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Cover Page Footnote

Much appreciation to Professor Erica Hamilton of Grand Valley State University who helped me work through and articulate the ideas of this piece. It would not be what it is without her help.

Writing as a Vessel for Thinking: Incorporating Self-Regulation, Metacognition, and Formative Assessment in the Middle School ELA Classroom

by Alyssa Ginzel

Writing is synonymous with thinking. As secondary ELA teachers, we know that thinking helps us promote personal growth, develop social networks, enrich democratic societies, and engage in aesthetic experiences (National Council of Teachers of English, 2016). Put simply, writing is not only a means of demonstrating what one knows, it is a vessel *to knowing*. It is therefore important that students are able to think deeply, critically, and analytically in their writing.

The Nature of Writing

Early models of writing characterized the act of writing as linear and somewhat simplistic (Harris et al., 2011). However, the act of writing is far from simple. An effective writer must manage an array of processes and skills, including a control of grammar and mechanics, organization, form, and purpose, a consideration of audience, and an overall evaluation of success within each of these categories toward the goals of the writing piece (Harris et al., 2011). Effective instruction of developing writers must take into account the demands of writing in general, but also the myriad of cognitive demands each of the facets of writing present adolescent writers. To support writing as a vessel to knowing, there are three important components of the writing process secondary ELA teachers need to include in their instruction, namely self-regulation, metacognition, and formative assessment.

Self-Regulation

When writing, we navigate, sometimes circuitously, through the stages of planning, translating, and revising (Harris et al., 2011). Each of the stages of the writing process comes with different cognitive demands. Self-regulation is one way to help students notice and manage those cognitive demands. According to Schunk



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and Zimmerman (2011), self-regulated learning refers to the “processes whereby learners personally activate and sustain cognitions, affects, and behaviors that are systematically oriented toward the attainment of personal goals” (p. 1). As secondary ELA teachers, we can help students self-regulate through the writing process by embedding opportunities for students to set goals and to self-assess their progress.

Metacognition

Metacognitive models of learning pair perfectly with self-regulated instruction. Put simply, metacognition happens when people think about their thinking. When writing, that means we are conscious of what we are saying, how we are saying it, how it might be perceived, how readers might misperceive what we are saying, and what we can do to mitigate readers’ confusion, among other things. Cer (2019) found that metacognitive strategies helped students engage in regulation of cognition when writing, while also positively contributing to their self-efficacy. Thus, teachers can help students become metacognitive thinkers by demonstrating thought patterns in think-alouds and reinforcing those thought patterns through peer collaboration and individual reflection.

Formative Assessment

Formative assessments are assessments that use evidence from student learning to shape, modify, or adapt instruction to meet student needs (Black & Wiliam, 1998). When formative assessment is practiced successfully, students are invited into the assessment process and are able to reflect on their learning, taking ownership of their progress. Formative assessment is a constant form of reflection that students undergo as a way to notice and adjust their approaches, thereby granting the student more autonomy while also helping them to close gaps in their thinking and/or writing progress. The benefits of formative assessment practices on student thinking and writing are numerous (Chappuis et al., 2012). These benefits include using the information gained from formative assessments to pinpoint specific problems so that teachers and their students can act based on the formative assessment results.

Self-Regulation, Metacognition, Formative Assessment, and the Writing Process

For secondary ELA teachers, one way to think about mentoring adolescents through the writing process is to consider this process as a set of stages, in which self-regulation, metacognition, and formative assessment are embedded. These stages can be linear or recursive, depending on adolescents' needs and writing goals.

Stage One: Forethought

In the forethought stage of writing, writers develop goals and create strategic plans for task completion and content conveyance (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009).

In this stage, it is important that writers visualize the outcomes of their actions (Bandura, 2018). Clearly defined learning objectives give students standards for monitoring tasks and elevate achievement (Winne, 2011). By visualizing these goals and the moves necessary to achieve them, students free up cognitive space, which can then be devoted to the content and ideas of their writing. Over time, these metacognitive thinking functions become engrained and reflexive (Fox & Riconscente, 2008).

