POSITIVE FEEDBACK IN PEER REVIEW: A RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF STUDENT COMMENTS

by

CHRISTINA LEA ARMISTEAD

(Under the Direction of Christy Desmet)

ABSTRACT

This close analysis of positive peer responses as written by forty students in first-year composition seeks to explore how students understand commenting as rhetoric. The study integrates a discussion of the dynamics among praise, critical feedback, and authorship within the context of an increasing shift from in-person oral to asynchronous online peer review. Using data produced by her own students, the author examines why and how positive feedback features importantly in the student commenting genre. Through an analysis of comments composed in 117 online peer review documents, this study reveals an important connection between student praise and critical feedback as well as suggests a need for composition instructors to teach online peer review as both writing and rhetoric.

INDEX WORDS: Peer Review; Virtual Peer Review; Feedback; Writing Response; Praise; Positive Feedback; First-Year Composition; Rhetorical Comments
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CHRISTINA LEA ARMISTEAD

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CHRISTINA LEA ARMISTEAD

Major Professor: Christy Desmet
Committee: Michael Moran
Michelle Ballif

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2013
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the students whose voices are featured in this study. After spending a wonderful semester reading your writing and another reading your peer review comments, I can safely say you will hold a special place in my memory as an inspiration.
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My thanks go to Christy Desmet for providing guidance and support throughout this project and for peppering my drafts with positive punctuation marks 😊. The completion of my degree and this document would not be possible without the valiant efforts of two indomitable superwomen: Beth Beggs, my writing center hero who swooped in just as I was feeling most lost and helped me learn to like my writing again, and Mary Armistead, my patient and devoted sister who proved time and time again that conversation can indeed be an excellent inspiration for writing.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>.............................................</th>
<th>vi</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>..........................................</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>..........................................</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

1. **INTRODUCTION** ................................................................. 1

2. **PEER REVIEW: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE** ................................ 10
   - Theoretical Foundations ........................................ 10
   - The Virtual Transition ........................................ 14
   - “Voice” in Positive Feedback .................................. 18

3. **POSITIVE FEEDBACK: MOTIVATIONS** ................................... 21
   - Praise: Invaluable or Invalid? ................................. 21
   - Why do Students Give Praise? ................................. 23
   - Positive Feedback in Peer Review Exhibits ................. 25
   - Concluding Remarks ............................................ 35
   - Positive Feedback Online .................................... 36

4. **POSITIVE FEEDBACK IN PEER REVIEW: METHOD** ....................... 39
   - Overview ............................................................ 39
   - Participants and Classroom Context ......................... 40
   - Peer Review on <emma> ......................................... 41
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Mitigation Categories and Definitions ................................................................. 46
Table 2: Comment Units Coding Scheme ............................................................................. 48
Table 3: Perfunctory Mitigation Category Key ................................................................. 78
Table 4: Thoughtful Mitigation Category Key ................................................................. 83
Table 5: Engaged Mitigation Category Key ........................................................................ 87
LIST OF FIGURES

Page

Figure 1: Peer Review on <emma> ........................................................................................................42
Figure 2: Percentage of Positive Feedback Units Out of Total ..............................................................52
Figure 3: Percentage of Total Positive Feedback Units..........................................................................53
Figure 4: Percentage of Positive Evaluation............................................................................................54
Figure 5: Percentage of Total Mitigation..................................................................................................55
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Peer reviewing is something that I was extremely uncomfortable with. I had never done it before, and I'm not the one to be critical of anyone. I am naturally a nice person who always likes to think about the positive aspects of a performance by someone.

Peer review is definitely intimidating to me. I'm afraid of offending people, and I don't like people feeling like I'm attacking them. When I peer review, I try to word everything very softly, and unfortunately, I hold back some of the things I could say.

When leaving comments on people’s essays, I try to make sure I fix the issue in a nice way by making a “criticism sandwich.” By that I mean, I try to acknowledge a point where the writer did well, then make a criticism, and finally point out another strong point in their essay.

When giving feedback, I never want to simply state that something is confusing or wrong. If I don’t understand the way he or she wrote an idea, I’ll say something like, “I really like what you are trying to say here, but I would suggest rewording it because I had to read it a couple times to understand.”

I really enjoyed all of the peer review days in my English 1101 class. I loved getting to read over my classmates' papers and helping them out with corrections and suggestions. Of course, I always tried to mix the bad with the good, as not to offend anybody.

These excerpts were taken from a collection of peer review reflections written by forty first-year composition students at the University of Georgia. They were part of an assignment I asked them to complete for their final ePortfolios— an exhibit of their peer review skills. The exhibit required students to a) describe their personal method of peer review; and b) demonstrate that method in action by showcasing a review they submitted via the department’s online course management system, <emma>.¹ Out of forty student exhibits, twenty-one referenced positive

¹ <emma> is an electronic markup and management application designed in-house at the University of Georgia’s English department as a course management system for composition instructors.
commentary as a desirable and even necessary form of feedback. Twenty-four discussed reluctance to give critical comments, and eight mentioned incorporating praise as a strategy for softening the tone of suggestions.

That students like giving positive feedback in peer review is nothing new to composition teachers. The body of research on peer evaluation in the writing classroom generally acknowledges praise as a distinctive feature of student response styles (Spear 1989, Beason 1993, Nelson and Carson 1995, Paulus 1999). Quantitative comparisons of student and teacher feedback show that students give more than twice (sometimes three times) as much praise than do teachers (Beason 1993, Cho, Schunn, and Charney, 2006, Patchan, Charney, and Schunn 2009). This marked difference is curious, considering that teachers are students’ primary (and often only) models for writing response, and studies show that praise is one of the least used comment types by teachers, ranking significantly below corrections, suggestions, and criticisms (Daiker, 1989, Dragga, 1988, Connors and Lunsford 1992, Beason 1993, Straub 1997). Clearly, positive feedback is not a learned but instinctive behavior on students’ part.

As the excerpts above indicate, there is likely a strong correlation between students’ love of praise and their reluctance to criticize each other. Indeed, when teachers write about student praise, they most often frame the discussion in terms of praise as an important function of social support or praise as an unwelcome excess in the paucity of more substantial feedback. The latter conversation is the more frequent. In scholarship on peer response, praise is described as the natural result of “peer review anxiety,” fear of appearing overly harsh or critical to classmates (Spear 1989, Geissler 1990, Williams 1992, Nelson and Carson 1995, Zhao 1998, MacLeod 1999, Nilson 2003, Clark 2003, Anderson 2010). Because providing feedback on writing is something that teachers do, many students think of commenting as tantamount to judging. They
perceive it as an inherently critical practice; the emphasis is on finding fault. In their peer review exhibits, several of my students described peer review using language of violence—“attack,” “hurt,” “offend,” “bash.” One even equated it to giving a death blow: “part of the terror of peer reviewing is that sometimes I feel like a merciless executioner.” Strategies like the “criticism sandwich,” couching a critical remark between two positive ones, emerge as a way to feel less like a judge and more like a collaborator.

Most studies offering improvements for peer review focus on giving critical feedback (Stanley 1992, Reid 1993, Porter 1995, O’Bryan 1995, Lockhart and Ng 1995, Nilson 2003, Anderson 2010). Scaffolds such as modeling exercises and guide sheets focus on training students how to look for weaknesses in writing. While these techniques have been used to good effect in increasing both teacher and student satisfaction with the quality of peer feedback, they are still oriented on fault finding. They reinforce the idea that commenting on writing is an inherently critical activity and fail to consider the distinctly social functions that praise might play in peer response.

Because students give feedback from the vantage point of an equal rather than an instructor, offering encouragement may help them reinforce to themselves and to each other that they are not authorities on writing. Furthermore, because peer review is reciprocal, students have every reason to feel that they are providing feedback that actively seeks to build up rather than tear down. When choosing an approach towards commenting on a classmate’s draft, students may consciously take a stance that is clearly positive and constructive, since they know that someone else is making a similar choice about their own writing. Despite these realities of the peer review situation, the scholarly discourse on how to train students to effectively give critical feedback is crucially divorced from an important foundational discussion—how and why do
students give praise? Furthermore, how can this understanding better inform methods of teaching feedback? Now is a particularly opportune time to engage in this conversation. The past ten years have witnessed a major shift in the practice of peer review, one in which positive feedback may figure more importantly into how students respond to each other’s writing.

With the advent of online commenting software, peer review has steadily been transformed from a primarily speech-based to a text-based exercise. While early proponents such as Peter Elbow and Kenneth Bruffee characterized peer evaluation as an oral activity—the sharing and negotiating of understanding in lively, face-to-face interactions—the “wired” classroom privileges modes of written response. Bruffee’s “Conversation of Mankind” has gone digital with the emergence of evaluation systems such as Bedford St. Martin’s Eli and Panther Learning’s SWoRD, in which reviewers insert comments into peers’ papers and the authors assess the helpfulness of these comments on a one to five scale rating. There are several consequences and implications of this shift from oral to written peer feedback. One of the most pressing for English instructors is refiguring how to teach peer review as writing, essentially another form of composition. As Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch argues in Virtual Peer Review, “the issue becomes one of how students respond in writing. That is, how well do they convey (in text) their suggestions, comments, and questions to fellow students?” (47).

Before teachers can approach the question of how best to prepare students for reviewing in an online environment, two important preliminary questions must first be considered: what are the goals of peer review, and how might the transition to virtual review change how these goals are accomplished? In “Peer Assessment between Students in Colleges and Universities,” Keith Topping outlines several purposes of peer review for students across the curriculum of higher education, including motivating substantial revisions, benefiting from the expertise of fellow
writers, developing meta-cognitive processes through evaluating others, improving verbal communication skills, and receiving encouragement and support from a community of peers. In narrowing the focus to the composition classroom specifically, all of these goals apply with one significant addition—enhancing audience awareness. One of the most persistent problems among inexperienced writers is their limited capacity to understand the dynamics of audience or even be able to picture writing to real people at all (Sommers 1982, 2004 Gearhart and Wolf 1994, Wyngaard and Gehrke 1996, Wiggins 2009). As the primary remedy to this problem, peer review translates the concept of “readers” into a live presence that vitally reinforces the social function of writing as an exchange between diverse communities of knowledge and culture.

In resituating this discussion of the purpose of peer review into a virtual environment, the important question becomes, “what do the comments say?” How might the disembodied text carry out the goals of motivating revision through critical feedback and enlivening the act of writing as a social transaction? The capacity of online peer review to fulfill these goals depends upon how the text functions communicatively on two levels. First, at a basic level, the content of comments is crucial. If a lively, face-to-face discussion between students about the development of their main arguments is condensed into a brief “you should expand on this” online, then virtual review can hardly be said to comparably complement the rich, back-and-forth negotiations typical of oral interaction. In order for peer reviewers to offer any useful, constructive feedback in a virtual environment, it is essential that students understand themselves as writers, subject to the elementary demands of composition (i.e., readable syntax, basic coherence, articulation through detail, etc.). Second, what comments say on a more purposeful level as rhetoric will determine whether the text can communicate anything meaningful as a representation of audience. In contrast to in-person response, written feedback is generally less
personal and also lacks the expressive richness of nonverbal cues. If online peer review is to continue the tradition of providing students with the support of fellow writers as well as confronting them with the reality that they are writing to real people with diverse experiences and backgrounds, then it is also essential that peer reviewers understand themselves as not only writers but authors of virtual comments. They must understand the peer-review text as a representation of themselves as readers and individuals, reflecting an ethos they consciously construct based on their rhetorical goals for the writer who will receive them.

The present study merges the question of whether or not online peer review can be an equivalent, even unique, complement to traditional, face-to-face review with my earlier discussion of how understanding student praise is fundamental to improving their critical feedback. I choose to approach the issue of peer review’s virtual transition through the lens of positive feedback because, as I demonstrate in the following chapters, it serves as a dynamic intersection between how students understand critical response to writing and how they understand commenting as rhetoric. Consequently, it represents both the problems as well as the potential of online peer review. In the following seven chapters, I address two critical projects:

- I explore the situational and rhetorical motivations behind students’ positive feedback in peer review in order to unpack how it relates to their understanding of writing response;
- I examine the textual products of these motivations in order to demonstrate the failures, successes, and opportunities of online peer review as a complement to oral writing groups.

I carry out these two projects through a quantitative and qualitative analysis of data produced by forty first-year composition students enrolled in one of two sections of English 1101
at the University of Georgia in fall 2012. This data comes from two primary sources: forty student peer review exhibits submitted in a final ePortfolio and 117 peer reviews completed through an online commenting system. As I describe on the first page of my introduction, peer review exhibits are written reflections of a student’s personal method of peer review. They were a required component of each student’s final ePortfolio to be submitted for successful completion of the course. Students’ peer reviews were written and submitted through <emma>, a suite of online writing software. This open source program was designed in-house at the University of Georgia’s English Department as a course management system for composition instructors. On <emma>, students can access class assignments, department policies, and writing and research-support materials as well as submit essays, projects, journals, and peer reviews. As part of the graded course requirements, each student wrote three essays and completed two online peer assessments per essay through a hybrid of traditional in-class and digital review modes.

This study is divided into seven chapters. Chapter two reviews the theoretical background and purposes of peer review in the composition classroom and how the transition into virtual commenting environments might complicate them. In Chapter three, I briefly step back from the discussion of the problems and potential of online peer review to address why praise features so importantly in student commenting. Using nine excerpts from forty student peer review exhibits, I explore the relationships between student praise, the rhetorical situation of peer review, and students’ understanding of critical feedback. I then merge this discussion of student praise with the question of how virtual review might accomplish the goals of traditional oral review. I do this through both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of students’ online positive feedback.
It is important to stop here and clarify by what I mean by “positive feedback.” While I use the terms “praise” and “positive feedback” interchangeably, the two are not quite synonymous. Whereas “praise” denotes a direct compliment, “positive feedback” refers to any positive expression of affect. Consequently, I use three primary categories to account for students’ positive feedback: *praise evaluation* (direct statement of value or compliment of skill); *reader response* (personal reaction to the text); and *positive punctuation* (emoticons and exclamations). Both the praise evaluation and reader response categories are developed from previous scholarship on written feedback (Zak 1990, Connors and Lunsford 1993, Straub 1997, Smith 1997, Patchan et al. 2009). Positive punctuation is a category of my own making and, as I demonstrate in Chapter six, important to account for in a virtual reviewing environment. Because students’ rhetorical use of positive feedback is a central point of interest in this study, my quantitative and qualitative analysis also accounts for *mitigation*, or the use of praise to lighten critical feedback.

The study of students’ peer review comments begins in Chapter four, where I describe the classroom context, method of data collection, and taxonomy of positive feedback with which I categorize the comment data. Chapter five includes a brief report and discussion of the quantitative results of the four categories outlined above—*praise evaluation, reader response, positive punctuation, and mitigation*. Chapter six analyzes qualitatively students’ “stand-alone” positive data, or examples from the three positive feedback categories that were not used in combination with other comments. Chapter seven analyzes students’ “mitigated” positive data, or examples of positive feedback mixed with revision-oriented feedback.2 This chapter will also include a separate discussion of a small but distinct portion of mitigation data I call *invention*.

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2 Revision-oriented comments are those that explicitly or implicitly call for changes in the text. They are often questions, suggestions, and criticisms (Lui and Sadler 2003).
These are comments in which students traverse the reviewer/writer divide and generate significant amounts of text that contribute to or complicate the writer’s ideas. Finally, Chapter eight explores the implications of this study’s findings for how composition teachers might best prepare students for virtual peer reviewing.

By choosing to focus on students’ positive feedback, I am able to address multiple points of interest. In the context of the growing prevalence of online peer review, I can demonstrate that while students often crucially fail to understand themselves as writers in online peer review, their motivations for giving praise are central to how students understand themselves as authors. Thus, positive feedback represents an entry point for teaching students to develop rhetorical consciousness in composing their comments.

Furthermore, examples of students’ written comments show how positive feedback is crucial to translating the dynamics of audience into a purely written medium. Students’ positive response is the heart of personality, community, and authorship in online peer review, and thus represents how the traditional goals of peer review might not only survive but thrive in a virtual environment. Lastly, considering why and how students give praise reveals larger implications of how they perceive feedback and revision in general. While this study shows that a majority of students polarize feedback into either encouragement or fault-finding, praise or criticism, the few who understand a crucial connection between liking and giving critical feedback not only help composition teachers improve students’ feedback overall but also demonstrate exciting possibilities for what online peer review might accomplish as a purely written medium.
CHAPTER 2
PEER REVIEW: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE

Theoretical Foundations

Peer review as a commonplace in the composition classroom emerged in the 1970s and 80s as a by-product of theories in liberal education and process-oriented writing pedagogy (Nelson and Murphy 1993, Kastman-Breuch 2003). In 1970, Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire published an English translation of Pedagogy of the Oppressed, in which he indicts traditional models of education that alienate students from each other and ultimately from their respective communities. This “banking model” of education demands silence and subjugation, positioning teachers as the sole holders of knowledge and students as passive recipients. Freire offers an alternative to this teacher-dominated hegemony in which “no one teaches another, nor is anyone self-taught. People teach each other, mediated by the world” (33). The classroom monologue thus transforms into a dialogue in which students do not learn in isolation, but approach fundamental human problems together with the purpose of forging bridges between individuals and communities. Concurrent work by teachers such as Donald Murray and Peter Elbow opened up an opportunity for writing instructors to incorporate this community-focused education model into their classrooms. Murray’s 1971 article, “Teach Writing as a Process not Product,” urged teachers to treat writing as a process of discovery by asking students to produce multiple drafts rather than a single, finished product. This multi-draft classroom allowed for mid-
process group work in which students could encounter each other’s writing in lively, face-to-face social exchange, transforming a once isolated labor into a social practice. In groups, students could recognize themselves as members of a community—a community of students and a community of writers.

This community model of student writing groups is very much indebted to Peter Elbow. In his 1973 classic *Writing Without Teachers*, Elbow emphasizes that writing is crucially a transaction with other people: “writing is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else’s head” (76). An unread text is fundamentally incomplete in isolation from its social function as communication. Consequently, he argues that writers need consistent support from a community of fellow writers who can give them an immediate picture of how their writing is experienced.

In his book, Elbow recommends weekly meetings between a small group of peers in which each person reads his or her work aloud and then listens to responses from the group. By seeing and hearing how readers respond to their words, writers can see their texts “doing something,” or leaping from the page to spark a visible reaction. He outlines four oral response exercises—pointing, summarizing, telling, and showing—that readers can use to share the “movies of their minds,” or the thoughts and perceptions that strike them while processing the writer’s words.³ Elbow’s book impressed upon composition teachers the importance of a community of peers in supporting and motivating the writing process. His read-aloud and response model has served as a basis for countless peer review exercises that guide students in

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³ According to Elbow, responders “point” to specific words and phrases, describing why they were effective or ineffective. They “summarize” their main feelings about the text and what they believe to be its “center of gravity.” They “tell” a narrative of how they experienced the writing with explicit references back to the text. They “show” their perceptions through metaphorical comparisons (i.e. “Talk about writing as though you were talking about the weather”) 85-92.

