

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4Taken from John Trimbur, *The Call to Write*, New York: Longman, 1999: 470-75.
Guidelines for Analyzing the Organization

- What is the main point of the draft? Is it clear and easy to find? Does the introduction help readers anticipate where the draft will be going?
- Do the paragraphs that follow develop the main point? Or do they seem to develop some other point? Is it easy to tell how the paragraphs relate to the main point? Or do they need to be connected more explicitly to it?
- Is each of the paragraphs well focused? Or do some of them seem to have several ideas contending for the reader’s attention? If a paragraph needs more focus, how could this be achieved?
- Within the supporting paragraphs, are there points that seem to need more development? Are there points that don’t belong at all?
- Is the ending or conclusion effective? Does it provide a sense of closure?

SAMPLE ANALYSIS OF THE ORGANIZATION OF A WRITER’S DRAFT:

I like the opening story because I can see what you are getting at. But I wasn’t totally clear on the main point for a while. At first, it seemed like it was just about your family. Then in para. 2 you broadened things to include American families in general. I think you could use a clinching statement at the end of the first para. That says what your main point is. The questions left me up in the air.

In para. 2, you give two examples that illustrate the problem. I think you could put these in the introduction to show what the problem looks like beyond your family. Then you could expand the final part of para. 2,…

Guidelines for Evaluating the Argument

- Analyze the parts of the argument. What is the claim or main point of the working draft? What supporting evidence is provided? What enabling assumptions connect the evidence to the claim?
- Do you agree with the essay’s main point? Do you accept the essay’s assumptions? Explain why.
- If you disagree with the essay’s main point or do not accept one or more of the essay’s assumptions, what position would you take on the issue yourself? How would you support your position? What assumptions would you make? How would you refute the main point of the essay? What alternate perspectives does the draft need to take into account?
- If you agree with the essay’s position, explain why. Do you think the essay makes the best possible argument supporting it? How would you strengthen it? What would you change, add, or omit? Why?
- Discuss the responses with your readers. If you disagree, the idea is not to argue about who is right but to keep talking to understand why your positions differ and what assumptions might have led you to take different positions.
SAMPLE EVALUATIONS OF THE ARGUMENT IN THE WRITER’S DRAFT:

Krista, your main claim seems to be at the end of the second paragraph where you say that the only quality family time is watching TV, and you support this idea by talking about how families have substituted fictional families for real families. The reason you give is that it’s easier that way—the actors do the work for us and everything works out fine. The assumption that connects this reason to your main claim seems to be that families can’t deal with reality any more and so they need a fictional substitute.

…but I think there can also be times TV contributes to family life. For example, in my family…..

PEER RESPONSE TO WRITING⁵

You will notice that some of the Suggestions for Reading ask students to underline and annotate sections of a piece of writing—to do that kind of rhetorical reading that notes not only what the author is saying in that particular section but also how that part relates to the other parts to form (or not to form) a whole. Following this method, you might ask students to exchange essays and then, on a separate sheet of paper, to respond to their partner’s essay in the following way:

1. Identify the main point of the essay. If the main point is stated in a sentence or two in the essay, note those sentences. If the main point is implied rather than stated explicitly, state what the reader sees as the main idea. If there are a number of main points competing for the reader’s attention, indicate what the points are and where they appear.

2. Divide the essay into parts and indicate what each of the parts is saying and what function each performs to make the essay into a whole. The units will generally be paragraphs in short essays but they may not be. Sometimes a couple of paragraphs go together to make a section. In some cases, a paragraph may have separate parts that perform separate functions in the essay as a whole. In other instances, the sections of an essay may not go together at all but instead pull the essay apart.

3. Tell the writer what is interesting in the essay and what he or she has done well. Note that this shouldn’t be easy praise but should indicate what points are worth pursuing and developing further. Remember that writers don’t always know what readers will find interesting and valuable in their writing and that sometimes the most interesting parts of a draft are submerged and need further amplification.

4. Tell the writer what might improve the essay. The issue here is not whether the reader agrees with what his or her partner has said but how the writer can present an essay more clearly and effectively.

5. Tell the writer what assumptions seem to operate in the essay. Again the point here is not to argue but to identify the grounds on which the writer is standing in taking a position.

Response groups are emphatically not edit groups. Peter Elbow distinguishes between criterion-based feedback and reader-based feedback: the former is text-centered, evaluating content, organization, diction, mechanics, and so forth; the latter is reader-centered, recording personal reactions rather than judging. A guide for peer response groups might include directions such as the following:

1. Read the first one or two paragraphs of the draft and stop.
   - What has the writer told you so far?
   - Based on what you’ve read so far, what do you expect the rest of the essay to tell you?
   - What’s your emotional response to the writing so far: interest? sympathy? boredom? anger?
   - What do you wish the writer would do next?
2. Read about halfway through the paper and stop again.
   - Describe, in as much detail as possible, what has been going through your mind as you read.
   - Point out sentences or passages that you especially liked as well as those that confused or annoyed you.
   - What do you expect in the second half of the essay? What do you want the writer to do?
3. After reading the entire paper, follow the steps below.
   - Briefly summarize the essay as if you were describing it to a friend.
   - Has your reaction to the paper changed? How?
   - What questions would you like to ask the writer?
   - What impression of the writer do you get from the way she or he ends the paper?
   - What metaphor or image would you use to describe the essay (or the writer)?

If you’ve never ventured into collaborative group work beyond the usual editing group, don’t be daunted by an initial disappointment or two. We’ve found that students sometimes have trouble overcoming twelve years of conditioning that tells them to pay attention to their instructors and to regard their peers as either pleasant diversions or hostile competitors. We’ve also found that the following hints about group work, as obvious as they may sound, are always handy to keep in mind:

1. Let students choose their own partners. We find that students often resent teacher-created groupings. In general, students have a better instinct for the people they’ll be able to work with productively.
2. Be sure that students are clear about the group’s task and the product they are expected to generate. Our experience has been that open-ended discussion groups often tend to degenerate into casual conversation, but students, like anyone else, like to see the outcome of their efforts. This outcome can be as simple as reporting a
summary of their discussion to the whole class or as elaborate as a collaboratively
generated paper, letter, survey, or picture.

3. We prefer not to delegate leadership roles in collaborative work groups. One of the
benefits of small group activity is that it frees students from the authority of the
instructor so they can feel free to express ideas they would normally censor in class.

Make sure you allow groups enough time to accomplish the task you give them. Most
experiments in collaborative learning founder on this point. Students need time to settle into any
collaborative activity, figure out your expectations, and negotiate leadership roles among
themselves.