In this stage, teachers help students plan for different components of writing (i.e., purpose, ideas, conventions, audience, style, organization) before students begin writing. Doing this helps students consider the different aspects they can focus on while writing, while also helping them begin self-monitoring and assessing their thinking and overall writing progress. To support my students, I share a handout (typed in Figure 1 and available as a poster from <<https://bit.ly/Ginzel-Poster>>) that helps students consider each of the components of their writing.

Elements of Writing	
Purpose	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why am I writing this? • What do I want to say? • What do I want to accomplish?
Ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do I want my reader to know? • What information or understandings do I need to communicate?
Conventions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What spelling or grammar concepts will I focus on? • How can spelling and grammar impact my ideas?
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is my target audience? • What strategies should I use to reach my audience? • How will I know that I communicated to my audience effectively?
Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What writing techniques can I use to make my writing more engaging and interesting? • How can I make sure my style speaks to my audience? • How can I make sure my style compliments my purpose?
Organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How should I organize my ideas so my piece makes sense? • Can I play with or reorder time, events, or ideas? • How should I group ideas together? • What transitions can I use to make my ideas connect and flow?

Figure 1. Elements of Writing (NOTE: A PDF of the original poster is available at: <https://bit.ly/Ginzel-Poster>)

One specific way I have implemented these prompts (Figure 1) into a narrative writing unit with my eighth-grade students has been to focus on individual elements of effective writing. Before brainstorming or drafting, I ask my students, “What are some qualities of effective narrative writing?” and then I ask them to respond on a Google

Jamboard. Generally, the responses are all over the place, but the fact that they have access to their peers’ responses allows students to consider aspects of writing they might not have considered alone. From there, we group their responses into different categories (e.g., “grammar, ideas, description”), as shown in Figures 2 & 3.