While Elbow provided the model for peer review, Kenneth Bruffee provided the justification for its use in the composition classroom. His landmark 1984 article, “Collaborative Learning and the ‘Conversation of Mankind,’” outlines a cogent argument for why open academic discourse between students can ultimately improve the quality of their writing. Building on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who posits that all thought is ultimately an internalized public conversation, Bruffee argues that writing as the product of reflection is essentially an internal social conversation re-externalized on the page. The implication for composition teachers is that by engaging students in conversation with each other as much as possible during the composing process, they can enrich students’ writing as an extension of that conversation. Beyond the immediate goals of the classroom, academic discussion among peers gives students an opportunity to practice the kind of spoken and written discourse that will become a part of their everyday lives:

Collaborative learning provides the kind of social context, the kind of community, in which normal discourse occurs: a community of knowledgeable peers. This is one of its main goals: to provide a context in which students can practice and master the normal discourse exercised in established knowledge communities in the academic world and in business, government, and the professions. (644)\(^4\)

Essentially, peer groups help students develop one of the most practical skills they can learn: basic academic and social decorum in public discourse. No matter what their professional

\(^4\)“Normal Discourse” is a term Bruffee borrowed from philosopher Richard Rorty. Bruffee summarizes it as “a conversation within a community of knowledgeable peers. A community of knowledgeable peers is a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions” (642).
destinations, the ability to communicate intelligently in both speech and writing is critical to students’ success. In a “community of knowledgeable peers,” students can practice basic frames of discourse while also learning to value multiple perspectives in how they choose to express their ideas to others.

In characterizing conversation between peers as the site where students encounter the social implications of writing, Bruffee laid the foundation for peer review to become the principal method for developing students’ ability to anticipate reader response. In fact, for the vast majority of composition teachers, audience awareness is taught primarily through peer review (Spear 1988, Clark 2003, MacArthur 2007). Student writers, in particular, are apt to neglect larger concerns of audience because they write in an artificial situation where they submit essays for a grade. All too frequently, they become preoccupied with writing to their immediate audience—the teacher. While composition instructors often urge their students to think of their “readers,” students have trouble picturing “readers” as a general concept (Sommers 1982, 2004, Gearhart and Wolf 1994, Wyngaard and Gehrke 1996, Wiggins 2009). Because most of them have had limited encounters with reader response to their academic work, they often fail to view their writing as part of a social conversation and instead see it as a test or measuring device (Dennen and Jones 2006).

However, Bruffee’s model of collaborative learning animates the concept of an audience as an embodied reality. The immediacy of live interaction with peers confronts students with a range of reader responses from laughs to raised eyebrows, approval to uncertainty, and admiration to confusion. This exposure to a real audience helps students to construct mental representations of how readers interpret writing (Traxler and Gernsbacher 1992), but more importantly, it transforms writing into a genuine act of communication. As in Elbow’s writing
groups, peer review gives students an opportunity to see their texts as they are experienced by an actual reader. As a result, they begin to understand the larger social functions of writing. Rather than an isolated labor, writing becomes community-oriented, emphasizing the interpersonal exchange of knowledge and ideas. For students, the end product of this conversation about their writing is more revisions, increased focus on meaning over surface, and better final drafts (Hays 1982, DiPardo and Freedman 1988, Schriver 1990, Paulus 1999, Holliway and McCutchen 2004, Midgette et. al. 2008).

The Virtual Transition

The practical and theoretical foundations of peer review, as outlined by Elbow and Bruffee, are very much rooted in a tradition of oral communication. Elbow designed his writing group model for the immediacy of live, face-to-face interaction. Bruffee’s argument for collaborative learning emphasizes the fundamental connection between oral and written discourse— that the way students talk will inform the way students write. So what happens when their conversation goes online? How will encountering peer responses in text rather than speech affect how students develop an understanding of audience and the social context of writing? While pen-and-paper exchanges have long been a component of peer review, oral interaction is considered its life-blood. However, since online commenting systems have filtered into the classroom over the past twenty years, focus has shifted increasingly to how students respond to one another in text (Topping 1998, Lui and Sadler 2003, Breuch 2004). Especially because so much of the “normal discourse” fundamental to Bruffee’s collaborative learning model is now occurring online, teachers are confronted with the reality that in order to prepare students to communicate effectively in professional working environments, they must ask students to
practice social frames of discourse in virtual environments. Thus, online peer review emerges as a necessary supplement to the oral model of sharing and talking about writing amongst a circle of peers. While it opens up exciting new possibilities for how students can engage with each others’ work, it also raises questions as to how the traditional functions of peer review—giving and receiving support from a community of peers, experiencing writings as communication, and promoting discovery through discourse—might translate into a digital format.

It is important to stop here and clarify what I mean by “online peer review.” In Virtual Peer Review, Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch defines it as “the activity of using computer technology to exchange and respond to writing for the purpose of improving writing” (10). There are two primary modes of online response: synchronous (real time) and asynchronous (delayed time). Synchronous review is essentially a webchat. Students read each others’ papers privately, and then pull up a text box where they stream their comments via a live feed. While the synchronous mode supports the interactive, back-and-forth negotiations typical to oral review, it also makes for a rather chaotic commenting environment, especially when multiple peers are commenting at once (Lui and Sadler 2003, Liang 2010). Asynchronous reviews in which students access and insert comments into their peers’ documents on their own time are far more common. Consequently, when I henceforth refer to “online peer review” I mean asynchronous online review.

Asynchronous evaluations are not simply pen-and-paper reviews that have moved online. Two important factors distinguish them. First, in contrast to their paper counterparts, virtual comments are not limited by spatial constraints. Depending on the parameters of the review system, peers can conceivably insert an infinite number of comments, each one being as long as they like. The effects of this spatial freedom cannot be understated. While the limitations of a
page encourage brevity, online commenting encourages elaboration. Responses have the potential to be more than brief scribbles but instead short compositions. Indeed, in online review, Bruffee’s “conversation of mankind” never has to leave the page. The externalized social discussion and response remain in the domain of text and therefore benefit from all the unique features of the written word outlined by Walter Ong in *Orality and Literacy*—permanence, visual presence, complex syntactic structure, and a greater capacity for deductive reasoning.

The second distinction between online and pen-and-paper review is that comments need not remain in the margins but can be inserted inside the essay itself, transforming the writer’s uninterrupted train of thought into a dialogue. Because the reviewer’s comments are nestled within the text, one could argue that there exists a greater degree of immediacy between the reviewer’s feedback and the author’s writing than in oral response. Peter Elbow’s “movies of your mind,” the thoughts running through the readers’ heads as they process the text, appear directly following the words that inspired them. Essentially, reviewers leave a record of their experience of reading, and with infinite space and access to the author’s writing, this record can be as detailed and developed as they like it to be. In this way, the role of “author” expands to include the reviewer, who can use the writer’s own medium to thoroughly engage with his or her ideas.

But do students see themselves as “authors” in online review? Or more fundamentally, do they even see themselves as writers? There are obvious differences between composing essays and composing comments; however, the basic guidelines still apply—articulating and developing a main idea, providing details, considering audience, and even communicating a sense of voice. The extent to which reviewers recognize themselves as writers working in a rhetorical situation will determine whether or not the theory of peer review translates into practice in an online
environment. The immediate purpose of peer review is to offer writers ideas on how to improve their text from the perspective of an actual audience of fellow writers; however, the more fundamental purpose lies in its tradition as a practice that emphasizes writing as crucially intertwined in community and social discourse. If online peer review is still to confront students with the reality that writing is communication, that it can “do something” to readers—provoke reactions or start a conversation—then student reviewers need to be aware of themselves as writers motivated by a rhetorical purpose.

This awareness is particularly important if the only peer response a writer sees is in text. One of the benefits of online review is that it can more easily be made anonymous. Many studies have noted that a consistent problem with classroom peer review is that bias resulting from friendship, social hierarchy, or cultural differences interferes with the quality of student feedback (Dipardo and Freedman 1988, Spear 1989, Nelson and Carson 1995, Zhao 1998, Topping 1998, Nilson 2003, Beach and Friedrich, 2006, Anderson 2010). Anonymous review is often offered as the solution to this problem. Indeed, research shows that peers are more likely to provide on-task, revision-oriented feedback in anonymous written conditions as opposed to identifiable written conditions (Bostock 2000, Liu et al. 2001, Lu and Bol 2007). If research continues to show significant advantages to online anonymous peer review, it may become more frequent in colleges and universities. However, especially in the context of the foundations established by Elbow and Bruffee, there are serious disadvantages as well, especially for student writers. In anonymous review, text response bears the full burden of articulating reader impressions and advice, embodying audience, and reinforcing writing as a fundamentally social activity. Reviewers’ words will stand in isolation from the wealth of non-verbal cues that enliven face-to-face communication. This raises the question of whether or not a purely textual writing response
can offer the same support, reader reactions, and conversation so valuable to reinforcing audience in oral peer interaction.

While these concerns are more important in anonymous reviews, they still have relevance in oral/online hybrids. One of the greatest advantages of online review is that it provides an easily stored and accessible record that can be visited multiple times. Students have ample opportunity to re-read, reflect, and develop revision strategies based on the written trail of their reviewer’s reading experience. But depending on the extent to which reviewers recognize that they are also writers, their partners may see very little evidence of this experience on the page. In online peer review, the fundamental question becomes—what do the comments say? Based on the written words, what can students understand, interpret, or intuit of the reader’s relationship with their writing? Do they help position the author’s text as part of a larger social conversation? To what extent do they draw the author out of isolation and reinforce writing as the desire to speak from and across communities? Or more fundamentally, do the comments reflect the engagement and support of a live reader—a human being?

“Voice” in Positive Feedback

As a purely written medium, online review lacks the immediacy and rich expressiveness of face-to-face interaction. However, I argue that positive feedback plays an absolutely vital role in compensating for this lack of live social connection, enlivening the text of online peer response with the social functions of writing. Dynamics of rhetoric, authorship, and community all intersect in the complex motivations that drive how praise is used in online review. As my next sections will demonstrate, positive language in peer review is closely tied to considerations of ethos and delivery and thus is central to how students understand themselves as authors of
written comments. In striving to present themselves as collaborators rather than judges, students make an effort to include a “personal touch” in their commenting style and thus convey to the essay author a sense of individual “voice.” As the heart of “voice” in online review, expressions of positive response are how student writers can look through the reviewer’s text to see the support of an active reader and a fellow writer.

As I mentioned in the introduction, positive feedback in peer review is more than simple praise. It encompasses any expression of excitement, engagement, or support for the author’s writing. In Chapters six and seven of this study, I present the spectrum of positive response as it appears in 117 online peer reviews by forty composition students using five over-arching rhetorical categories: praise evaluation, reader response, punctuation, mitigation and invention. Examples of data in each category demonstrate how positive feedback can translate the theoretical purposes of peer review into an online environment. With these five types of positive response, online review can accomplish all of the goals intended for oral review—offer the support of fellow writers, share reader reactions, start a conversation, and ultimately give the essay authors a sense of how an audience processes their writing.

However, some of the comments in the data do none of these things. Many of them are vague, predictable, and ill-considered, confirming that student reviewers are often completely unaware of themselves as writers with a rhetorical purpose. Thus, the examples of positive feedback presented in Chapters six and seven represent both the potential and the problems with students’ written responses online. A close study of the data will consider their value based on what the comments as content and as rhetoric communicate to the essay authors.

Before taking a close look at what online positive feedback can accomplish, I must explore why students give positive feedback and how these motivations guide students’ approach
to writing comments. In the next chapter, I give an overview of the reasons why praise emerges as such a distinctive feature of student commenting. As an important preface to this discussion, I begin with a brief review of the literature on the efficacy of praise as a form of writing response for teachers and then move on to argue why this issue must be approached differently in the context of peer review. I end by offering a spectrum of possible reasons why students give praise, using nine excerpts from student reflections on peer review as a basis. These excerpts were written by the same group of students who produced the data that will be analyzed in Chapters six and seven. By leading into a close study of positive comments with a consideration of its motivations, I mean to establish how peer reviewers write their comments from a particular social and rhetorical context.
CHAPTER 3

POSITIVE FEEDBACK: MOTIVATIONS

Praise: Invaluable or Invalid?

In my introduction to this study, I noted that when teachers write about praise in peer review, they often characterize it as an undesirable form of feedback, one that results primarily from students’ fear of offending classmates with criticism (Spear 1989, Geissler 1990, Williams 1992, Nelson and Carson 1995, Zhao 1998, MacLeod 1999, Nilson 2003, Clark 2003, Anderson 2010). Beneath this disapproval of student praise lies the larger question of its efficacy. While studies of teacher feedback often urge instructors to include more positive remarks in their comments, there are doubts of the value of praise in writing response. In scholarly discussions of feedback, estimations of praise tend to polarize along two lines; either praise motivates students to commit to their writing, or it engenders complacency.

The latter argument rests upon the belief that praise communicates to students that they do not need to revise. There is certainly research to back up this claim. Quantitative studies seeking to understand the causal relationship between feedback and revision generally find that praise comments yield few to no changes to the text, at least not changes that can be directly attributed to specific instances of praise (Pintrich 2002, Nelson et. al. 2010, Cho and Cho 2011). The same studies find that directive comments articulating solutions to an identified problem are the most likely to result in measurable revisions. Consequently, several scholars suggest that in
contrast to direct suggestions or criticisms, praise offers no learning-related information and therefore offers ineffective feedback for a task as cognitively demanding as writing (Kluger and DeNisi 1996, Ferris 1997, Hattie and Timperley 2007).

However, teachers who write about the motivational value of praise argue that its effects are more deeply rooted than what can be measured from one draft to the next. Feedback identifying what students have done well can help students develop a mental category of good and bad writing strategies as well as engage them with their writing, not only in the present but also in the future (Gee 1972, Brophy 1981, Daiker 1989, Lipp 1995, Ferris and Hedgcock 1998, Goldstein 2004). Research on students’ self-efficacy beliefs about writing suggests that a positive correlation exists between reinforcement from teachers and successful writing performance (Beach 1989, Bandura 1997, Bruning and Horn 2000, Pajares 2003).

Thus, in his 1993 article “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking,” Peter Elbow writes that one of the fundamental measures of good composition instructors is that they actually like student writing and are not reticent to show it. He proposes that the so-called “common sense” causal order of improving writing and then liking it is actually backwards: “Only if we like something will we get involved enough to work and struggle with it. Only if we like what we write will we write again and again by choice— which is the only way we get better” (200). Essentially, if students do not have a reason to like their own writing, then why should they want to improve it? In answer to this question, Elbow argues that students need at least a few appreciative readers, both teachers and peers, to motivate them to spend more time drafting and revising.
Why do Students Give Praise?

The question of whether or not praise is a worthwhile form of feedback largely focuses on teachers as the givers and students as the receivers of praise. The same question, when approached from the perspective of students as commenters, is a very different discussion. For a number of reasons that are obvious but often taken for granted, the rhetorical context of peer review is quite distinct from that of teachers. First, students are novices, both as writers and responders to writing. They are much less practiced at giving feedback than teachers and many of them are unwilling participants, completing peer reviews only because they are part of course requirements. Most important, the power dynamics are entirely different, not only because students write comments as peers but because students write comments reciprocally. Teachers respond to writing from a position of security, a security that comes from being an authority figure as well as being on the giving end of the commenting situation. In contrast, peer review asks students to be both the givers and receivers of feedback. They respond to writing while also allowing their own writing to become vulnerable to others.

_Vulnerable_ is certainly the operative word here. Based on studies of teacher feedback, students have good cause to worry that their writing might be subjected to “violence” by a red pen. Teachers are often known to be insensitive or careless in their delivery of criticisms, questions, and suggestions (Daiker 1989, Connors and Lunsford 1993, Zhao 1995, Straub 1997). This insensitivity is a part of the privilege of a one-sided commenting situation. Two-sided feedback, on the other hand, encourages empathy and identification. Consequently, students approach peer review with a “golden rule” mentality, mindful of providing the types of comments they would like to receive (Spear 1989, Patchan et al. 2009).
Given the dynamics of students’ reviewing condition, it is unsurprising that praise is a distinctive feature of their feedback style. As I noted in my introduction, comparative studies of student and teacher comments find that students give at least twice as many praise comments as teachers (Beason 1993, Cho et. al. 2006, Patchan et. al 2009). Even in anonymous online peer review, students provide more positive remarks than do their instructors, suggesting that the instinct to give praise is more deeply rooted than the desire to maintain social solidarity. So while teachers and scholars may be divided on the efficacy of praise, students seem to have arrived at a consensus. That praise features so significantly in student commentary says something about its value to them as receivers of feedback. But the reality is that regardless of whether or not praise should be included in writing response, the vast majority of students will include praise in their comments to each other. So in approaching the issue from the perspective of students as commenters, the question becomes not whether praise is worthwhile feedback, but why students think it is worthwhile feedback.

Unfortunately, despite the fact that scholarly work on peer review frequently mentions the prevalence of student praise, there are no extended reflections on its motivations. Some cite the cause as lack of instruction in how to conduct peer review (Geissler 1990, Clark 2003). Many attribute it to students’ fear of offending their classmates (Nelson and Carson 1998, MacLeod 1999, Nilson 2003, Anderson 2010). Others note the function of praise in helping to maintain group solidarity (Spear 1988, Beason 1993). However, these discussions tend to be short and one-dimensional, focusing on one or two causal factors rather than stepping back to consider a spectrum of possibilities. This kind of narrow focus encourages a flat, rather than well-rounded, understanding of student praise. As I argued in my introduction, the discussion of how to teach students to give critical feedback is fundamentally divorced from a consideration of why students
give praise. One of the purposes of this study is to demonstrate why these two conversations need to be united. Ultimately, any endeavor to instruct students on giving substantial critical feedback must derive from a full understanding of why students give praise. While no exploration of these reasons can hope to be comprehensive, any attempt that seeks to be representative as well as reliable needs to give a voice to a range of students. Consequently, I will approach the discussion of motivation by using a sample of students’ written reflections on peer review.