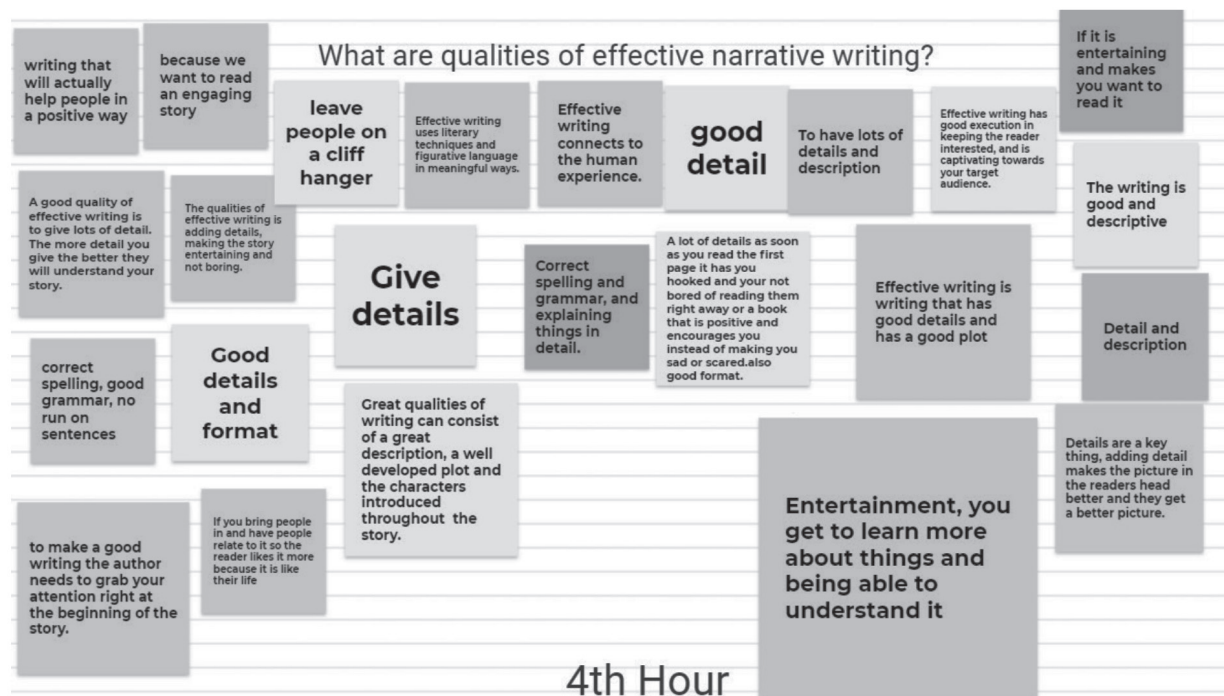


Figure 2. Effective Narrative Writing Jamboard #1

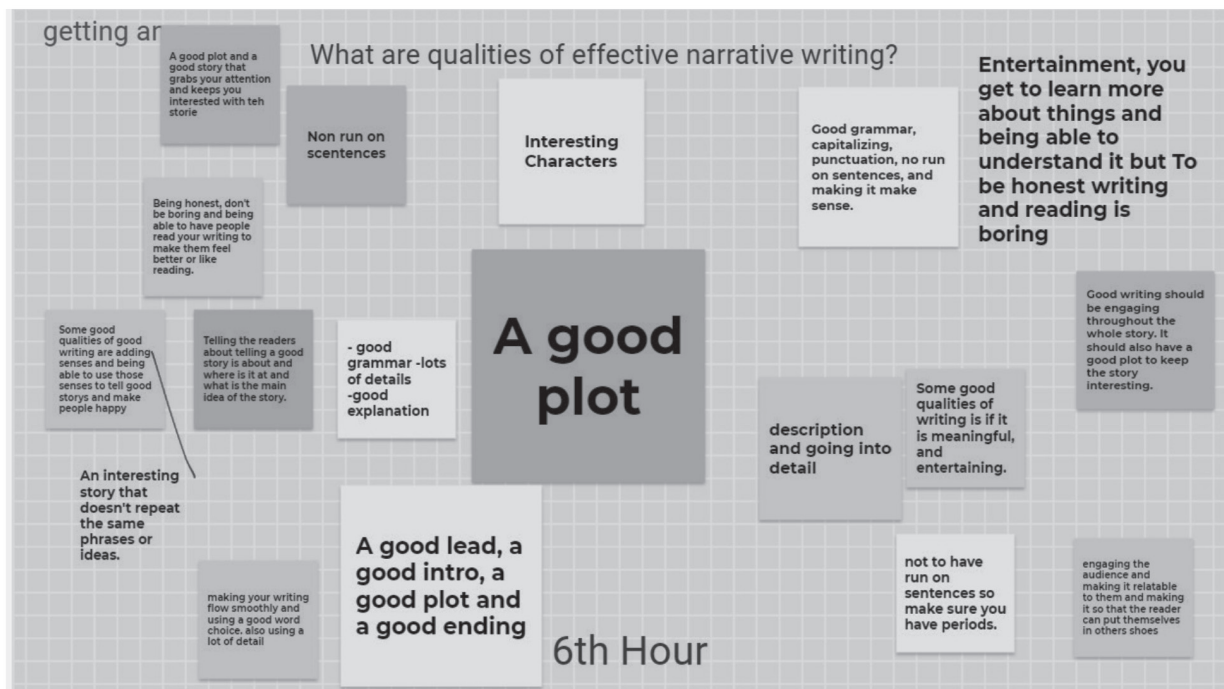


Figure 3. Effective Narrative Writing Jamboard #2

In the beginning stages of drafting, we think about individual aspects of writing (e.g., organization). Within the category of organization in narratives, we discuss pacing and sequencing. To support students' learning, I show two clips from the Disney/Pixar movie *Up!*, one, the iconic montage of Carl and Ellie, and the other, the scene when Carl and Ellie first meet as children. First, we analyze the elements of the film, and then I ask the students to extend their thinking to the context of their own narratives (Figure 4).

This shows questions and responses from two students: one as they thought through the pacing and organization of events in their narrative about the day their dog died, and the other who recounted a moment of personal growth in middle school. The purpose of this activity is to help students set goals for their writing before beginning the process of transposing, while also helping students realize that authors make choices that affect their stories, and how readers perceive their stories. Overall, I have found that this type of activity helps students to

Questions	Student 1—Narrative About Dog's Death	Student 2—Narrative About a Big Change in Middle School
Why did the filmmakers choose to slow down time in one scene, and to speed up time in the other?	Because when they slowed it down, it was an important scene to show how they met. When they sped it up, it was less important and they did that to keep the movie flowing, so no one loses interest.	Because showing all the details can be boring, and some scenes require you to skip forwards without the scene feeling like it's dragging itself.
Do you think the filmmakers should have developed any of the moments from the montage more? Why or why not?	No, I think it was the perfect amount of time because it showed the viewers what happened and the bumps in their relationship and the sad parts in their life.	They should have shown a bit more of the after-effects of losing their child, because even though it's a kid's show, it should've been longer to show the lasting effects. Maybe she could have looked a bit tired for the next few scenes in the montage.
What moments in your story should you slow down? Why? What will they show?	I am going to slow the time down when the story gets to the day where we go to the vet to let him go. I will also slow it down when I find out that he had cancer.	I should slow down parts from the beginning, because then I can use sensory details to exaggerate what was happening in the vision of a younger version of myself.
What moments in your story will you speed past? Why? For what effect?	I will speed up the time when I go to the vet and find out. I will do this because it is not very important.	The details of what happened throughout the day leading up to school, because it's not very interesting, and we've seen enough of the same stuff every day that having it in the story would slow it down significantly.

Figure 4. Student Example—Pacing in Narratives (NOTE: The student's original word choice, spelling, capitalization and punctuation have been retained in this version.)

understand *why* they are writing, while also helping them monitor to what extent their writing is effective and meaningful, a form of self-regulation and metacognition.

metacognitive thinking. For example, the following questions can be used as an entrance or exit slip, or discussed in a “pair and share” with a partner.

Later, as students move into the performance stage of writing, teachers can ask them to reflect on each of the categories of their writing, again engaging students in

1. *What was my original goal?*
2. *Where am I at currently?*
3. *What do I still need to do to reach my goal?*

Student-Created Rubric		
Introductory Paragraph		
Things To Do...		Things To NOT Do...
Content/Ideas What is said? How does the author catch our attention, or not? How do the ideas flow together and make sense, or not?	<i>Ex: The ideas are organized and lead to a thesis statement that focuses the paper.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The author catches our attention by talking about the I have a Dream speech because everyone knows about the I have a Dream speech. The paragraph introduced the points the author will make in the essay well. 	<i>Ex: The ideas are jumbled and incoherent, and their attempt at a thesis doesn't make sense.</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The ideas of what caused the Holocaust are kind of jumbled and it's not very organized and it makes it seem like he is just throwing things out there. He said nobody knows what caused the holocaust and then he said that Hitler caused the holocaust
Structure How is it said? In what order?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The beginning of the paragraph hooks us into reading the rest of the essay. The last few sentence's introduce us to what we will read about in the essay. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He gives a bunch of random ideas after asking a question He asks what happened in the Holocaust in a question form and than just rattles off a bunch of ideas and throws other things out there randomly
Style/Formatting What do you notice about sentences, spelling, punctuation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The author spelled all of the words right. The grammar is correct and they used all the right punctuation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There seems to be a lot of spelling mistakes in the essay and a lot of the words are not spelt correctly He adds unnecessary sentences that he could connect with words like and or so
Body Paragraph 1		
Things To Do...		Things To NOT Do...
Content/Ideas What is said? How does the author catch our attention, or not? How do the ideas flow together and make sense, or not?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The author catches our attention by mentioning King's accomplishments and the age he'd completed them by The ideas flow together because he gives a good supporting idea for his claim, an he proves his idea with backup evidence It flows together because Parsley is using transition words a well Parsley explains the evidence he chose to use 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He throws a lot of information out there instead of connecting them to make sense The in-text citation is not used correctly in the essay.
Structure How is it said? In what order?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The paragraph shows that he starts off with a supporting claim to his overall claim Then the next few sentences give us facts using research evidence The last few sentences in the paragraph also use transition words, and wrap up the section with a good conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> He talks about Hitler starting the holocaust and then he goes to talking about people hating jews before the holocaust The information doesn't connect at all and it moves from one thing to the next and its not organized so it is confusing
Style/Formatting What do you notice about sentences, spelling, punctuation?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The sentences were properly punctuated with periods, and commas The transition words were used properly The words at the beginning of the sentence, and proper nouns were capitalized 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In some spots there are words with no spaces and there is bad spelling He added a link to where he got his information in the paragraph instead of putting it in a separate spot for the works cited.