**Positive Feedback in Peer Review Exhibits**

On the first page of my introduction, I included a small group of reflections excerpted from a pool of exhibits written by each of the forty students who produced the data for the present study. These excerpts were taken from a project students completed as a final exam for the course, an electronic portfolio demonstrating their growth as writers over the course of the semester. The portfolio included a biography, a reflective essay, two essays completed for the class, a revision exhibit, and a peer review exhibit. The peer review exhibit asked students to a) describe their philosophy of peer review; and b) demonstrate that philosophy in action with an example of a full review completed for a classmate. In these exhibits, many of my students not only described their method of review but also reflected generally on their experience with peer review. Consequently, they provide a rich mosaic of perspectives through which to explore the possible reasons why praise features so frequently in student feedback.

Below, I discuss nine possible motivations for student praise, each one based upon an excerpt taken from a student’s peer-review philosophy. Many of these motivations are rhetorical. They reflect a degree of communicative intent, a conscious decision on the part of the reviewers
to achieve a particular effect on their audience. However, not all motivations derive from consideration of the essay writers. Some of them are instinctual or a product of other situational factors. To distinguish between motivations that are driven by rhetorical intent and those that are not, I adapt two terms used by Linda Flower in her article “Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing.” Flower describes “writer-based prose” as the kind of writing that one essentially addresses to oneself. It fundamentally lacks any real consideration of an audience beyond the writer. In contrast, “reader-based prose” reflects a convergence between the writer’s sense of purpose and the desire to effectively communicate that purpose to a particular audience. Thus, reader-based prose is consciously public and rhetorical.

Similarly, I employ the terms “writer-focused” and “reviewer-focused” as a means for discussing the degree to which motivations for praise are more about the reviewer than the essay writer. “Reviewer-focused” motivations are those that are essentially self-serving or a reflection of a student’s lack of experience with providing feedback. “Writer-focused” motivations are those that reflect a desire to shape content to suit the needs of the audience—the essay writers—as the receivers of feedback. In the excerpts below, the students who articulate “writer-based” motivations establish something akin to an “ethos” as reviewers, suggesting how they would like to present themselves through their written comments. In choosing which excerpts to include for this study, I found that the places where students seemed most conscious of themselves as “authors” of comments—writers addressing a particular audience with a particular purpose—were the places that outlined their rationale or method for giving positive feedback. Considerations of praise emerged as the locus for navigating the rhetorical situation of peer review—the reciprocal giving and receiving of feedback as well as the equal power dynamics.
Before I begin, it is important to note that while these students completed peer reviews in a face-to-face, oral/online hybrid situation, these peer review exhibits served as a preface to a written review that was submitted subsequently online. Consequently, these excerpts focus exclusively on the written component and thus provide insight into how student praise functions in text. As the authors of many of the comments included in Chapters six and seven, these student voices position their written expressions of praise in a rhetorical context.

*Excerpt One: Praise as a Default*

_The first time I peer reviewed I was really unsure about what I should criticize in my peer’s paper. My first instinct was to look for issues with grammar because that is what I noticed first, and I mostly commented on things that I thought were done well._

For this student, praise functions as a default comment to fall back on when at a loss for other responses. It is a “reviewer-focused” motivation, emerging from her inexperience giving feedback and probably her own revision habits as a writer. It is significant that she pairs giving praise with a focus on grammar. She writes that correcting grammar was an “instinct” because “that is what I noticed first.” In Nancy Sommers study “The Revision Strategies of Student Writers and Experienced Adults,” she found that student writers very rarely revised beyond the scope of a few sentences and were instead fixated on correcting grammar and phrasing. When she interviewed her student subjects, Sommers found that while they could sense that there were larger issues in their papers that merited more thorough revisions, they had difficulty articulating these problems or imagining solutions to them. It is no surprise then that the struggles students often face in revision may reappear in peer review tasks. In this case, excessive praise in peer review emerges as a “filler” comment in place of more substantial feedback that the reviewer would like to give but does not know how to deliver.
Excerpt Two: Saving Face

At first, I never enjoyed peer reviewing because I was not a good writer. Honestly, I was afraid what people might think of what I comment on their papers so I always said nice things about their papers even though I did not mean it.

This student very candidly articulates one of several effects of “peer review anxiety,” or the fear of offending classmates when giving feedback. Just like the student in excerpt one, for this reviewer praise becomes a “filler” comment, not only because of lack of confidence but also because the student worries about his classmates’ perception of his feedback. He writes that he was “afraid of what people might think of what I comment on their papers,” as if his comments were an extension of himself. This preoccupation with maintaining a likable image among peers is very much a “reviewer-focused” motivation, one that is a commonly identified culprit for prevalence of praise in peer review (Geissler 1990, Williams 1992, Nelson and Carson 1998, MacLeod 1999, Nilson 2003, Anderson 2010). By giving compliments solely in the service of maintaining a good relationship with peers, this student runs the risk of sounding insincere. Studies indicate that students often perceive praise that is unspecific or too frequent as meaningless (Brophy 1981, Land and Evans 1987, Straub 1997). As another student wrote in her peer review exhibit, “I hate fabricated superficial compliments. I would rather have my peer reviewer just give it to me straight and tell me what is wrong with my paper.”

Excerpt Three: Praise as Mitigation

I admit, I struggle with peer review. I hate to think that I could either (1) hurt somebody’s feelings with my criticisms (because what if I just bashed their favorite part of their essay!?) or (2) tell them to change the wrong thing and therefore hurt their grade without meaning to. There’s just something about hurting someone’s work that really bothers me.
This student is also the author of the excerpted “criticism sandwich” included at the beginning of the study:

*When leaving comments on people’s essays, I try to make sure I fix the issue in a nice way by making a “criticism sandwich.” By that I mean, I try to acknowledge a point where the writer did well, then make a criticism, and finally point out another strong point in their essay.*

The first excerpt situates this strategy within the perceived “violence” of giving feedback. She describes peer reviewing as akin to an “attack,” in which the victims could be the writer’s feelings or the writer’s grade. Consequently, she uses praise to soften the edge of potentially demoralizing criticisms. In studies of writing feedback, the term “mitigation” describes the pairing of praise with criticism in written comments. Unsurprisingly, this strategy is much more frequent among students than teachers (Patchan et al. 2009). In the present study, I devote all of Chapter seven to charting patterns in students’ mitigation comments, distinguishing between those that demonstrate a heightened awareness of rhetorical audience and those that do not. While all mitigation comments are in a sense “writer-focused,” some of them may also be motivated by the reviewer’s own uneasiness with providing feedback. In the excerpt above, the student writes that “there is something about hurting someone’s work that really bothers me.” Given her discomfort with the potential to “hurt” someone when commenting, praise mitigation may be an instinct on her part, an attempt to reinforce to both the writer and to herself that she is not “attacking,” but rather offering support.

However, frequent use of mitigation may result in praise that seems more formulaic than sincere. The “sandwich” strategy in particular is an easily identifiable template. It also approaches praise and criticism as separate “pieces.” The metaphor itself indicates that the student imagines a fundamental divide between praise and critical advice; they are made of two different substances. Consequently, the praise in such mitigation comments is likely to be
fundamentally unrelated to the criticism and perhaps even phatic, with no real communicative intent.

**Excerpt Four: The “Golden Rule” Mentality**

> Peer review is a very hard thing for me to do. The whole idea is to look at the paper and to see what doesn't fit. However, I don't like telling people that they're wrong in their papers, because I hate being told that I'm wrong. A lot of times that means I end up being way too nice. But when it's for the sake of a good grade, I'd rather someone just tell me. That's what I've been trying to tell myself this whole semester.

Because peer review is reciprocal, it inevitably encourages empathy and identification with the writer. However, while this may seem counterintuitive, praise that results from empathy is not necessarily “writer-focused.” As with the student in this excerpt, it can be motivated by the reviewer’s own fears as the receiver of feedback. The student above struggles to give the feedback that she knows the reviewer needs because she herself dislikes such feedback. Like the student in excerpt three, she perceives a fundamental divide between “praise” and “criticism.” She can either tell the writers they are wrong or be “way too nice.” This perception leaves her in a dilemma of choosing one or the other. For a reviewer who only sees one of two options in giving feedback, the compelling force of empathy may result in more praise over revision-oriented advice. However, for reviewers who think of positive and critical feedback as complementary, empathy may motivate the integration of praise into other kinds of feedback as a rhetorical device for establishing rapport with the writer.
Except Five: Positive Packaging

Peer review has always been really nerve racking to me. I want so badly to provide insightful and useful criticisms because for me, those are the most useful tools in editing my essay. Since it helps so much for me to get outside criticism and encouragement for some parts of my paper, I want to provide just as useful of a peer review as I would want. That being said, I usually tend to be completely honest when I think something needs alterations or further developments. However, I try to package criticisms more like suggestions, usually with a little encouragement, because when it seems more like help than an attack, I usually listen to it more.

For this student, empathy translates into striving to give both “insightful and useful criticism” as well as encouragement. Unlike the student who described the “criticism sandwich” in excerpt three, he does not view positive and negative feedback as rigidly separate pieces but instead as potentially fluid: encouragement can be incorporated into advice. This writer-based strategy of “packaging” comments so that they seem supportive does not polarize comments into “praise” and “criticism” but recognizes feedback as a valence that can be revision-oriented as well as positive.

In this case, praise is entirely “writer-focused” in that the reviewer uses it with specific rhetorical intent. It is a product of the student’s sensitivity to the rhetorical stakes involved in giving advice—that depending on the delivery, a peer may choose to disregard it. This awareness comes from his experience as a receiver of feedback; “when [a comment] seems more like help than an attack, I usually listen to it more.” He uses praise as a way to shape the author’s perception of him as a reviewer, not because he wants to be liked but because he believes that if he projects himself as a collaborator, his suggestions are more likely to be used in revision.
**Excerpt Six: Positive Impression**

When I receive a paper that has only negative comments it makes me want to throw the essay away and just start over. Conversely, when a reader only puts positive remarks I don’t gain anything from the peer review. I learned from receiving my first couple peer reviews that the best reviewer is one that has a good mix of what the author did right and wrong, and thoroughly explains the comments made in the paper.

Like for the student in excerpt five, empathy and experience motivate this student to “mix” positive feedback with critical advice. However, rather than micro-manage at the level of individual comments, she seems to think of reviews holistically. Her goal is to give writers an overall impression that clearly communicates what they need to work towards while also building the motivation to do so. In reflecting on her experience as a receiver of feedback, she describes not the effect of single comments but the lingering impact of the whole review. This description emphasizes an important reality about feedback— that comments are not processed in isolation but read from one to the next as a narrative of the entire reading experience. For a student who thinks of a review as a whole “package,” positive comments can help give her classmates an overall impression of her support and encouragement. However, in this “package,” positive feedback is still the polar opposite of critical feedback. According to the student, an ideal review includes a “mix of what the author did right and wrong,” as if the review must be composed of two discrete ingredients.
Excerpt Seven: Praise as “Personal Touch”

The peer review process doesn’t seem to come very easily for me. I am always worried about coming off too critical, and my review would insult the person. However, after taking this course I have learned how to provide better constructive criticism. Another tip I have learned is that it is important to add a voice and a personal touch to your papers. I have also incorporated this idea into my peer reviews.

Like students in previous excerpts, this student fears “coming off [as] too critical” to her classmates. She overcomes her fear by learning to provide “constructive criticism” and by adding “a voice and personal touch” to her peer reviews. She does not specifically articulate what she means by a “personal touch,” but in the example she uses to demonstrate her peer review philosophy, she includes several comments that express her personal reactions as a reader (e.g., “This got my attention!” “OMG!” “I’m so jealous! I want to go here!”). Along with her suggestions for improvement (most of which were mitigated with praise), the student also writes comments that communicate her personal experience of reading.

In Chapter six, I discuss such “reader response” comments as a form of text-based facial expressions—the closest equivalent to nonverbal cues such as smiling or gasping with surprise. While these comments would seem to be entirely “reviewer-focused” in that they directly reflect the reviewer’s experience, as the student in this excerpt indicates, they can also be a way to “package” the whole review with a sense of personality. In reading the comments, the writer can see a person and a classmate, not just an editor. It is interesting that she derives her “personal touch” strategy from her experience as an essay writer. For her, composing comments is like composing an essay in that it is not just a written practice but a rhetorical one. She consciously shapes the content of words in order to achieve an effect on her audience.
Excerpt Eight: Confidence Booster

As a peer reviewer, I like to think of myself as a bit of a shape shifter because every writer needs different types of criticism in order to help them improve their papers. If I am peer reviewing for a future Pulitzer prize winner, then obviously I am going to be much more critical than I would be for a writer who lacks confidence. Every writer needs to hear and receive different criticism in order to fulfill their paper’s potential.

For stronger writers, I will not be lavishing them with compliments by any means. These people are already well aware that they are good writers, so what they really need is a healthy dose of reality. I do not mean to come across as a total hardliner here, though. I will give them credit where credit is due. With weaker writers, I do my best to follow my 1 for 1 system: 1 criticism for every 1 compliment. By doing this, their confidence is not damaged and the writer hopefully will not shy away from taking risks in their writing.

This student bases her praise strategy entirely upon the idea that writers process positive comments differently depending upon their skill level. Strong writers will read them as a confirmation of something they already know. Poor writers will read them as a reason to feel more confident in their choices. Describing herself as a “shape-shifter,” she adjusts her persona as a reviewer based on her assessment of what she believes the writer needs to hear. For a strong writer, she is tough (but still gives “credit where credit is due”). For a poor writer, she presents herself as a coach, balancing direction with encouragement. Praise is her pivot point for transitioning between these different roles as a reviewer. For her, as for many of the students in previous excerpts, positive feedback is central to how she constructs her “ethos” as a peer reviewer. Also like so many other students in previous excerpts, her “1 for 1 system” reduces feedback to two discrete poles: praise and criticism.
Excerpt Nine: Praise as Polite

It is always hard to be the peer editor, mostly because of what it entails. First of all, I am their peer, not their superior. I have no credentials. My opinion has no authority behind it. Also, I am the second party, the outsider looking in. It is their work and they know what they want or are trying to say. So I try to approach their paper like an average reader, letting them know the things I liked and the things I wanted to hear more about.

This student positions praise within the social dynamics of the peer review situation. As a peer editor, he is both an equal and an outsider, and thus feels that he needs to compose comments in a manner that implicitly acknowledges these two realities. To distance himself from any pretensions of authority, he consciously presents himself to his review partners as “an average reader, letting them know the things I liked and the things I wanted to know more about.” It is interesting that neither components of this “writer-focused” strategy are framed negatively. He does not criticize, but “likes” and shows interest in knowing more. Rather than polarize feedback into “praise” and “criticism,” he imagines all feedback as essentially positive. Positioned in a context where he is both an equal and an outsider, positive delivery of revision-oriented comments seems to be a function of good decorum—a gesture of respect and goodwill for a colleague.

Concluding Remarks

In summary, “reviewer-based” praise often reflects students’ inexperience as writers, sensitivity to self-image, and anxiety over giving criticism. Especially for those who perceive feedback as either positive or negative, empathy may motivate more praise than criticism since the students themselves dislike being told they are wrong. “Writer-based” praise emerges out of a desire to seem supportive and collegial. Praise is often used as a preface to critical feedback in order to frame revision-oriented comments as a friendly offer of help, not an attack. Students
may give more praise to weak writers because they believe it is valuable for building confidence and encouraging risk-taking. For those who see the whole review as a “package,” they may include positive comments both to offset negative comments as well as give an overall impression of friendliness, personality, and encouragement. Regardless of whether their praise is “reviewer-based” or “writer-based,” students as a whole generally perceive a fundamental divide between positive and critical feedback.

**Positive Feedback Online**

In the context of online review, praise serves an important function as a “tone adjuster.” The rhetorical situation of peer review as a reciprocal exchange between equals motivates students to be sensitive to how they deliver their feedback, and in an online environment, students may be doubly sensitive without the help of nonverbal cues to convey affect and support. Consequently, as a purely written medium, online review may encourage the use of praise as a rhetorical device. In Chapter two, I argue that positive feedback serves as an important bridge between the oral tradition of peer review and online formats, enlivening a dead text with a sense of voice and community support. In the excerpts above, praise emerges as the locus for students’ “voice” in online review—a voice of respect, a voice of encouragement, a voice of a fellow writer. Their desire to communicate “voice” is crucially intertwined with their understanding of critical feedback. As another student framed the sentiment in his peer review exhibit, many students want to “positively critique” each other’s work, allowing the writer “to fix his or her mistakes without feeling ashamed or defeated.” However, for too many students, “positive critique” is an oxymoron. As demonstrated by several of the excerpts above, students
often perceive feedback as a dichotomy between praise and criticism. Written comments can either communicate either “you’re right” or “you’re wrong.”

While studies of teachers’ written feedback define criticism as a directly negative evaluation of writing (e.g., “these arguments are not convincing”), students seem to have a much more inclusive definition (Gee 1972, Brophy 1981, Zak 1990, Ferris 1997, Straub 1997, Hyland and Hyland 2001). Especially in text, any comment may be in danger of seeming like an “attack”—questions, suggestions, even grammar corrections. In the excerpts above, students respond to this sensitivity of textual tone in one of three ways. First, they simply avoid writing critical comments and say “nice” things instead. Second, they somehow pair critical remarks with positive ones, either by “sandwiching” them or incorporating them together into an encouraging suggestion. Third, students include stand-alone positive comments throughout the paper to counterbalance the potentially critical tenor of the review as a whole.

The data discussed in the following chapters are the textual products of all three of these strategies. Qualitatively, the data demonstrate that students’ positive response has the potential to bring the active support, reader reactions, and conversation of Elbow’s writing groups and Bruffee’s “Collaborative Learning” into a virtual environment. Quantitatively, the data show that this potential is far from being reached. Unfortunately, much of the data reflect that too many students understand positive and critical feedback as discrete responses to writing. This understanding combines with students’ general inability to consider themselves as writers in online review, yielding comments that are vague, incoherent, and ultimately contain little to no value for their intended audience.

In my second chapter, I wrote that in order for online peer review to translate the theoretical goals of enlivening audience and reinforcing writing as community and social
discourse, students must be conscious of themselves as writers working in a rhetorical situation. This chapter demonstrates that as peer reviewers, students are often acutely aware of themselves as producers of rhetoric, a rhetoric designed for audience like themselves—inexperienced academic writers. The following chapters show that this consciousness does not always translate into effective written feedback. However, a small but significant portion of data implies two things about online review. First, it inherently supports a variety of positive responses to writing by virtue of its text-based medium which makes it free of spatial constraints. Second, in order for online review to achieve its potential as a medium, it is vital that students learn to view positive and critical feedback not as fundamentally separate but as similar expressions of liking, supporting, and engaging with writing.
CHAPTER 4

POSITIVE FEEDBACK IN PEER REVIEW: METHOD

Overview

In the following four chapters, I present quantitative and qualitative positive-response data collected from 117 online peer reviews completed by forty freshman composition students at the University of Georgia. The present chapter reviews the classroom context, method of data collection, and categories of positive feedback used for the study. The fifth chapter includes a brief report on and discussion of the quantitative results. In the subsequent two chapters, I engage in a qualitative study of the data through a rhetorical analysis of five positive comment categories. Chapter six examines “stand alone” positive response (comments not used in combination with revision-oriented feedback). Chapter seven examines “mitigated” positive response (comments in conjunction with revision-oriented feedback).\(^5\)

The qualitative analysis chapters are propelled by the questions of interest explored in the previous two chapters:

- How might online comments translate the traditional goals of oral peer review into a virtual environment?

- What do these comments suggest about the relationship between the reasons why students give praise and their understanding of critical feedback?

\(^5\) Revision-oriented comments are those that explicitly or implicitly call for changes in the text. They are often questions, suggestions, and criticisms (Lui and Sadler 2003).
Participants and Classroom Context

The data used for this study was produced by my own students, twenty females and twenty males for a total of forty students. Each student was enrolled in one of two sections of English 1101, First-year Composition, at the University of Georgia. The course is designed to introduce students to the rigors of college writing. In addition to teaching advanced composition strategies, it also develops the foundational academic skills of critical thinking, analysis and research, and proper documentation. For each of the three assigned essays, students were required to complete an online peer review for at least two of their classmates. Unfortunately, because students can be lazy, not everyone submitted the required number of peer reviews. However, because students can also surprise you, some of them submitted more than the required number of peer reviews. Consequently, the data for this study comes from a total 117 peer review documents.

Students were prepped for peer review days by evaluating and analyzing sample student essays in class. In groups, students read and assigned each essay a number grade according to the department rubric, which includes guidelines under the general categories of unity, organization, presentation, coherence, and audience awareness. Following these exercises, I solicited a list of qualities that characterize the “ideal peer reviewer.” The aggregate of the two class lists is as follows:

The Ideal Peer Reviewer…

- Reads the paper
- Reserves judgment until the end
- Focuses on ideas
- Edits grammar (last)
- Is honest (but tactful)
- Reviews the paper with confidence

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6 For a copy of this rubric, please refer to appendix A.
The night before our first in-class peer review, I posted this list under the announcement board on our class homepage on <emma>, the English department’s course management system. I also asked students bring their laptop computers to class.

Peer Review on <emma>

All peer reviews in this study were submitted through <emma>, an electronic markup and management application designed in-house by the University of Georgia’s English department as a course-management system for composition instructors. The program is also used by several other post-secondary schools in the Southeast, including Georgia College and State University, Virginia Military Institute, and the University of Mississippi. On <emma>, students can access course assignments, department policies, and writing and research-support materials. Throughout the semester, students use <emma> to submit private journal entries, public forum posts, essay drafts from brainstorms to reflections, peer reviews, and exhibits for their final course portfolios. Each student submits at least four drafts on <emma> per essay—a pre-write, exploratory draft, peer review draft, and final draft. Out of these, the peer review draft is the only document that students are asked to make publicly available to the class.

To complete peer reviews, students use the same mark-up tools that teachers use to grade their papers. Once they are assigned review partners, students find each classmate’s essay draft under a “Projects” tab and re-save the document as their own (<emma> allows for commenters to assign the document to its original owner). Once on the editing page, students can highlight any portion of a writer’s essay (at the level of a word, sentence, paragraph, and beyond) and identify grammar mistakes via a set of mark-up tools or insert an individually composed comment into the text. Most of the students in the present study preferred to write individual
comments. There were no virtual restrictions to the number or length of comments. An example of a peer review on <em>Emma</em> is included below (Figure 1):

![Figure 1: Peer Review on <em>Emma</em>](image)

Before peer review days, I demonstrated to students in class how to re-save and edit their classmates’ essay drafts. Students were specifically asked not to focus on grammar errors but to address the most important categories on the department rubric—organization, unity, coherence, and audience awareness. On the day of the peer review, all students brought their laptops to class. I divided them into groups of three to review both of their partners’ work. Students silently commented on their partners’ essays for the first hour of class and ended the review with a fifteen-minute verbal debriefing. For the first review, I provided a guide sheet based on the department rubric. For the subsequent two peer reviews, I asked students to refer to their online
copy of the rubric for guidance. Peer review performance counted for a third of the students’ participation grade for the course.

Caveat: Oral/Online Hybrid

Because the data in this study was produced in an online/oral hybrid situation, students wrote comments knowing that they would have an opportunity to explain them further in person. Consequently, many students may have neglected to fully articulate their written comments. However, as I discuss in Chapters six and seven, such neglect decreases the value of online peer review for both the reviewer and the writer.

Categories of Positive Feedback

All positive comments in this study are sorted into one of two primary categories: praise evaluation or reader response. I also account for paralinguistic expressions of affect by the category positive punctuation. If positive comments were used in combination with a revision-oriented comment, I include it in a second category, mitigation. A small portion of mitigation comments are also included in a category I call invention. While I account quantitatively for invention comments as mitigation, I devote a separate qualitative section to them because they share features that distinguish them as a group from typical mitigation comments. A description and example of each category follows.  

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7 For a table of all positive comment categories, with examples, see Appendix B.
**Praise Evaluation**

Praise evaluations are direct statements of positive value (“good point,” “Great word choice!”). This definition derives from previous studies of written feedback, which generally define praise as a positive evaluation taking the form of a compliment. For the vast majority of studies, “praise” is the only type of positive comment accounted for (Connors and Lunsford 1993, Beason 1993, Cho et al. 2006, Nelson and Charney 2009, Patchan et al. 2009). However, this is likely because most studies focus on teacher feedback, and teachers do not typically write substantial amounts of positive commentary. Because praise evaluations represent a sizable portion of the data, I divide the category into four sub-categories: *affirmation* (statement of agreement—e.g., “good point”); *meets criteria* (indicates the writer has met goals set by the teacher); *general praise* (praise without explanation—e.g., “good thought”); and *specific praise* (praise with explanation—e.g., “I like how you show an example to connect real life situations”).

**Reader Response**

Reader response comments are personal reactions to writing (e.g., “You’ve got my attention!” “Damnnn… so expensive”). In her study of teachers’ end comments, Summer Smith defines reader response as “tools for expressing the reactions of an active reader . . . [the] representations of thoughts had about the paper while reading it” (257). Reader response, as a distinct category, is quite rare in studies of written comments. When they are accounted for in teacher feedback, they tend to be negative—e.g., “I don’t understand what’s going on in this paragraph” (Connors and Lunsford 1993, Beason 1993, Smith 1997). While studies of written

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8 Praise “describes the paper or a portion of the paper positively, including encouraging remarks” (Cho et. al. 178); “A complimentary comment identifying a positive feature in the paper” (Nelson and Schunn 387); “Good remarks on what constituted the strength” (Cho and McArthur 76).

9 Two prominent exceptions would be Zak (1990) and Beason (1993), who both distinguish between reader response and praise.
feedback frequently characterize reader response comments as those that emphasize the subjective *I* (“I like this part . . .” “I think this is . . .”), I consider these comments essentially evaluative, not responsive, because they assign a positive value to a part of the writing. In contrast, reader response comments point not to the paper but to the reviewer, emphasizing his or her personal reaction (“You’ve definitely got me intrigued here”).

**Positive Punctuation**

While no previous study of written feedback accounts for paralinguistic textual markers, the students in the present study used them so frequently that I would be remiss to exclude them. I define “positive punctuation” as pictorial expressions of affect, including exclamation marks and emoticons. Because they were so frequently used with reader response comments, I include my analysis of positive punctuation data in the same section as reader response.

**Mitigation**

Mitigation comments are combinations of praise evaluations and revision-oriented feedback. Praise mitigations are frequently included in studies of teacher feedback as a form of affective language (Connors and Lunsford 1993, Smith 1997, Straub 1997, Hyland and Hyland 2001, Patchan et. al. 2009). Students in the present study produced a large quantity of mitigation comments, necessitating finer distinctions among different types. Consequently, I divide mitigation into three sub-categories: *perfunctory, thoughtful,* and *engaged.* As I describe further in Chapter seven, I sorted mitigation comments into each category using a key of questions I developed based on patterns I saw in the data. Because the divisions between

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10 According to Patchan et. al (2009) and Hyland and Hyland (2001), other forms of affective language include hedges (“you might want to cut this”), downplay (“but I could be wrong”), and interrogative syntax (“could you explain just a little?”).
categories are more guidelines than hard boundaries, I will save an extended discussion of each sub-category until Chapter seven. For now, a table with brief definitions is below (table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mitigation Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Perfunctory</td>
<td>Vague, underdeveloped, and sometimes contradictory; most often mitigated with a general praise comment.</td>
<td>“I really like the opening sentence, but maybe try to spread your quotes more evenly throughout the essay.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
<td>Generally detailed and coherent; most often mitigated with a specific praise comment.</td>
<td>“I really like how you drew the reader in with the contrasting scenes and take an interesting approach to the intro. I think that it may be a little too long winded, though because it delays the main argument.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Detailed comments that often maintain a positive tone throughout; frequently uses praise as a launching pad for suggestion.</td>
<td>“I think that last sentence is a really great one and could even be used as a transitional sentence to talk about &quot;the purpose behind Miracle&quot; as you mentioned. Even some more brief insight on the group could be helpful.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Mitigation Categories and Definitions

Invention

Quantitatively, I account for invention comments in the engaged sub-category of mitigation. However, I discuss them in a separate section. Invention comments are a small but distinct body of mitigation data in which reviewers seem to traverse the reader/writer divide.
They generate specific ideas for the essay writer to consider by asking questions, offering additions, sharing personal stories, and kindly pointing out counter-arguments. Essentially, the reviewers engage the writers in a textual form of social conversation. This type of generative feedback is an incarnation of Kenneth Bruffee’s “Conversation of Mankind” as it may potentially exist online. Invention comments in this study imply a future for peer review in which students can engage intellectually with each other’s writing through writing of their own.

**Coding Comments by Units**

Because online commenting environments do not have spatial restrictions, a single comment can be several sentences long and contain different types of feedback. Consequently, studies of online writing response often code data by meaningful units (Lui and Sadler 2003, Cho et. al. 2006, Patchan et. al. 2009). In the present study, I also code comments by units, with one unit generally being the equivalent of an independent sentence clause (though students often write comments in fragments). I count each exclamation mark and each emoticon as a single unit. Included below is a table of exemplary comments written by the students in the present study. In each comment, units are bracketed and marked by number. Positive comment units are colored in blue. Their category is specified to the right (table 2):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Positive Feedback Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[ This is a good point ]¹ but I think it sounds a little bit awkward at the end, ² do you think you could stick it in another part of the paragraph ³ (in an area where you are talking about how libraries are quiet.) ⁴ [:] ⁵</td>
<td>Unit 1: Praise Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit 5: Positive Punctuation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ Your descriptions really make me feel for you, ¹ do you think that maybe you could add a little of how you had no idea what was going on at times- ² just to be able to add to the sense of foreignness? ³ B/c I think you kind-of poke at it when you explain to us what different drills are-]⁴ [ so I guess what I mean is try to expand on that. ]⁵</td>
<td>Unit 1: Reader Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ Overall I think your essay was very interesting ¹ because I learned many new things reading it.]² I have had many friends with diabetes and never knew the struggle that they have to go through until now. ³ I thought that it was just about taking your insulin shots and keeping record of your blood sugar level, but it’s so much more than that. ]⁴ ⁵</td>
<td>Unit 1: Praise Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Units 2-4: Reader Response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[ So I like the idea of including the camp in the paper ¹ but its such a minimal part that idk how I feel about it. ² I think you should include it ]³ but I feel like it should be longer or shoved into an earlier paragraph ⁴ but it definitely ties back to your idea and can be used as a good supporting point. ]⁵</td>
<td>Unit 1: Praise Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit 3: Praise Evaluation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unit 5: Praise Evaluation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: Comment Units Coding Scheme**

**Summary**

The following chapters analyze positive comment data collected from 117 peer review documents written by forty first-year composition students in an online course management system. Using the comment coding scheme demonstrated above, I sort each unit into one of three positive categories—*praise evaluation, reader response, and positive punctuation*. Positive units that appear in conjunction with revision-oriented feedback are also included in a second category.
for mitigation. Due to their quantitative size, both the praise evaluation and mitigation categories are divided into sub-categories. As representative of students’ rhetorical work in an online commenting system, the data provide an excellent entry point for exploring the question I raised in Chapter two—can a theory of peer review rooted in an oral tradition translate into a virtual environment?
CHAPTER 5

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Imagine you are blind and deaf. You want to speak better. But you are in perpetual darkness and silence. You send out words as best you can but no words come back . . . You know you did something wrong. What you aren’t getting is the main thing that helps people speak better: direct feedback to your speech—a directly perceived sense of how different people react to the sounds you make.

This is an image of what it is like when you try to improve your writing all by yourself.

Peter Elbow, Writing Without Teachers

In Chapter two, I discussed how peer review in the composition classroom evolved from the desire to pull students out of communicative isolation and into conversation with one another. By posing as an audience for each others’ work, students are confronted with the sometimes infuriating, sometimes gratifying, but always deeply felt reality that writing is a social practice. Kenneth Bruffee describes discourse between peers as a meeting place between various knowledge communities with each student representing a nexus of various cultures, experiences, and belief systems—vegetarianism, computer science, football, Southeast Asia, the American South, cancer survivors, diabetics, Catholicism, or secularism. In the traditional oral model of writing groups, students can watch their writing leap from the page and take off in other people’s minds, bringing these communities to life in a frenzy of activity between peers. Beyond the immediate value of receiving specific direction and advice about their writing, peer groups offer students the more resonant, enduring experience of seeing how their words can spark a
conversation, inspire reflection, and contribute to another person’s growing understanding of what is true—what is real.

In the following chapters, it is my intent to show how positive feedback is vital to helping online peer review continue this tradition of animating writing as a vitally social practice. It is not my intent to suggest that online review can improve or replace the oral model of writing response, only that it has the potential to become a unique counterpart, in some ways inferior and in some ways better. Qualitatively, the data imply a future in which students enliven a flat, one-dimensional piece of writing with the textual record of its encounter with a reader—a peer, a fellow student writer, and an individual consciousness representing various knowledge communities. However, the quantitative story of the data reveals that online review too frequently leaves students in communicative darkness, isolated from what Peter Elbow argues all writers so desperately need in order to improve—“a directly perceived sense of how different people react to the sounds [they] make” (Writing Without Teachers 76).

I argue that there are two primary reasons why this is currently the case. First, as the peer review exhibits discussed in Chapter three demonstrate, most students perceive feedback as existing at one of two poles—as either praise or criticism. If a comment is not explicitly positive, then it is potentially negative. Especially in written review, where students provide feedback naked of nonverbal cues, all revision-oriented comments—questions, suggestions, corrections—are in danger of being perceived as an “attack.” This understanding intersects with a more fundamental, unquestioned belief that online peer review is a written but not a writing practice. Students represent rich, complex thought processes as fragmented, inarticulate text because they do not think of online review as much more than a virtual version of pen and paper commenting—a place for brief jotting down of half-formed responses rather than a forum for
deliberate, well-considered reflection and composition. Consequently, what could be a detailed and lively record of a student’s encounter with a classmate’s writing is only a shadow of a fuller, richer intellectual experience. I believe that neither of these problems is unsolvable, and in my conclusion I outline several possibilities for how composition instructors can help online peer review achieve its potential. Before teachers can engage in such a conversation however, we need to see it as it exists in the present in order to imagine how we might propel it into the future.

Quantitative Data

Based on the unit system described in the last chapter, I counted at a total of 4,384 comment units in 117 peer review documents. Of those units, 29% were positive feedback, including the categories of praise evaluation, reader response, and positive punctuation. A chart of positive units out of the total is included below (Figure 2):

Figure 2: Percentage of Positive Feedback Units out of Total

Out of 117 peer review documents, only 11 did not include a single expression of positive response. By far, the most frequent positive comments were praise evaluations, constituting 69%
of the total. For the remainder, 20% were reader response and 11% were positive punctuation. A chart of these percent values is below (Figure 3):

![Chart showing percentages of positive feedback units]

**Figure 3: Percentage of Total Positive Feedback Units**

These data include both stand-alone and mitigated praise comments. The majority of all positive feedback units (77%) were not combined with revision-oriented feedback.

In Chapter four, I outlined four sub-categories for praise evaluation: **affirmation** (statement of agreement), **meets criteria** (indicates the writer has met goals set by the teacher), **general praise** (praise without explanation—e.g., “good”), and **specific praise** (praise with explanation—e.g., “This is a cool connection: we could have made more discoveries if it weren't for copyright”). A chart outlining percentage values of each praise evaluation category is below (Figure 4):
At 55%, over half of all praise evaluation comments were coded in the general category: 10% were coded as affirmations, 5% as meets criteria and 30% as specific. As I discuss in the next chapter, the specific comments evaluate an element of writing positively through explanation, helping students understand what parts work well and why. Affirmations and general comments, however, are usually short, two to three-word inserts that do no more than identify something as “good.” Where specific comments offer insight into how the reviewer processed the writing, affirmations and general comments leave only a vague trace of this process on the page. Unfortunately, as the chart above shows, together these two categories make up 65% of all praise evaluation.

Out of all positive feedback units, 33% were used in mitigation with revision-oriented comments. 82% of all mitigations were with praise evaluations, 8% were with reader responses, and 10% were with emoticons. In the previous chapter, I described three subcategories of mitigation. Perfunctory mitigations are vague, imprecise, and sometimes contradictory, thoughtful mitigations are more detailed and coherent, and engaged comments generate ideas for
the writer and often maintain a positive tone through the entire comment. A chart outlining percent values of each category is below (Figure 5):

![Figure 5: Percentage of Total Mitigation](chart)

The majority of mitigations are comprised of two distinct parts—the praise comment and the critical comment. They are textual embodiments of many students’ perception that positive and critical feedback are fundamentally separate responses to writing. In both the perfunctory and thoughtful categories, praise is “sandwiched” next to revision-oriented feedback as a preface, an afterthought, or both. Often, there is no topical connection between them, making for an incoherent transition from one to the next. Only comments in the third category, the engaged comments, incorporate positive and critical response together as a unified whole. Many of them use praise as a “launching pad” for giving advice. However, at 16%, these comments were quantitatively in the minority.