Figure 5. Student-Created Rubric (NOTE: The student's original word choice, spelling, capitalization and punctuation have been retained in this version.)

Another helpful activity for students as they consider the elements of writing and their goals for their writing piece is to have students examine “effective” versus “ineffective” example essays. For example, before starting an argumentative writing unit, I have my students look at two essays and then create a “rubric” where they outline what they notice about each essay’s content/ideas, structure, and style/formatting for each paragraph of the essay (Figure 5).

This prompts students to actively consider the elements of writing and, later, to consider and name their own writing goals.

Stage Two: Performance

In the performance stage of writing, adolescent writers engage in the act of translating ideas into written words (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). Because writing is such a complex task, tracking one’s performance across tasks can sometimes produce cognitive overload for developing writers (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009). To address and remedy this cognitive overload, self-observation strategies help adolescent writers become more aware of their progress through tasks (Zimmerman & Moylan, 2009).

As outlined by Bandura (2018), such self-regulation strategies can be categorized to include environmental, intrapersonal, or behavioral elements. To support students, I print questions (Figure 6) and have my students glue them in their writer’s notebooks, and I also copy/paste them into a Google Doc where students compose their drafts.

If I notice students are off task during writing time, or that they seem overwhelmed or stuck, I ask them, “What strategies/questions have you tried?” Usually, there is an, “Oh, yeah!” moment before they review the handout and try a strategy and self-redirect. These self-observation questions/strategies grant adolescent writers the agency and autonomy to inform and shape their learning and development as a writer.

After freeing up some of the cognitive load that can challenge the writing process, teachers can directly address and improve student writing and thinking through formative assessment and feedback (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). This can be done by offering verbal feedback via conferences or written feedback on student drafts. However, even with written feedback, students often do not revise their writing, or they may