**Concluding Remarks**

As a whole, the quantitative data show that students’ rhetorical intent often does not translate into effective rhetorical delivery. The textual products of strategies described in the
third chapter—the “criticism sandwich,” or the “one-for-one system”—are frequently used with praise that is vague, imprecise, and incoherent, ultimately failing to give students the support they need—clear, descriptive feedback about their writing. The qualitative analysis of data that follows in the subsequent chapters reveals both the problems and the potential of online review—both the comments that leave writers in relative isolation from their readers, thus keeping them in Elbow’s “darkness and silence,” and the comments that enliven the page with reader engagement, illustrating the dynamic social functions of writing. Examples from the latter category also indicate how online review might transform from a written practice to a writing practice to the benefit of both the reviewer and the reviewed.

In Chapter six, I examine students’ stand-alone positive feedback, the comments that students use to “package” the whole review to give an overall impression of friendly support. Data from specific praise, reader response, and positive punctuation categories demonstrate how students can bring the immediacy and insight of a live writing group into a virtual environment. However, data from affirmation and general praise categories confirm that most students do not consider themselves as writers in online review. Consequently, these comments represent kernels of a larger thought process, one that might have developed into a conversation in person but remains a half-articulated fragment online.

In Chapter seven, I examine students’ mitigated positive feedback, the comments used to shape the tone of the naked text so that critical remarks seem supportive and encouraging. Examples from two of the three mitigation categories, perfunctory and thoughtful, show that students’ polarized perception of feedback as either praise or criticism most often correlates with a lack of substantial advice. In contrast, examples from the engaged category show that students
who understand positive and critical feedback as complements or even similar expressions of liking frequently provide better, more detailed suggestions.

The movement from Chapter six through Chapter seven is one of gradual progression on two counts. First, it is a progression from limited to more inclusive and enriched expressions of positive feedback, one in which positive response is not simply praise but an expression of active reading, solidarity, and intellectual engagement. Second, it is a progression of increasing use of space. Online review affords students infinite space for composing their comments. Quantitatively, the data show that students do not generally take advantage of this freedom. However, the movement from Chapter six to seven is one of gradual expansion where comments become increasingly longer and rhetorically complex. By the end of the two chapters, the data reveal a potential for online review to host the intersection of disparate knowledge communities in a written medium, one where distance and time foster reflective response and ultimately a blurring of the distinction between reviewer and writer.
CHAPTER 6
QUALITATIVE STUDY: STAND-ALONE POSITIVE FEEDBACK

The Comment Box as a Writing Space?

Once a peer review is posted on <emma>, students can access it forever. Even after the course is long over, they still can log-on to the site and visit the course archives to find and revisit their old peer reviews. Whether the day before the paper is due or a year after they turned in the final draft, the written record of another person’s encounter with their writing remains intact and available. The permanence of online peer review is perhaps its greatest advantage over the oral tradition. Where a lively discussion among friends can be enjoyed but easily forgotten, the thoughts and reactions of a virtual reviewer can be re-experienced exactly as they first appeared. But what will the comments say? In re-reading the responses interwoven throughout the text, will students see a live reader, processing and synthesizing the words on the page, or will they only be able to piece together a vague shadow with half-articulated fragments?

Unfortunately, the data in the present chapter show that reviewers most often leave writers with fragments. While the spatial freedom of online peer review gives students the opportunity to translate their thoughts into detailed responses, they very rarely choose to do so. Perhaps this is because they simply do not see a virtual commenting environment as a writing space. Instead, students currently approach commenting online as teachers grade papers. Studies of pen and paper teacher comments have found that they are typically brief and often quite
vague, pointing to problems but not articulating why they are problems and how students can fix them (Connors and Lunsford 1993, Smith 1997, Straub 1997). If students approach online commenting as an equivalent to pen-and-paper grading, their response style is likely to mimic this brevity and lack of detail. Such an approach is a missed learning opportunity for both the reviewer and the reviewed.

In her 1979 article “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” Janet Emig argues that out of the four language processes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, writing is unique in that it integrates the triple functions of enactive, graphic, and symbolic processing: “the symbolic transformation of experience through the specific symbol system of verbal language is shaped into an icon (the graphic product) by the enactive hand” (124). By doing, seeing, and representing all at once, writers engage both hemispheres of the brain. Thus, Emig proposes that “writing through its inherent reinforcing cycle involving hand, eye, and brain marks a uniquely powerful multi-representational mode for learning” (125). If writing is indeed a unique mode of learning, then peer reviewers have an opportunity to learn about how they respond to and process writing simply by articulating their thoughts into coherent sentences on the page. In doing so, they not only reflect, synthesize, and graphically reinforce their experience as readers, but leave a detailed record of this experience for the reviewed students to read and understand how their reviewers intellectually engaged with their writing.

The vast majority of data in this chapter does not come close to achieving this potential. Examples from the praise evaluation category, in particular, represent missed opportunities for written reflection and intellectual engagement. However, data from the reader response and positive punctuation categories demonstrate that while students do not view online peer review as a forum for extended writing reflection, they may associate it with another type of writing
space—social media. Examples from these categories show that students’ online responses can enliven a dead text with the expressiveness of a live reader, giving the writers a sense that their words can “do something” to readers—make them laugh, learn, and think.

**Praise Evaluation**

Out of the total of positive feedback units, 69% were praise evaluations. 73% of those were “stand-alone” comments, or praise not combined with revision-oriented feedback. These are the tools students use to “package” the whole review in order to not overwhelm their peer review partners with critical commentary. I divided praise evaluation data into four sub-categories: *affirmation* (statement of agreement), *meets criteria* (indicates the writer has met goals set by the teacher), *general praise* (praise without explanation—e.g., “good”), and *specific praise* (praise with explanation—e.g., “I like this. You have: Statement, examples, significance. Much easier to follow”). Though many of these comments were likely written with the rhetorical intent of helping writers to feel encouraged and confident, the vast majority are devoid of any real communicative value and thus more likely to lead to indifference or even frustration. The term “evaluation” assumes the existence of criteria, a fundamental set of guidelines for measuring performance. However, the problem with most of the comments in this section is that their basis for positive evaluation remains obscure.

The meets criteria sub-category includes all comments that explicitly praise the writer for meeting the criteria set forth by the teacher—either the specific requirements of the assignment or the guidelines of the department rubric. However, these comments only made up 5% of all praise evaluation data. Comments from the other three sub-categories were based on a personal set of criteria that most reviewers failed to articulate. For example, affirmation comments
expressed the reviewer’s agreement with the writer (e.g., “I agree,” “good point”), yet not a single affirmation comment out of 117 peer reviews explained why:

I completely agree!
Good point
Exactly.
Definitely
YES
True dat
Soooo true . . .

In an oral writing group, agreement would be the entry point for a conversation. Students might share personal experiences or discuss information they learned from another class. Essentially, they would engage in the kind of discourse that Kenneth Bruffee argues helps students understand writing as a social practice—one that creates a bridge between different knowledge communities. By contrast, peer agreement online is reduced to a simple one to three word statement.

In context of the reviewing condition in which this data was produced, perhaps students chose to save such a conversation for the oral component of the review. As Janet Emig notes in “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” talking is natural and easy where writing is cognitively demanding. Given the difficulty of writing in comparison to speaking, students have every reason to save more detailed responses for speech interaction. However, by choosing not to articulate the thought process motivating their agreement into words, students miss an opportunity to slow down and really consider what exactly strikes them as true or logical about the writer’s argument. Such an activity would force them to reflect upon how they as readers determine whether or not to trust in an author’s representation of reality. For the writers, a written record of this process to re-visit in revision would help build a mental catalogue of how to establish a rapport with readers and perhaps even inspire developments to the argument itself.
However, written affirmations as they stand in the present study would at best remind writers of a distant conversation and at worst merely represent naked approval without any sense that it derives from an active process of reading and understanding.

Similar to affirmations, most praise evaluations that positively assess a particular skill or choice do little beyond simply identify it as “good” (e.g., “great word choice!”). In her peer review exhibit, one student wrote, “Peer reviewers want to make sure they elaborate on any positive or negative feedback they give . . . we are now at the level of writing where comments such as ‘great sentence’ and ‘I like your opening paragraph’ isn't helpful to anyone.”

Unfortunately, 55% percent of all positive feedback data show that this is exactly what most peer reviewers did:

- Nice, like this
- Great use
- I like how you ended the paragraph
- Great paragraph
- good conclusion to your paragraph
- I like this sentence
- nice counter argument
- Good comparison

While some comment units, like the examples above, were a preface to an explanation, 78% of all comment units in the general praise category stood alone. Many of them simply identified portion of the writer’s text as “good”—a word, a sentence, a paragraph—and they were often delivered after the first and/or last paragraph of the paper. This pattern of framing a writer’s essay with praise implies that many students followed an unspoken “packaging” template, in which they started and ended on a positive note. While there is nothing inherently wrong with this strategy, its formulaic predictability, combined with the short, inarticulate nature of the praise comments, make them more likely to be perceived as insincere. More importantly, like
affirmation comments, they represent a missed opportunity for reviewers to work through their process as readers and for writers to see evidence of this process on the page.

However, not all praise comments left writers in the dark about their peer’s evaluative criteria. 30% of all praise evaluation units provided insight into what the reviewers as representatives of an audience found to be effective writing strategies:

The opening paragraph is straight forward and to the point. You explain a personal example as to how you use music to escape from the real world, and I think that your audience will definitely make that connection as well.

I like that you breakdown all of the medical terms so there isn't a conversational barrier between you and the reader.

Good job. Very descriptive and creative about using the fight as a "battlefield." Made it seem like the reader was there, experiencing this with you.

I like this paragraph a lot and I especially like your water war example. I think it makes you more relatable to the reader and is a good example of how the information you presented worked in your own life.

Like in the examples above, many reviewers invoked the “general reader” to articulate why a particular choice worked well. For the writers, this develops their understanding of how to engage or establish trust with their audience. For the reviewers, this indicates that they are reading and commenting on their classmates’ papers with an awareness of how and why they process a piece of writing as “good.” In the context of peer review as a reciprocal activity, this awareness is something they will likely carry back to their own writing. By consciously inhabiting the role of a general reader and reinforcing that performance through words on the page, students are more likely to approach their own writing with the same consideration for a general audience.
However, by allying themselves with “the reader,” students also take the affective charge out of the compliment. While references to an abstracted audience may help student writers approach their work with critical distance, they do little to animate their writing as a live and interactive force in another person’s consciousness. One of the advantages of oral peer review is that students can literally see how their writing leaps into another person’s brain and diffuses as an embodied reaction—a shudder, a laugh, knitted eyebrows, a gasp. Virtual review is deprived of these types of nonverbal responses to writing. However, this does not mean that the text of virtual review is devoid of deeply subjective, personal reactions from readers.

**Reader Response and Positive Punctuation**

In *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow succinctly outlines the core purpose of a writing group: “The goal is for the writer to come as close as possible to being able to see and experience his own words through seven or more people. That’s all” (77). In Elbow’s model, the value of this micro-audience is not necessarily their suggestions for improvement. It is the plurality of perspectives they offer in giving writers a sense of how their work is experienced by readers: “to improve your writing you don’t need advice about what changes to make; you don’t need theories of what is good and bad writing. You need movies of people’s minds while they read your words” (77). The emphasis here is on both the immediate and the visual. Readers share their first impressions, accompanied by a verbal picture of how they processed the words on the page. As the metaphor suggests, the purpose of the “movies of your mind” model is to try to make visible what will always be essentially obscure—the things going on in a person’s brain as they read someone’s writing. Elbow’s four response exercises—pointing, summarizing, telling and showing—are designed to exteriorize these internal processes as much as possible. He also
recommends that writers read their work aloud in order to merge the experience of writing with the experience of an audience. By doing so, writers get an intensely present sense of how their words affect listeners through a wealth of telling non-verbal responses—a peal of laughter, uncomfortable rustling, and even silence.

Online peer review will never be comparable to the expressive richness of a physically present audience. The very qualities that define its advantages to oral interaction—the time and distance needed to carefully consider and develop first impressions—are also the source of its disadvantages. By nature, online response is delayed in that the writers experience the readers’ reactions well after the moment they initially formed. Also, as Janet Emig remarks in her comparison of writing and talking, “writing is stark, barren, even naked as a medium; talking is rich, luxuriant, inherently redundant” (124). Where oral response is vitally present and multidimensional, written response is flat and de-contextualized. However, despite this “barreness,” online peer review is still capable of conveying a sense of immediacy. Like the student in Chapter three who included a “personal touch” in her peer reviews, many students bring Elbow’s “movies of the mind” to the page through comments that materialize their spontaneous, in-the-moment experiences of reading.

Reader response comments are the expressions of a live, active reader. Unlike praise evaluations, they do not assess the writing but react to the writing. In evaluative feedback, students often seem like medical examiners, autopsying the text in order to determine how it works. However, in reader responses, students do not assess the writing as it might be received by the abstracted “reader” or “audience.” Instead, they are the readers, experiencing and reacting to the writing in the moment.
Together with exclamations and emoticons, reader responses are the textual substitutes for nonverbal communication. They have an air of spontaneity (though as the student in Chapter three with the “personal touch” strategy indicates, that appearance of spontaneity may be very much calculated). Out of context, many of them could be mistaken for Facebook reply posts. Indeed, because online peer review is an exchange between social equals where students compose comments in a text box and submit them to a classmate’s virtual space, it may bear some association with social media environments. Much of the reader response data in this study share features typical to social media writing: text speak (“lol,” “haha”), emoticons, and multiple punctuation marks (Thelwal et. al 2010):

that’s really sweet
Ouch!
cute (:  
how was there enough hours in a day for all that!?!?!?!
lol did you buy any?
you could say an “eggcelent” or “eggelent” breakfast. Haha
Awwhhh!!!
that’s awesome!
sounds like a lot of work :(  

With the use of emoticons and exclamations, these comments become examples of text-based facial expressions. Because I counted a single exclamation mark as equivalent to a single unit, the majority of data in the positive punctuation category were paired with reader response comments. Students frequently used multiple exclamations or emoticons to intensify their personal reactions (e.g., “That’s so interesting to know!!!”). Sometimes students used stand-alone emoticons as substitutes for gasps or smiles (e.g., “One key contributor to the number of animals in shelters is the horrifying reality of abuse’ :( “). Recent scholarship on emoticon usage in online social environments finds that while emoticons do serve the same functions of nonverbal behavior, they are not always direct equivalents. A physical frown is not the same as a
virtual frown. In their study of high school students’ perception of emoticons in online messaging, Derks et al. (2007) found that “frown” emoticons were always perceived positively unless paired with an explicitly negative comment (e.g., “you’re dumb :( ”). The students in the present study often used “frown” emoticons to lighten the tone of criticism (e.g., “Going back and forth between past and present tense is really confusing :( ”).

As a genre, reader response comments give writers a sense that their words are “doing something” to readers, stirring some sort of emotional or personal reaction:

Unbelievable suspense!
Very alarming stats…
I'm jealous! I want to go here!
Very funny. I literally laughed out loud
Cute example! Made me smile :)

Of all reviewer comments, reader responses are the most full of “voice” and thus, in context, they seem to transform the author’s uninterrupted train of thought into a conversation. Because many of them reveal something personal about the individual reader, they explicitly show students how their writing can reach into another consciousness to form a bridge—a shared experience or an expression of solidarity (reader responses are in bold):

In just 24 hours, I quickly realized how different things were from the north and how completely out of my element I was. When someone talked about “Chaco’s,” I thought they were referring to a Mexican restaurant, not a pair of shoes. Girls were amazed that I had never heard of Zaxby’s or Jimmy Johns. **I never heard of Jimmy Johns until I came to UGA haha.**

Vegetables such as cabbage, broccoli, and cauliflower contain flavones and indoles that are thought to have anti-cancer activities as well. Much of this information was told to all UGA students who eat in the dining halls through the informational cards **I read those all the time :)** placed at every table by Katherine Ingerson, the UGA Food Service’s Registered Dietician.

Despite my doubts, I decided to participate in the pageant anyway because I knew that it would be a great experience for me. The first thing I had to figure out was what my talent would be. I was immediately regretting my choice because I did not know what I could
do. I knew that I could not run or kick a ball across the stage. **You totally should have, just saying!**

In one case, a student literally turned a review into a conversation. Her peer review partner wrote a comment in her essay to which she responded in her review of his:

My mom decided she would pay for private school for that year, but also enroll me in the public school and let me test it out for a week. If I liked it, I simply wouldn’t go back to my old school. With that, I started third grade in a public school. **Your mom is a saint if she would blow an entire years tuition to let you test out public school. Props to her....**

I asked my parents about transferring to Hereford with my sister. They asked me if I was sure I was making the right decision. I thought back to all the stories my sister had told me. I thought about wearing anything I wanted and letting my hair or “flow” as we described it, rage and grow long. Public school would certainly make it easier on my parents. They wouldn’t have to pay that nasty 19,000 dollar tuition every year. **damnnn.... btw, I don't think my elementary school was that pricy, so that's why my mom was willing to pay for it. Oh and to see me happy, like your parents too :) haha**

In some respects, this is a shallow conversation. However, in the context of Bruffee’s model of peer review as a meeting ground for various knowledge communities, these comments represent an encounter between two similar but discernibly different communities. Both students chose to write papers on their experience transitioning from private to public school; however, they seem to be from different economic backgrounds. Based on his own experience, one student immediately assumes that a private school must cost upwards of $19,000. The other corrects this assumption. From this small interaction, both students get a sense of how individual experience may affect how readers process and draw (sometimes false) conclusions about the author and her text.

Sometimes reader response comments express validation of the writer’s communicative purpose. They implicitly articulate that their words have “done something” to them—not a momentary, fleeting reaction like a laugh but a more resonant, reflective response that indicates a
slight but notable shift in the reviewer’s perception of the author’s subject. The following responses, for example, animate the writers’ words as enactive in the readers’ minds (reader responses in bold):

Some songs have a good way of covering up how meaningless and useless they really are. Take away the music and see what’s left. Ask yourself questions: What are they saying in this song? Does what they’re trying to say mean anything? Did they even try? You have to decipher amongst yourself the depth of the lyrics. This gets me thinking about my own interpretation of music.

One of the biggest stereotypes of secularists of all shades face is that somehow they are closed-off, unapproachable, and private unless they are championing their beliefs that apparently exist in contemptuous, anti-religious blasphemy. I definitely thought this of atheists.

If people begin putting animals before their own desires, even at the slightest amount, animals will begin to see a brighter day one step at a time. The main reason for animal advocacy – to improve animals’ lives and conditions – must begin somewhere, with one animal at a time. Wow your topic is so good! It made me tear up and by the end of it I was like “oh wow let me go save some puppies.” So I think you did a good job bringing awareness to the subject.

In this final example, the reviewer praises the writer for “bringing awareness to the subject” in general, but this evaluation is very clearly a reflection of her own personal awareness. She does not assess his writing as rhetoric as much as she reacts to it as rhetoric. By doing so, she tells him two things: 1) his essay has successfully elicited an emotional response; and 2) his essay has made a memorable contribution to this reviewer’s cultural image of abandoned animals. The pictures his words painted in her mind are incorporated into an existing body of mental images built from other mediums of communication and meaning-making. His essay has joined these mediums as a legitimate contributor to “discourse” about the subject.

While reader response comments bring the immediacy of a live audience to the page, as representations of an encounter between knowledge communities, they are only vague inclinations of a larger potential. Like affirmation comments in the previous section, many are
kernels of a conversation that never comes into being. Take the following comment for example (reader response in bold):

Conformity is when a majority of the group produces an incorrect idea or an idea contrary to one’s beliefs. It will go unchecked in discussion because someone with a correct or contrasting point is too afraid to speak up because he is the only one with that opinion. In Asch’s Line Conformity Experiment, subjects were placed in a room with actors. The group was presented with a board with lines. They were asked to match the lines. The actors chose lines that were obviously incorrect, but because of conformity, the participants agreed as well. great example! we just learned about this in psychology so I was thinking about it while reading.

This reviewer’s comment reveals a piece of knowledge shared with the writer. Both of them know of Asch’s Line Conformity Experiment. Both have had recent encounters with this information through participation in an academic activity (the writer in researching for the paper, the reviewer in a psychology class). However, the reviewer’s experience of processing and understanding this information would be quite different from the writer’s. He comes from a different background—a different set of knowledge communities. Thus, he can engage the writer with a new perspective and perhaps even new information (what else did he learn in his psychology class?). However, as it stands, the comment represents unfulfilled potential for an intellectual intersection between two different frames of reference on the same subject.

Concluding Remarks

Nearly every comment included in both sections of this chapter represents an opportunity for a conversation between reviewer and writer. While online review cannot replicate the back-and-forth negotiation of oral discourse, it can still offer an opening into another perspective. However, most of the examples in this chapter do not really take the opportunity to do this. None of them take on the qualities of a written conversation that brings the wealth of a single
individual’s knowledge and experience on the page. Instead, they are only remnants of a larger, more complex thought process, one that remains obscure.

This is not to say that all written comments must be detailed with personal insight in order to be effective. Even the most miniscule comment unit, such an emoticon, can enliven a dead text with a sense of personality and peer support. However, the problem with the data in this chapter is that really none of them engage the writer in extended “conversation.” Ultimately, this chapter shows a general neglect by students to take advantage of the space online commenting affords to them. However, comments in the next section represent the body of data where students are most apt to use that space—giving critical feedback.
CHAPTER 7
QUALITATIVE STUDY: MITIGATION

In Chapter three, I discussed how students’ desire to give praise is crucially intertwined with their understanding of critical feedback. Many students perceive the practice of commenting on writing as inherently negative. The underlying message is “you’re wrong,” or “badly done.” Consequently, peer review is often considered to be the equivalent of fault-finding. As one student wrote in the opening line of his peer review exhibit, “when it comes to telling people bad news or feedback, I cannot do it easily. Since this is the case, peer review is very hard for me.” In other peer review exhibits, students associated reviewing with “attacking,” “bashing,” and “hurting.” One even equated it to giving a death blow: “part of the terror of peer reviewing is that sometimes I feel like a merciless executioner.” The belief that all feedback is fundamentally “bad news” is compounded in a reviewing environment stripped of nonverbal cues. The tonal “nakedness” of comments written online, combined with students’ already persistent fears that their feedback will offend their classmates, motivates them to be quite leery of leaving critical comments “hanging” by themselves in virtual space. Consequently, while data in the last chapter show that students often do not take advantage of the space available in an online environment, the data in the present chapter represent students’ most frequent use of that space.

While the limitations of the physical page keep students from excessively dressing their criticisms with mitigating language, the spatial freedom of online peer review allows students to
indulge in this impulse as much as they like. Students in the present study often framed their comments with apologies (“sorry if that sounded mean :( ”), downplay remarks (“idk. I could be wrong”), or use hedges and interrogative syntax (“What would you think if the sentence was changed to state that ‘I rarely get homesick’?”). Pen-and-paper reviews force students to be selective in which comments they choose to mitigate, but online, students do not have to be so conservative. They can choose to mitigate all manner of critical feedback, even those that are seemingly innocuous, such as grammar corrections and suggestions for rephrasing. Unfortunately, students do not always make good use of virtual space. Much of the unit data in this study is from suggestions that were circuitous and unnecessarily long. For example, the student who wrote the following took five comment units to communicate a single idea:

Your descriptions really make me feel for you, do you think that maybe you could add a little of how you had no idea what was going on at times- just to be able to add to the sense of foreignness? B/c I think you kind-of poke at it when you explain to us what different drills are. So I guess what I mean is try to expand on that.

As the peer review exhibits in Chapter three might indicate, the most frequently used mitigation strategy among students in the present study was pairing critical comments with praise. One reason why praise mitigation might emerge as a more popular strategy than others is that praise can conceivably do more than simply mitigate. It can build up. The empathy encouraged by a reciprocal reviewing condition motivates students to want to provide feedback that lets their classmates know that they are capable of producing good work. Through pairing critical and positive feedback, students not only keep their peers from feeling discouraged but also give them a reason to return to their writing with confidence and even enthusiasm. In doing so, they can fulfill one of the most valuable functions of a writing group— offering the kind of support where writers do not walk away feeling defeated but excited to revise.
Unfortunately, two things prevent students from really providing this kind of supportive critical feedback. First, the problem I discussed in the last chapter carries over into this one—students do not think of themselves as writers in online review. Consequently, their praise mitigations are often vague and formulaic where they could be detailed and engaged. Second, most students’ deep-seated understanding of positive and critical feedback as diametric opposites causes them to shy away from giving substantial, content-focused feedback. As a result, often their mitigations not only consist of discrete parts but also frequently remain preoccupied with local issues of grammar and phrasing. However, the spread of data across this chapter is one of progressive integration, authorial consciousness, and global focus. While praise/criticism pairings at the beginning are fundamentally disconnected and underdeveloped, comments at the end demonstrate remarkable rhetorical awareness, as well as provide a picture of what might happen when students understand positive and critical feedback as complements or even similar expressions of liking.

In the first section, I review a spectrum of mitigation comments using categories I developed based on patterns in the data: perfunctory, thoughtful, and engaged. The movement from one category to the next will show students’ increasing awareness of themselves as writers, as well as a general trend of incorporating positive and negative feedback into a rhetorical whole. The final section examines a very small, but distinct, body of data from the final mitigation category, engaged. I call these comments invention. They are the incarnations of Kenneth Bruffee’s “Conversation of Mankind” as it may exist in an online commenting environment. They not only represent a rich encounter between diverse knowledge communities but also imply a future in which online peer review as a writing space might increasingly blur the distinction between reviewer and writer.
Mitigation

In their study “Teachers’ Rhetorical Comments on Student Papers,” Connors and Lunsford call praise mitigation *admonitio*, Latin for a “warning of impending evil” (210). Similar feedback studies further characterize it as a perfunctory consolation prize, the “this is good” followed swiftly by “but…” (Straub 1997, Hyland and Hyland 2001). Praise mitigations have a reputation for being formulaic and predictable. Most students in the present study keep this reputation well intact. The majority of mitigation data fall into one of three templates: the “*admonitio,*” in which criticism is hailed by praise plus a “turning signal” (e.g., “however” or “but”), the “afterthought,” in which praise is tacked on to criticism as an appendage, and a combination of the two: the “criticism sandwich” described by the student in Chapter three. The word “sandwich” is an accurate characterization of how most students piece together their mitigations. By and large, mitigated comments are made of discrete parts of praise and criticism that can be easily disassembled. Most often the praise is either a general comment (e.g., “good paragraph”) or has no logical connection to the criticism. Consequently, the positive component of praise mitigations has an air of superficiality, as if it is there only to function as a “tone adjustor.”

However, not all student praise mitigations are so formulaic and underdeveloped. In collecting comments from a diversity of peer reviewers, I noticed patterns in the data that suggested a natural grouping among them. Mitigations seemed to fall along a spectrum according to three guiding features:

- The detail of the positive and critical feedback (from general and unclear to specific and solution-oriented);
➢ The focus of critical feedback (from local issues of grammar and phrasing to global issues of content and development);

➢ The degree to which the positive and critical feedback seemed essentially connected (from discrete parts to an incorporated whole).

By plotting mitigation comments along a spectrum according to these three features, a general pattern emerged. Students who were more willing to break away from standard mitigation templates and make an effort to integrate positive with critical feedback usually provided more detailed advice on global concerns of organization, development, and audience awareness. Students who stuck to a template that kept positive and critical feedback as discrete parts generally wrote comments that were vague and preoccupied with local concerns of grammar, phrasing, and reordering. Thus, when I collected student mitigation comments from peer reviews, I organized them into three categories that reflected this progression from vague, inarticulate comments on form to more consciously developed advice on content. I labeled the three categories *perfunctory*, *thoughtful*, and *engaged*.

The guiding forces of movement from one category to the next are increasing rhetorical awareness, use of space, and integration of positive and critical feedback. Comments in the perfunctory category are much like the general praise comments in the previous chapter in that they fail to offer any meaningful information to the writer. They are generally short and consist of rigid segments of praise and criticism, neither of which is well-articulated. Comments in the thoughtful category demonstrate a stronger sense of audience in that students make more effort to explain both their compliments and suggestions. While they tend to maintain a logical connection between the praise and criticism, they also keep them essentially separate through tonal markers that indicate a shift between the two. However, comments in the engaged category
either maintain a positive tone throughout or make an effort to integrate more fully positive and
critical feedback into a rhetorical whole that cannot be easily disassembled. Whereas comments
in the previous categories largely focus on local concerns within the purview of a few sentences,
engaged comments generally offer suggestions that shape or develop the writer’s content.

These three categories represent correlations, not rigid boundaries. Students’ mitigation
comments do not always fall easily into one category. For example, some comments that offered
specific, articulate solutions also maintained a fundamental divide between praise and criticism
(e.g., “I like this paragraph and the one after it, but it is very awkwardly placed after you talk
about Uganda. I personally think you should end with the BPU and finish it with the sense of
family.”). Conversely, a few comments that integrated positive and revision-oriented feedback
ultimately failed to offer specific advice (e.g., “I really liked this paragraph. I think you should
expand on it.”).

Because data did not always fit neatly into the pattern of increasingly developed,
integrated, and content-focused praise, I designed a three question key tailored for each category
as a tool for assigning comments into perfunctory, thoughtful, or engaged mitigation. Each key
focuses largely on the detail of the comment and level of integration between praise and
criticism. To sort mitigation data into one category, I tested it against each category key starting
at perfunctory and moving to engaged. If at any point the comment fit the characteristics
described in at least two of the three questions, then I assigned it to that category. This system
proved effective in all but a very few cases. If a comment fit two of the three questions in more
than one category key, I sorted it based on other correlating factors in the data. I include each key
in the following sub-sections for the three mitigation categories.
Perfunctory

More than any other collection of data in this study, perfunctory mitigations demonstrate that students too frequently do not consider themselves as writers in online peer review. The category as a whole demonstrates a general (even egregious) lack of understanding that peer review comments are actually intended to be read by someone else. Consequently, the question key for perfunctory mitigations focuses primarily on lack of detail (table 3):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Does the praise component lack development (is either general praise, an affirmation, or an emoticon)?</td>
<td>I feel like this sentence could be in a better spot, it seems really random, but the idea of the second paragraph is great.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Do both the praise and criticism comment lack development?</td>
<td>I like this whole paragraph but maybe start it in a different way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Are the subject of praise and the subject of the criticism unrelated?</td>
<td>I really like the opening sentence, but maybe try to spread your quotes more evenly throughout the essay.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3: Perfunctory Mitigation Category Key**

Comments in perfunctory mitigation frequently matched the characteristics of all three questions in the key. Their brevity, ambiguous language, and formulaic construction made them easy to identify. Before providing more examples, it is important to stop here for two reminders. First, as the peer review exhibits in Chapter three suggest, praise mitigations are often intended to be rhetorical. Students use them so that their classmates feel supported, not attacked, by critical advice. However, as I noted in the quantitative analysis in Chapter five, rhetorical intent does not always translate into effective rhetorical delivery. Thus, the second important preface to
the following examples is that these types of comments made up over half the mitigation data, representing a sizable bulk of students’ rhetorical work.

“Perfunctory” is certainly an accurate label for comments in this category. The praise components often seem automated, as if they were being inserted into a template, and are usually either general praise statements or affirmations. Perhaps the frequency of phatic praise in student mitigations is simply a reflection of what students have learned from teachers. In their study of teachers’ written comments, Hyland and Hyland (2001) found that while the criticism component of mitigations was generally explained, the praise component was usually not (e.g., “this is good”). However, unlike teachers, students were often just as vague in articulating their criticisms:

Other than the thesis, strong opening paragraph.

Try a little more formal of an intro. I like that it was a question though.

This sentence is good, but I think you need something stronger for the end of your paper if that makes sense?

Maybe work on the conclusion a bit to end with more of a bang, it was your first college party after all. But really good story.

The lack of specific advice in comments like those above might be a reflection of students’ difficulty with imagining solutions to the problems they see in their classmates’ writing. As Nancy Sommers found in her study comparing the revision habits of student and expert writers, students are often able to sense global issues but are frequently unable to identify them fully and even less able to think of strategies for solving them. Similarly, peer reviewers may have trouble articulating exactly what is wrong in a classmate’s paper. However, another possibility is that students are hesitant to take on the directive voice of authority that offering specific solutions
necessarily requires. In perfunctory mitigations, students often danced around their critical purpose and sometimes essentially contradicted themselves:

I like this. but I don’t know how to present it in a better way cause idk if I like the parentheses. but I like it.

Kind of just jump into the next example so it seems kinda choppy, but it sounds alright.

Your paper has awesome facts but I would add more fluff and flow and take out a few of those facts b/c it is a little overwhelming.

I really like this opening paragraph and I seem to understand where you are going with the paper, but I feel as if something is missing and I almost have to guess what you are trying to do.

In these examples, the students all identify a primary problem—parentheses, incoherent transition, repetition, and lack of clarity—but rather than directly point to the problem, they use praise as an evasion tactic. Perhaps this defaulting to praise rather than clearly articulating a problem is evidence of something I discussed in Chapter three. Because students are often uncomfortable giving revision-oriented advice, praise may have more purpose for the reviewers than for the writers, reinforcing to themselves that they are peers, not authorities.

When students comment on papers, they are in a sense stepping outside of a role they are comfortable with, a student, and inhabiting a role that is foreign to them, a teacher. In previous chapters, I have mentioned that students may perceive the act of commenting as inherently negative because of their previous experiences with teacher feedback. Teachers have a reputation for focusing on weaknesses rather than strengths and sometimes doing so in a manner that is overly critical or insensitive. Consequently, many students associate the role of teacher/commenter with fault-finder. However, the role of teacher is also associated with that of a guide. In a study of student attitudes towards teacher comments, Richard Straub found that students believed that the best teachers presented themselves as coaches in their feedback,
offering direct, individually-tailored suggestions. Consequently, when students become peer reviewers and thus inhabit the role of mock-teachers, many understand that they have a responsibility to provide their classmates with confident, solution-oriented advice. However, they also feel compelled to stay grounded in their role as students. Like the student in the “praise as polite” exhibit from Chapter three, peer reviewers are acutely aware that they are both outsiders and equals. Thus, in approaching a classmate’s paper, many still want to maintain an essential connection to their role as students, a role associated with solidarity and support.

In the context of the pervasive understanding of critical feedback as the equivalent of fault-finding, this tension between the role of student and the role of teacher presents a major problem. As students, peer reviewers feel they need to offer their classmates positive encouragement. As teachers, peer reviewers feel they need to offer straightforward, revision-oriented advice. However, for those who perceive feedback as falling along two poles, praise or criticism, reconciling the role of teacher and the role of student may seem like an impossible challenge. These students cannot imagine how to give feedback that is both critical and positive. Consequently, their mitigated comments sometimes seem to have two voices as if they are switching between two roles:

For this paragraph, I think it might be better to start off with a broader statement than a quote . . . good definition of rumination though.

I feel like this sentence could be in a better spot, it seems really random, but the idea of the second paragraph is great.

I think you could incorporate elements from these three sentences to make a strong thesis. I like what you are trying to say here though.

Good start to the paragraph. Go into more about what the organization is about and develop more but you’re off to a good start.
As in the examples above, the praise and criticism in perfunctory mitigations were often incongruous. They seemed to have no logical connection between them, with the praise addressing one component of the essay and the criticism another. It is as though the students were speaking with different voices: one being the voice of authority, another being the voice of support.

In trying to balance two different roles with two separate sets of expectations, students were unable to fulfill either. Both the praise and the criticisms remained fundamentally underdeveloped, and as a rhetorical whole, the comments conveyed indecisiveness and uncertainty. The undercurrent of all perfunctory mitigations seemed to be this sense of insecurity in providing critical advice. The tension created by a perceived difference in offering support and giving advice manifested on the page as tentative, disconnected pieces of text that seemed to run against each other in a countercurrent.

_Thoughtful_

More so than the other two categories, thoughtful mitigations represent the largest diversity of mitigated comments. As the mid-step between perfunctory and engaged commentary, they were the most difficult to place. However, the feature distinguishing them from comments in the previous category is an increased sense of confidence and coherence in articulating both praise and criticism. Unlike in perfunctory comments, both the positive and critical components of thoughtful mitigation were generally detailed and often shared a topical connection, so that one flowed logically to the next. Consequently, as a whole, the comments are relieved of the tension that characterized perfunctory mitigations and instead seem to reconcile
the roles of peer and teacher through well-articulated praise and straightforward advice. The question key for the thoughtful category is included below (table 4):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Is the praise component well-developed (either specific praise or reader response)?</td>
<td>You really got my attention with the first few sentences (where you describe the library). However do you think you could condense it a little?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Is the criticism component well-developed (either attempts to articulate the cause of the problem and/or offers a solution)?</td>
<td>I like this conclusion a lot. It’s got a great point and logic, but maybe you can break it off from this paragraph and start a new one with a few intro sentences leading to this point.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Is the mitigation unified (praise flows directly into criticism)?</td>
<td>You do a good job here of showing that you are not familiar with the kitchen, but maybe to make it a little more obvious you could exaggerate the time a bit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4: Thoughtful Mitigation Three Question Key**

As indicated by the examples in the question key above, the students who wrote thoughtful mitigations were much more likely to take advantage of the space available in a virtual commenting environment. In general, this space was equally inhabited by both positive and critical feedback. Unlike in perfunctory mitigation, students who wrote thoughtful comments usually made an effort to articulate a specific point of praise that lead naturally into a piece of advice. Consequently, the praise component seemed less arbitrary and more genuine. The correlation between detailed praise and better advice suggests that students’ ability to deliver effectively both encouragement and critical feedback depends upon their confidence in identifying a specific problem and solution. However, in thoughtful mitigations, the problems most frequently addressed were those that students are generally known to be more confident in solving: local issues of grammar and rephrasing.
In her study comparing the revision strategies of students and experienced adults, Nancy Sommers identified four primary operations of revision: deletion, addition, substitution, and reordering. While the experienced writers were more focused on discovering meaning and thus applied these operations to large chunks of writing, such as pages and paragraphs, the students did not venture beyond the purview of a few sentences. They recognized larger problems in their essays, but struggled to imagine solutions to them. In contrast to the difficulty of addressing global, content problems, small-scale revisions such as deleting a few sentences, substituting one word for another, and adding a one-sentence transition were easy processes they felt confident in doing.