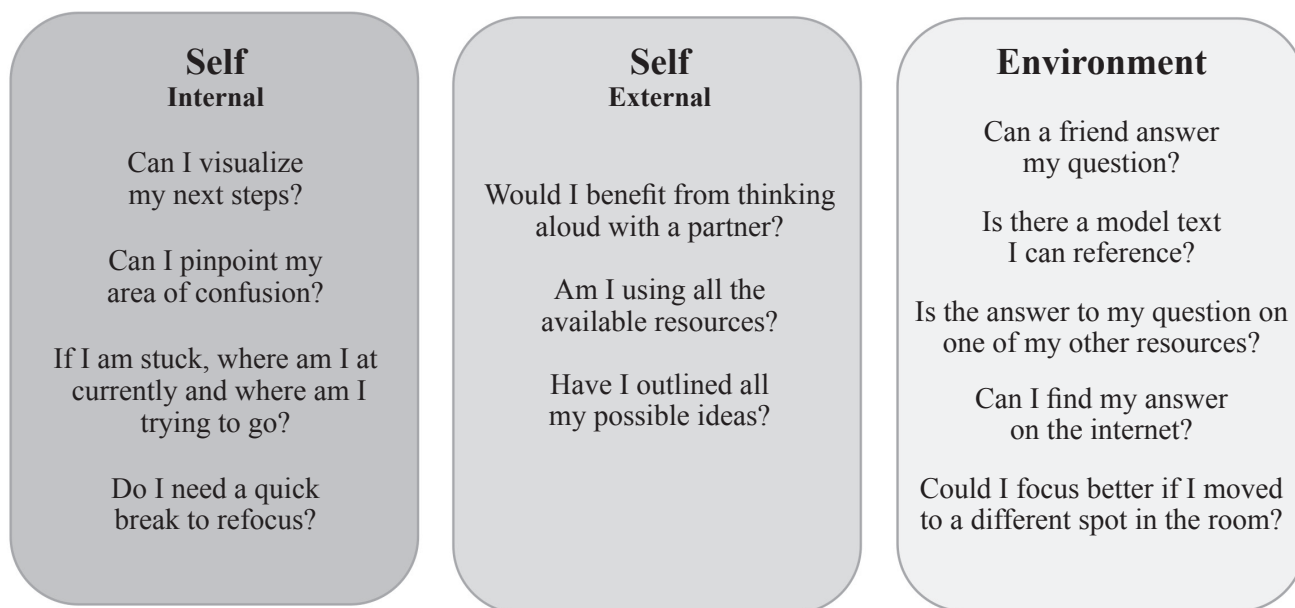


Figure 6. Self-Regulation Reminders

otherwise harbor misconceptions about the distinction between revising and editing (Sachar, 2020). Feeling overwhelmed or frustrated with teacher feedback, students can fail to implement meaningful changes to their drafts (Lee, 2011). *Why?* The type of teacher feedback matters.

Researchers have found that students were more likely to revise their writing when they received localized feedback, but were less likely to revise if the feedback was excessive (Sachar, 2020). Furthermore, generalized feedback (e.g., “Good job!”) lacks specificity to extend students’ understanding of their thinking and writing. During drafting, feedback that focuses on content and ideas—instead of surface-level features (e.g., spelling, punctuation)—has been shown to be most effective (Beach & Friedrich, 2006). Feedback should provide specific commentary on ideas and construction so that students come to understand writing as a process through which they grapple with complex ideas and come to deeper understandings (Sachar, 2020).

Equally important is *when* students receive feedback (Frey & Fisher, 2013). If teachers wait to provide students with summative feedback on writing, they will not notice changes in student performance because there is no opportunity for students to revisit and revise work (Frey & Fisher, 2013). Based on these authors’ work, below are some examples of formative feedback I use with my middle school writers in conferences and on drafts during and after writing:

- *Your writing (ideas, conventions, presentation) [here] is strong because...*
- *Your writing [here] could be improved by...*
- *Can you explain why this narrative is meaningful to you?*
- *What do you want readers to know or walk away with?*
- *How do you think that is coming through in your writing so far?*
- *Can we add or take away anything here?*
- *If someone disagreed with your argument, what would they say? How could you address that here?*
- *Can you explain why you made [this] choice?*

- *What are your next moves?*
- *Where are you going and why?*

Measuring student needs through formative assessments and shifting instruction so that it is responsive to those needs can produce drastic improvements in student writing. Together, self-monitoring strategies and constructive feedback processes help students regulate thinking in productive ways and benefit students’ writing overall (Madison et al., 2019).

Stage Three: Self-Reflection

In this stage of writing, students engage in self-reflection. Reflection can happen during and/or after the writing process (Bandura, 2018), and students should use self-reflection for revision of content *and* writing mechanics (Harris et al., 2011). However, adolescent writers often feel that their first and only life-preserver when they confront an obstacle is their teacher. It is important for students to realize that they have access to—and can implement—other resources, which creates autonomy and furthers their development as writers. To support my students’ autonomy, I encourage my students again to ask and answer internal and external questions (Figure 6).

In addition to teacher feedback, peer feedback is essential in helping students self-reflect on their thinking and writing. Students can share their drafts with peers and practice utilizing purposeful conversation stems. Not only does this help adolescents obtain feedback on their own drafts, it also helps them extend their thinking into the context of their peers’ unfamiliar writing pieces. To support peer feedback, I share sentence stems (Figure 7) with my middle school students and expect that they will use these to self-reflect, while also giving and receiving purposeful and targeted feedback.