In the context of their revision habits, perhaps students are better able to reconcile the roles of student and teacher in thoughtful mitigation because they feel more like authorities on the problems they attempt to solve. By and large, the critical component of these comments apply one of Sommer’s four revision operations—deletion, addition, substitution, reordering—to a local area of the essay:

I really like this opening. It catches my attention and makes me want to discover what you are going to talk about! but maybe lead into this next thought better by saying “For most people, they could not and that is why organizations come in handy . . .”

I like what you're trying to say here but I'm having trouble thinking of a way to phrase it. Universal everywhere is redundant so find a way to say “the way the pieces move is universal” or “is the same all around the world.”

I like the direction of this opening sentence, but I think the last half is a bit wordy. You could possibly break it into two sentences.

Your thesis is good. You clearly state what you're going to write about. But I do recommend you cut down some of the wording in the middle of your intro paragraph.

The comments above follow a general trend of complimenting an idea in the essay then correcting its structure. This formula of validating content and revising form characterizes the
majority of mitigations in this category and perhaps explains why so many of them were more likely to coherently connect praise with criticism. In contrast to larger concerns such as thesis development, form and phrasing problems are easier for students to identify and solve without having to, as one student wrote in her peer review exhibit, “bash their [classmate’s] favorite part of their essay.”

So while thoughtful mitigations demonstrate a greater degree of confidence, this confidence is more a function of the critical issues the comments address. Students still struggle with imagining how to point out larger problems of development and organization while also maintaining a supportive tone. The few thoughtful mitigation comments that focused on such problems were similar to perfunctory mitigation in that they seemed fundamentally incoherent or disconnected:

This is a good argument. I like how you developed the counterargument that is pretty true and used several sources to combat it. I know this is a rough draft, but make sure that later you develop the explanation of the quotes more.

So I like the idea of including the camp in the paper but it’s such a minimal part that idk how I feel about it. I think you should include it but I feel like it should be longer or shoved into an earlier paragraph but it definitely ties back to your idea and can be used as a good supporting point.

Also like perfunctory comments, all thoughtful mitigations relied on “turning point” language in their constructions. Words like “but,” “though,” and “however” served as a hinge between positive and critical feedback, reinforcing them as separate parts. While there is nothing inherently wrong with the “this is good but…” template, the data in this study suggest that most students are unable to imagine any other possibility for “positively critiquing” their classmates’ writing. While praise mitigation comments as a whole are representative of students’ desire to provide feedback that is encouraging as well as constructive, the majority demonstrate that they
see these two things as fundamentally separate expressions. Comments can compliment and then they can advise, but they cannot do both at once.

Engaged

Engaged mitigations are distinct from the previous categories in one of two ways. First, the vast majority focus on issues of content—expansion of main ideas, addition of evidence and argument support, connections between body paragraphs, and large-scale structural revisions. Second, rather than hinge praise and criticism with “turning point” language, many of them use positive feedback as a launching pad into critical advice. Essentially, these comments are not true mitigations. The word mitigation implies the idea of a countercurrent, a compliment that runs against a criticism to diminish its effects. However, engaged comments to not diminish but build, starting with and maintaining a positive tone throughout.

This section focuses on how engaged comments integrate positive and critical feedback into a rhetorical whole. However, beyond their rhetoric, these comments also do something very interesting as written meditations on the writer’s content. Students not only evince support for the writer but sometimes traverse into the writer’s territory, the realm of invention where ideas are generated and developed. While some examples in the present section are characteristic of this quality, I save my discussion of the generative nature of these comments for a separate section entitled “Invention.” Rather than discuss the focus of the critical feedback, the present section examines how the authors of engaged comments successfully offer both the support of a peer and the guidance of a teacher by recognizing a crucial connection between liking and revising.
The question key for engaged mitigation focuses on the development and use of praise as well as the focus of critical advice (table 5):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Is the praise well-developed (reader response or specific praise)?</td>
<td>I think you should really stress the creativity and opportunity you present when you learn how to use a sound board in this conclusion. This paper makes me walk away wanting to learn how to use one.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Does the suggestion calls for content development/addition or a major structural change?</td>
<td>This is good start point for combating the stereotype. Perhaps here you can add anecdotal evidence on how metal music affects you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Does the praise serve as a “launching pad” into advice?</td>
<td>I definitely see how these connections can provide support. Could you also say they also provide a knowledgeable group of friends who could help defend from these attacks? Who would help one learn more and enable themselves to defend their standing in an argument?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Engaged Mitigation Three Question Key

While one of the questions in the key addresses the detail of praise, most engaged comments cannot be easily separated into a “positive component” and “critical component.” They are not structured to transition between one thought to the next with counter language (“this is good, but…”), but instead use words that build (“this is good, and…”). Consequently, they maintain a positive tone throughout, beginning with a compliment that seamlessly leads into suggestion. In this way, the “praise” in engaged comments seems to be not only the opening sentence but the comment as a whole:
This is a good point, and I think you could add a paragraph about the evolution of how we use the library. It might help you add some length to your paper while strengthening your case.

The “tiger mom” example is really good! Maybe you can add some more examples of authoritarian parents? Or even add an example of an instance when a parent didn't put much pressure on a child and they succeeded greatly at something because they wanted to?

I think that last sentence is a really great one and could even be used as a transitional sentence to talk about “the purpose behind Miracle” as you mentioned. Even some more brief insight on the group could be helpful.

A standard mitigation comment can be disassembled into two parts: the positive remark, the part that needs no change, and the critical remark, the part that needs revision. However, in the comments above, the connection between the praise and critical feedback is that the one is cause for the other. In the last example, the reviewer literally takes a part of the writer’s text—“the purpose of Miracle”—and uses it as a foundation on which to suggest development. Many of the authors of engaged comments follow this pattern of identifying something positive in their classmates’ writing and imagining how they might use it to make an improvement. Rather than seeing revision as a necessarily cause-and-effect relationship between finding a problem and fixing it, they understand how liking a part of someone’s writing can actually be an excellent reason for suggesting that they revise it.

In previous chapters, I have discussed how many students equate giving critical feedback with fault-finding. The mitigation data in this study imply that this perception is rooted in an underlying belief that revising is a negative response to the discovery of error. The authors of mitigations discussed in the earlier sections write comments as if one revises only in order to correct a mistake. Thus, the polarizing of feedback into either positive or negative expressions ultimately reflects an understanding that all revision-oriented comments communicate that the
writer has done something wrong and all praise comments communicate that the writer does not need to revise. However, for the students who write engaged comments, offering classmates advice is not a practice in finding weaknesses but in finding strengths. One revises not only in response to error but to take something good and make it better.

By connecting the concepts of revision-oriented and positive feedback, students who write engaged comments are better able to manage the dual roles of peer and teacher. They do not have to feel like they are “attacking” or “bashing” an essay because they are not only looking for mistakes, they are looking for strengths. This difference is rooted in the way they approach the text. Like the student in Chapter three who wrote in his peer review exhibit that he tries to write comments “like an average reader, letting them know the things I liked and the things I wanted to hear more about,” the students in engaged comments approach their classmates’ work as interested readers, channeling their experience of reading into how they choose to offer improvements. Consequently, many of the comments are hybrids of reader responses and critical feedback, starting with a statement of enjoyment (“I love”) and continuing on to a suggestion:

I love the idea of a sound you have never heard before. I'm not sure if it's possible to add more detail here, but go for it if you can. Great hook.

I love the intro and it sets a fast pace to the rest of the paper. You could really take advantage of that aspect of the emergency room. Add as much detail to your examples and situations to really draw the reader in.

I love how you describe the town as a tricky maze. Was there a point where you literally got lost?

This is a great place to add description about the scene outside. I haven't been to the science library and I would love to get a better picture of what the landscape and atmosphere outside is.

In the comments above, students do not approach their classmates’ writing as editors but as engaged readers. They identify more with the role of “audience” than the role of “teacher.”
This closer identification with “audience” allows them to comment not from the perspective of an authority but from that of a peer, and thus, they can more freely share advice because they are not coaching as much as they are sharing Elbow’s “movies of their minds.” The reviewers’ choice to purposefully inhabit the persona of a reader not only serves to make them more comfortable in their roles as commenters. It is also a rhetorical move on their part. They consciously “perform” the role of an interested audience in order to dramatize for their classmates what it is like to have their writing be liked by someone. This performance seems to reflect the philosophy of writing response outlined by Peter Elbow in “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking”—that students will devote more effort to improving their writing when they actually like it. Authors of engaged comments deliberately work to show classmates that their writing is worth reading. By framing critical feedback rhetorically with a positive reading experience, they endeavor to not only help the writers develop a plan for revision but also give them a reason to be excited to revise.

However, like the standard “this is good, but” mitigation template, the pattern of identifying something “loved” in the writing and using it as a launching pad for advice could quickly become formulaic. Thus, if too frequently used, the launching pad template might undercut the rhetorical purpose of engaging students in their writing through showing them that their work is “loved” by someone. In contrast, a more authentic expression of praise for an author’s work would be evidence that the essay engaged reviewers intellectually, inspiring them to reflect upon, synthesize, and generate ideas through the lens of their own perspective.
Invention

In “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking,” Peter Elbow argues that the best composition teachers actually like their students’ writing and are not reticent to show it. However, “liking” is not always equivalent to “praising.” For Elbow, the clearest indicator that he likes someone’s writing is that he is not afraid to criticize it: “If I like a piece, I don’t have to pussyfoot around with my criticism. It's when I don't like [students’] writing that I find myself tiptoeing: trying to soften my criticism, trying to find something nice to say—and usually sounding fake, often unclear.” In this context, critical engagement with the text is the sincerest compliment a peer reviewer can give to a writer. Asking questions, pointing out counter arguments, and offering new angles are all expressions of intellectual liking. They show writers that their words have “done something” to readers—made them reflect, reconsider, and connect their own experiences with the ideas on the page.

A very small margin of comments in this study brings this sort of liking into a virtual environment through lengthy meditations on the author’s writing. The word “lengthy” is relative here. As indicated by the data in previous sections, most online peer review comments are brief, with even mitigations averaging at around twenty-five to thirty words. However, a few comments coded into the engaged category were 100 words or more, with the longest one being 275 words total (longer than the required length of a class journal entry). While the size of these comments might suggest that they were all offered at the end of the paper as final assessments, half of them were inserted into the text as visible interruptions to the writer’s train of thought, transforming an essay into a written conversation. As a whole, authors of these comments did one of two things. First, they took a piece of the writing and built upon it, offering a new vision for a paragraph or sometimes the entire paper. Or second, they engaged the writer with an
alternate perspective through their own experience and knowledge. In some cases, the authors did both. Either way, these comments were distinctive in that they generated significant contributions to the content of the writing, whether through a revision plan or a new perspective. Thus, I called these comments “invention” because the reviewers were essentially “inventing” ideas for the essay as if they were the writers themselves.

As their inclusion in the engaged category would suggest, invention comments always contained an element of praise, either as a direct compliment or a reader response. In offering the writers content-focused critical advice, the authors of these comments were careful to encourage the writer by validating their choices or communicating their interest in the subject. In this way, the comments were rhetorically framed to accomplish the same goal as the engaged comments in the previous section—motivate writers to get excited about revising. The following two invention comments very clearly work to communicate this message through the language of support and readerly interest. Both were offered as end comments, with suggestions for large-scale revision to improve coherence and development:

Towards the end of your paper you go on about how you like both types of sports equally. This would be a very good thing to write about through the whole paper. Your thesis should be about how team and individual sports compare, and how your personal insights have shaped your view on them. The more direct your thesis is towards this paper, the better your paper will flow. Trust me, once you have a good thesis your paper will be much better. You have everything that you need for this paper, it looks like you have done the research and gotten the personal experience, so now you just have to use what you have now to reformulate this thesis and rearrange it so that it conforms to it. Can’t wait to see how it turns out!

It seems like what you're trying to say is that maturity, when it comes to music, is important so that we can understand lyrics. Why is this the case though? Is it about the ability to turn to music as an emotional means to cope with our everyday lives? You mention that in your final paragraph but I don't entirely see it as a recurring theme throughout the paper. I'd find a way to connect that idea earlier on, because it's a really good topic. Music is something we all love and this paper has the potential to say something really powerful to a good number of people.
Like in engaged comments in the previous section, both of these reviewers take something the writer has done well and use it as a launching pad into giving advice. What is remarkable about these students is that both are willing to do what so many of their classmates are not—recommend substantial changes to the entire paper. They approach the essay holistically, essentially “revisioning” what it might become if the writer focuses on a single idea that already exists in the text but is underdeveloped. Perhaps this willingness is a product of experience. Both of these comments were written at the end of the course after the students had an opportunity to develop their revision skills. However, given the rhetorical dynamics of peer review discussed throughout this study, it is quite likely that these students were not reticent to suggest large-scale changes to their classmates’ work because the changes were based on something in the writing that they genuinely liked.

As Elbow writes in “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking,” giving critical feedback is easier when motivated by a positive stance towards the text. Especially in peer review where students are so sensitive to the appearance of “bashing” someone’s writing, being able to base their feedback on a genuine experience of liking allows them to be less cautious in offering advice. However, students are only able to do this if they understand liking as a reason for revising. As the data in this study demonstrate, most students see commenting and thus revision as the search for error. If they approached their classmates’ writing with the purpose of finding strengths and imagining how they could be better, they would likely offer more substantial revision-oriented feedback.

Not all authors of invention comments approach the essay holistically. Some zero in on a particular part of the text. In these cases, reviewers would sometimes explicitly suggest changes to the writing, but often these were implicit suggestions buried in what was essentially a personal
reaction. The reviewers’ primary purpose was to draw the writer’s awareness to a potential counterargument. Rather than offer a new vision for the whole essay, they instead inject a wealth of perspective into a single point, using their own individual knowledge to complicate it. For example, one reviewer responds to a writer’s discussion of animal shelters’ refusal to adopt a “No-Kill” policy with a pragmatic perspective that considers the economic realities:

While I really like your voice and main ideas here, I think it’s important to realize that these directors chose not to keep animals because of expenses. It is more expensive to keep an animal around than it is to get rid of it and allow room for new animals that could be more likely to get adopted. To say that it is a “simple refusal” might be a little too one-sided. What is truly sad though is that money is more important to these directors than the loss of an animal’s life.

This comment is not explicitly personal. It does not even reveal any special knowledge on the part of the reviewer. However, it does represent a point of view very different from that of the author. While the author seems to write from a standpoint of idealism, the reviewer writes from one of pragmatism, perhaps reflecting a background that makes her sensitive to the realities of running a business in a capitalist economy. In a sense, this comment is a textual embodiment of Kenneth Bruffee’s “Conversation of Mankind” in that it is essentially an encounter between two distinct knowledge communities. In his essay on collaborative learning between peers, he writes that “every student is a member of several knowledge communities, from canoeing to computers, baseball to ballet… pooling the resources that a group of peers brings with them to [a writing] task may make accessible the normal discourse of the new community they together hope to enter.” For Bruffee, this “new community” is a professional and academic social realm in which mastery of discourse depends on one’s ability to work with and account for multiple perspectives. In this context, the reviewer in the comment above is helping the writer learn to successfully develop and apply academic frames of discourse to his writing.
Beyond contributing to the development of their academic voice, invention comments can also confront students with a crucial reality of the rhetorical situation—that they are writing to real people with real life experiences that may affect their response to the text in unexpected ways. The comment below brings this reality resoundingly to the page. The reviewer is responding to the writer’s use of Psalm 14 in his essay about the negative cultural image of atheists and secularists. Though the reviewer is very careful not to frame the criticism as an attack, the sheer length of the comment suggests to the writer that his choice has struck a nerve with this particular reader:

I like your inclusion of various sources. It’s more informative than argumentative which was an interesting approach. However, I might be wary of including anything from the bible. You can never read the words for face value like most do, but instead must view them with respect to the time period in which they were written and also the cultural events of that time. The book of Psalms was written over a period of 500 years, and during the time of the flourishing Persian Empire. Excerpts from Psalms are known to come from King David and members of the Jewish community, rabbis and such. After the massive expansion of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the second, the boundaries spread all over Asia Minor, including the annexation of Jerusalem. Some members of the Persian Empire were known to be secular, and this obviously would have conflicted with the ideals of the Jewish community in Jerusalem. This coupled with resentment of the Persian occupation could have led to the creation of Psalm 14, with this in mind I think one must consider that Psalm 14 could be as much a chastising of Secularists, as much as it is resentment towards the Persian occupation of Jerusalem. I think that the inclusion of it is appropriate in the context you use it, however I think that you might want to consider either acknowledging this aspect or leaving it out all together, because some might use this as a focal point in opposition to your paper. As prejudice as this might sound, this is the world we live in.

This comment reads like less of a review and more of a journal entry. It is more focused on the reviewer’s knowledge than the writer’s text, and perhaps even steps beyond the bounds of decorum in offering something of a “history lesson.” However, the comment represents a valuable learning experience for both the reviewer and the reviewed. For the essay writer, it embodies an encounter between his rhetorical choice to use the bible to demonstrate his argument and the effects of this choice on a representative of a knowledge community that is
very familiar with the text and its cultural context. For the reviewer who wrote the comment, it embodies a process of reflection, synthesis, and articulation of his reading experience, one that forces him to consider how rhetorical choices in writing intersect with the unpredictable dynamics of politics and culture.