Teachers can also ask students to leave feedback questions on their drafts. Doing this helps students think metacognitively about the areas in which they might still need to grow, and it helps teachers provide students with meaningful feedback. Below are some examples of prompts my middle school writers have used when requesting teacher feedback.

Peer Collaboration Stems	
Notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I notice... • I think... • I wonder if... • I have an idea...
Connect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This reminds me of... • What you are saying connects to (text/world/self)... • Have you thought about how this connects to...
Summarize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What I think you are saying is... • The purpose of your piece seems to be... • The strongest piece of evidence seems to be...
Clarify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can you explain what you mean in this word/sentence/paragraph/section? • Can you clarify how this connects to your overall theme/information/position/argument? • Can you clarify your organization here?
Challenge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What if... • Have you considered? • I don't know if your theme/information/position/argument comes through. • Some people say... What would you say in response?
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think you could add... • I think you could take away... • I think this word/sentence/paragraph/section is strong because... • I think this word/sentence/paragraph/section needs work because...

Figure 7. Peer Collaboration Writing Discussion Stems

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>I am unsure if [this section] adds to my purpose. Could you give me your thoughts?</i> • <i>Does my evidence (or word choice, organization, etc.) contribute to my ideas?</i> • <i>Can you clarify my punctuation here?</i> • <i>Can you help me with my in-text citation formatting?</i> • <i>I am wondering if my dialogue is properly formatted and seems "real?"</i> • <i>Could I organize this section/paragraph differently?</i> • <i>Can you tell me what I did well overall?</i> • <i>Can you tell me how I have improved since our last writing task?</i> • <i>Can you tell me what I can focus on for our next writing piece?</i> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>"Is it good?"</i> • <i>"What do I need to do?"</i> • <i>"Did I get an A?"</i> • <i>"Can you spell/grammar check for me?"</i> • <i>"Do I have enough dialogue/figurative language/ in-text citations?"</i> |
|--|--|

Although I give students examples of thoughtful feedback questions, I have found that they generally begin to ask their own questions after some direction. I have been amazed at the depth of students' thinking about their own writing; in turn, I have found that the feedback I give is much more specific and meaningful as a result. Figure 8 shows examples of one student's feedback questions, as well as my responses, on an informational essay about mental disorders.

Moreover, teachers should also provide examples of less helpful feedback requests for students, so they know what not to do, such as:

Closing

Many secondary ELA teachers have felt the frustration of teaching writing. This complicated process seems

Mental Disorders

Imagine not being able to say what was on your mind. Not being able to complete a task because of something that you can't control. So many people have to deal with this. Anyone can be affected by neurological disabilities. Learning disabilities can mean a person's brain is altered, but you may still be able to think like an able-bodied person would, making life so much harder because of the frustration that occurs. Furthermore, a study done in 2020 came to the conclusion that only 17.9 percent of persons with a disability were employed (Persons with a Disability). That means that 82.1 percent of adults with disabilities could not find a job to support themselves. Thus, there are many different learning disabilities including autism, ADHD, and dysphasia that can impact one's life significantly.

To begin, autism is a common learning disability among people of all ages. Autism is a



Figure 8. Feedback Questions—Student Example

impossible to deconstruct, and in our attempt to make it make sense to our students, we can find ourselves ricocheting between order and chaos. In the realm of order, we over-emphasize outlines and rubrics to the point that the structure is stifling and permits little creativity, discovery, or critical thought. In the realm of chaos, we over-emphasize open-ended prompts, writer's workshops, and choice to the point that our students struggle to grapple with our lofty, though well-meaning, ideals.

What is important, and what we want our students to achieve through their writing, is the ability to think critically, grapple with ideas, and articulate complex thinking in cohesive ways. This can be achieved when ELA teachers actively integrate self-regulation, metacognition, and formative assessment in their writing instruction and assessment. When modeled and implemented in ways that empower students, adolescents' writing quality can improve.

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