As textual expressions of an encounter between diverse knowledge communities, invention comments represent an opportunity for students to engage in Kenneth Bruffee’s “Conversation of Mankind” in a way that is distinct from the oral peer review tradition. In face-to-face writing groups, students can enjoy a live experience of reader reactions rich with nonverbal expressions and back-and-forth negotiations. However, the pace of conversation is determined by those in the group. Some students can dominate the conversation and others can be consistently interrupted. Thoughts are shared the moment they are formed, and they are gone just as quickly. In contrast, writing is a slower, self-rhythmed practice that combines process and product with visual reinforcement of ideas as they develop on the page. In “Writing as a Mode of Learning,” Janet Emig argues that because talk is transitory, it is ultimately a less committed act than writing. One cannot be an “author” of speech in the same way one is an “author” of text. The dynamics of personal responsibility are more serious considerations in a verbal practice that result in a graphically permanent record. For these reasons, writing is a unique medium for not only discovery but ownership of personal knowledge.

Because online review offers the distinct advantages of a self-paced, personally committed discourse, students have more of an opportunity to become slowly aware of themselves as members of a knowledge community and to concretize that experience as a graphic reality close to the essay writer’s text. The best example of this process of discovery and ownership in the present study occurred in a reciprocal review between two students, Trevor and
Avery. Trevor’s essay explored the reasons why church attendance among young Christians drops drastically once they enter college. Avery’s essay discussed the benefits of a plant-based diet and the ways in which students can maintain this diet when eating at the university dining halls. In the process of writing comments for each others’ essays, both students became aware that they each belonged to a community that offered a valuable perspective for the other’s work. Trevor became aware of himself as a “meat-eater” and used this perspective to help Avery understand where her argument was effective and where it was not (reviewer’s comments are in bold):

Nuts and beans are a great source of protein, and eating a bean burrito instead of a beef one will be just as rich in protein. The main reason these foods are a better alternative is because they provide you with the protein needed and have less fat and cholesterol. I like this argument as a meat eater, because that is one of the things that would concern me, giving up the nutrients. I think this is a good place to develop the scientific type stuff. I see you have the facts in your brainstorming, and I think this is one part where you could draw those in. It is a good argument, especially when factually backed.

My friend and I tried a vegan cupcake, that was made without eggs and milk, and we liked it better than the regular cupcakes made with dairy products. The bread was very moist and the taste was lighter than regular cupcakes in my opinion. As a meat eater, it could be easy for me here to say “well of course it would taste good to a dietician or people that already make healthy choices, but does it taste good enough for someone with a non-vegan habit to consider stepping out of the comfort zone?” Again, I like the personal experience, gives you credibility, but without like background to you and your friend, I am left to question whether or not this could be a biased opinion. I would just be careful with using your personal opinions especially at the very end there, because it could look like bias.

Though Avery’s paper does not explicitly address “meat-eaters,” in reading her essay, Trevor gradually comes to recognize himself as a member of this community. Through his comments, he weaves a tension between communities that did not previously exist into Avery’s text and thus helps her to understand the complex social dynamics that might influence how readers’ choose whether or not to accept her argument. In creating this tension, Trevor is sure to remain
supportive of her critical project, approaching her essay not as a critic but as a representative of a community to which she is trying to reach. Similarly, when commenting on Trevor’s writing, Avery presents herself as a lapsed Catholic who is curious but wary of how teenagers become members of a Christian community. She uses this experience to help Trevor understand the kind of detail that such an audience would want to know (reviewer’s comments are in bold):

When they were young, parents forced their faith on their kids and never allowed it to be their own. They shouldn’t force them to go to church but have to let their faith develop by providing every opportunity for them to choose church. **How can this be done? Do you know someone or have an example?** My parents never forced religion on me. I was raised Catholic, but I never was super religious. I don't really connect with the people who are super Christian mainly because the people in high school who claimed to be “Christian” didn't practice the Christian values outside of church and partied all the time. I’ve always been interested to see how people all of the sudden choose church and find Jesus, so I would definitely develop this idea more. I just don't understand how this happens and I would like to.

For some parents, the changes that kids go through in college may not seem like that big of a deal, but for parents and church leaders who want teenagers to grow in their faith in college and who care about their spiritual life, the problem looks pretty scary. **It seems like you are still going strong with your faith, so maybe you can use some of your experience in here. Explain how you found Christ in high school (I'm assuming this is true) and tell what you think good methods are that worked on you for keeping your faith in college. Also, have you interviewed anyone? I think that might be super helpful.**

As an exercise in developing audience awareness, peer review is intended to foreground the social functions of writing. When reviewing a classmate’s essay, students become aware of this function by recognizing themselves as members of various knowledge communities and understanding how this membership influences their experience of reading and ultimately their experience of writing. While this discovery is certainly possible through oral review, the self-paced reflection and sense of authorial ownership inherent to writing is better suited to nurturing students’ growing awareness of their social identities and how these identities inform their
intellectual encounters with other perspectives. Through developing and representing their social selves in their review of a classmate’s essay, peer reviewers can validate their peers’ writing as fulfilling its social function of inspiring discourse, thus giving them one of the most enduring, and deeply-felt compliments a writer can receive—seeing how their words can leap into another consciousness and start a conversation.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

As data in the previous two chapters demonstrate, online peer review has the potential to translate the best of the oral writing-group tradition into a virtual environment while also offering advantages unique to its medium. Online, writers and readers navigate the same space. They are both authors in their own right, writing within the frame of a practical and rhetorical purpose. In context of the needs particular to students in a composition course, a peer reviewer’s purpose is to bring the social functions of writing dynamically to the page, weaving a rich reading experience into the thread of the author’s text through comments that communicate the immediacy and intellectual engagement of a live reader, fellow writer, and individual consciousness. Through articulating this experience in writing, reviewers achieve a fuller understanding of how they respond as readers, as well as discover how their personal and social knowledge guides this response. This written record confronts essay authors with a visual reinforcement that their writing no longer exists in a vacuum but is officially part of public discourse in that it has passed through the mind of a reader and peer.

However, as the data in the present study also demonstrate, students’ limited understanding of critical feedback and neglect to see themselves as writers prevents online review from achieving its potential. The pervasive belief that revision-oriented feedback is an exercise in fault-finding combined with students’ difficulty in managing the double role of peer and teacher is compounded in a purely written medium, in which comments are naked of
nonverbal cues. As the heart of conveying “voice” and controlling tone, positive feedback emerges as central to how students respond to the unique dynamics of a purely written reviewing environment. Students employ positive feedback to project an image of friendliness, respect, and support in the text of their comments, but the inability to imagine response that is both positive and critical and the tendency to represent, rich complex thought processes as inarticulate fragments often means that their rhetorical intent does not translate into effective rhetorical delivery.

I propose two approaches to peer review instruction that may help composition instructors deal with the problems described above, as well as take better advantage of the unique opportunities inherent to a virtual reviewing environment. The first approach is to teach commenting as an exercise in rhetoric. The second is to teach commenting as an exercise in writing.

**Teaching Peer Review as Rhetoric**

Peer review scaffolding is generally designed to teach peer review as a skill. Preparation focuses on helping students identify and improve weak thesis statements, bad transitions, incoherent organization, and so forth. Essentially, it is another opportunity to develop students’ writing skills. In no way am I suggesting that this approach is not valuable. On the contrary, training students to apply a critical lens to deconstructing the writing of others will certainly help them improve their own compositions. However, it is also important to acknowledge the distinct social dynamics of peer review as a reciprocal exchange between equals and to understand how a purely written medium makes navigating these dynamics a bit trickier. Consequently, in addition to teaching students the skills necessary to provide quality, revision-oriented feedback, peer
review instruction might also benefit from positioning review as a rhetorical practice, one that is social as well as practical.

As this study demonstrates, positive language in peer review is closely tied to considerations of ethos and delivery and thus is central to how students understand themselves as *authors* of written comments. Thus, a classroom conversation about the purpose and functions of praise would serve as a logical entry point into discussing the text of written feedback as rhetoric as well as content. Based on the findings of this study, some questions of interest may include:

- Is positive feedback valuable in peer review? Why or why not?
- What purpose does positive feedback serve for the writer? For the reviewer?
- What can positive feedback tell someone about their writing?
- Do different writers need more positive feedback than others? Why?
- What *is* positive feedback? How do you define positive feedback?
- What does it mean to “like” someone’s writing? What is the greatest compliment someone could give you about your writing?

If improperly executed, such a conversation could certainly result in peer reviews filled to the brim with positive comments and little critical advice. However, if the teacher approaches the discussion with two specific end goals in mind and consciously propels students towards these goals, then the conversation could prove to be crucial in helping students give each other the kind of revision-oriented feedback they need.

First, instructors should use student responses to construct a very public classroom understanding of what positive feedback is and what purpose it should serve. As it stands, praise in peer review is a private rhetoric. Students decide on their own what it is and how they should use it. Externalizing it into a public conversation would confront students with its uses and
abuses, encouraging a more purposeful rhetorical practice. If frustrations with vague, excessive and/or superficial praise were to be expressed out loud, students might be mindful to avoid these tactics. The second end goal of a conversation about positive feedback should be to displace the assumption that all feedback falls along two poles, criticism or praise, and that one leads to revision while the other does not. By discussing exactly what it means to express “liking” through peer review comments, perhaps mentioning Peter Elbow’s claim that it is easier to give critical feedback on writing that one likes, then students would not only begin to see a relationship between positive feedback and revision but would also develop a broader understanding of what it means to “praise” someone’s writing. If students learn to see intellectual engagement as a higher-order compliment, they might be more willing to provide feedback like the invention examples included in the last chapter.

While a public conversation about positive feedback might prove productive in helping students better incorporate praise into their response styles, a classroom activity in which students articulate their ethos as peer reviewers would encourage students to be more conscious of their comments overall. The assignment from which the student reflections in Chapter three were excerpted essentially asks students to do this. At the University of Georgia, all students must include a Peer Review Exhibit in their final ePortfolio where they a) describe their personal philosophy of peer review; and b) demonstrate that philosophy in action by including an example of an online review submitted on the course website. As the excerpts in Chapter three demonstrate, this assignment prompted some very thoughtful responses regarding how students approach commenting on a peer’s draft. Some of them even gave their approach a name (e.g., the “shape shifter” or the “average reader”).
However, students write peer review exhibits in retrospect, after the majority of their coursework is completed. Perhaps students might benefit from articulating their peer review philosophies earlier in the semester before they begin peer review in practice. Such an assignment could be an opportunity for instructors to emphasize that peer review does not as students to take on the role of teachers but that of readers. In this context, the fundamental question would become, “what kind of reader are you?” or perhaps more accurately, “what do you best respond to as a reader?” Straightforward prose? Descriptive language? Thorough research? Original analysis? Asking students to think more consciously of themselves as an audience for their classmates’ writing would likely encourage a greater awareness of audience in their own writing. Furthermore, by positioning this question in the context of the peer review situation, students may be more mindful of what kind of audience they need to be for their peers and how they might communicate this self-concept through the text of their written comments.

Teaching Peer Review as Writing

Most students fail to see peer review as writing because teachers do not give them a reason to do so. Aside from the fact that peer review is simply not presented to students as a writing activity, instructors as the models for commenting generally give students the impression that written feedback should be brief and impersonal. Coming from teachers, perhaps this kind of minimal marking is as it should be. Longer, more elaborate comments that share personal reactions or detailed revision advice run the risk of “appropriating” the text from the student. However, the same cannot be said for student comments. As one student in the present study succinctly stated in her peer review exhibit, “I am their peer, not their superior. I have no credentials. My opinion has no authority behind it.” Peers do not write comments from a position
of authority, and therefore, students can be more discriminating in whether or not they chose to follow their advice. Consequently, for all of the benefits outlined throughout this study, it would be to the students’ advantage if they approached online peer review as not just a written but a \textit{writing} practice.

In the context of many examples of the vague, inarticulate commentary included in the previous two chapters, composition instructors should design peer review scaffolds that ask students to think more consciously about their written comments not only as representations of audience but also in terms of their content. This is not to say that all peer review comments should become miniature compositions, only that the peer review as whole should provide a well-rounded picture of the reviewer’s reading experience as well as thoughtfully-articulated, revision-oriented advice. In helping students to be mindful of what their reviews communicate to writers, perhaps teachers can ask students to examine critically the text of sample peer reviews. In small group activity, instructors could give students an example of an online peer review and ask them to do the following based solely on the content of the reviewer’s comments:

- Draft a revision plan for the essay writer
- Identify the reviewer’s best piece of critical advice
- Identify what the reviewer liked about the essay and why
- Describe reviewer’s commenting style in one or two words (Encouraging? straight-forward? engaged? uncertain?)

Such an activity would demonstrate very persuasively how comments such as “you should expand on this” do not do much in the way of communicating to students how their writing was experienced and in what ways they can improve it.
Beyond emphasizing the importance of articulating comments so that they actually communicate something of substance to the essay writer, composition instructors could also incorporate elements of more reflective composition exercises, such as journaling and free-writing, into peer review activities. While the idea of using another person’s digital document as a writing space may seem a bit suspect (particularly in regards to “appropriation” of their writing), there are three reasons why such exercises would be of benefit for both the reviewer and the reviewed. First, in context of Kenneth Bruffee’s “Conversation of Mankind,” there is much value in asking students to engage in each other’s writing through the lens of their own knowledge and experience, not just as writers but as people. The invention comments in the last chapter demonstrate that peer review, as a writing practice, has the potential to encourage students to reflect more thoughtfully on how their own subjective perspective collides with and complicates that of another writer. Second, Janet Emig’s argument for writing as a mode of learning positions written “conversation” as a more personally committed and deliberate act than oral conversation. Consequently, composing an extended response that engages with the writer’s content intellectually would perhaps motivate a stronger sense of awareness and even ownership in students’ understanding of the individual experiences and community affiliations that shape their approach to social discourse. Third, asking students to transform a classmate’s essay into discourse through their own writing has the potential to reinforce for the authors the social implications of their texts and thus motivate revisions that reflect a deeper understanding of these considerations.

Given these benefits, perhaps composition instructors can design online peer response activities, in addition to the traditional model of providing a spectrum of comments throughout the essay. They could ask students to read an early draft of a classmate’s paper and compose a
250 word written response, either developing a journal prompt based on the writer’s content and answering it or detailing a potential counterargument. Such exercises would not only encourage students to think of their writing as a crucially social transaction but would also transform composition into a more social, collaborative practice itself. By turning peer review into a writing space and thus blurring the distinction between the reviewer/writer divide, the “invention” process of writing, the realm of slow, reflective generation and development of ideas, may become less of a work in isolation and more of a shared activity between peers and fellow writers.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


APPENDIX A

UGA First-Year Composition Program Grading Rubric

Competent/Credible/Complete:

If you meet these first three standards, you are writing competently and will earn a grade of "C" (70-79).

1. Unity

- Contains a center of gravity, a unifying and controlling purpose, a thesis or claim, which is maintained throughout the paper.
- Organizes writing around a thesis or according to the organizational requirements of the particular assignment (e.g., summary, narrative, argument, analysis, description, etc.)

2. Evidence/Development

- Develops appropriate, logical, and relevant supporting detail and/or evidence.
- Includes more specific, concrete evidence (or details) than opinion or abstract, general commentary.

3. Presentation and Design

- Follows SMH guidelines for standard English grammar, punctuation, usage, and documentation.
- Meets your teacher's (or the MLA's) and the First-year Composition program's requirements for length and/or format.

Skillful/Persuasive:

If you meet all of the competency standards above and, in addition, achieve coherence and exhibit audience awareness, you are writing skillfully and you will earn a grade of "B" (80-89).
4. Coherence

- Uses words and sentences, rhythm and phrasing, variations and transitions, concreteness and specificity to reveal and emphasize the relationship between evidence and thesis.
- Explains how, why, or in what way evidence/detail supports point/claim/thesis/topic/ideas.
- Incorporates evidence from outside sources smoothly, appropriately, and responsibly.

5. Audience Awareness

- Demonstrates a sense that the writer knows what s/he's doing and is addressing real people.
- Reflects a respect for values that influence ethos (e.g., common ground, trustworthiness, careful research).

Distinctive:

If you meet all of the competency standards, achieve coherence and exhibit audience awareness, and, in addition, demonstrate a mastery of one or more features of superior writing, you are writing distinctively and you will earn a grade of "A" (90-100).

6. Distinction

- Your writing stands out because of one or more of the following characteristics: complexity, originality, seamless coherence, extraordinary control, sophistication in thought, recognizable voice, compelling purpose, imagination, insight, thoroughness, and/or depth.

Ineffective:

If your paper does not meet competency standards, either because you have minor problems in all three competence areas (1-3 above) or major problems in one or two competence areas, you will earn a grade of "D" (60-69) or "F" (<60) and should schedule a conference with your teacher.

ESSAY GRADE ______
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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| Praise Evaluation   | Positively evaluates of writing; statement of value or achievement; direct compliment. | “I agree with your points of view”  
“ I see where you are going here” |
| Affirmation         | A statement of agreement; confirmation of clear communication.              | “definitely a narrative, not an essay”                                 |
| Meets Criteria      | Confirmation that the writer has met criteria specifically outlined by the teacher. | “I liked this paragraph”  
“Good thought” |
| General Praise      | A positive statement of value that does not identify a particular accomplishment or choice. | “Nice adjectives”  
“I like how you show an example to connect to real life situations” |
| Specific Praise     | A positive statement of value that does identify a particular accomplishment or choice. | “That’s really sweet”  
“Interesting. I didn’t know that” |
| Reader Response     | Positively reacts to writing; expression of enjoyment or engagement.        | “You just need some evidence and stuff to back yourself up!”            |
| Positive Punctuation| Emoticons and exclamations.                                                 |                                                                        |
Generative comments offering additions to the writer; “conversation starters.”

“This is a very interesting paragraph. You discussed conformity earlier. Maybe you could make a connection here about how a listener might especially be affected by conformity. It seems the listener often has intriguing ideas and valuable discussion to add to the group- what if these ideas were never presented because of a lack of comfort within the group?”

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
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<tr>
<td>Perfunctory</td>
<td>Most often mitigated with either general praise or an affirmation.</td>
<td>“I really like the opening sentence, but maybe try to spread your quotes more evenly throughout the essay.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
<td>Most often mitigated with specific praise or reader response.</td>
<td>“I really like how you drew the reader in with the contrasting scenes and take an interesting approach to the intro. I think that it may be a little too long winded, though because it delays the main argument.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engaged</td>
<td>Most often mitigated with specific praise or invention; frequently uses praise as a launching pad for suggestion.</td>
<td>“I think that last sentence is a really great one and could even be used as a transitional sentence to talk about &quot;the purpose behind Miracle&quot; as you mentioned. Even some more brief insight on the group could be helpful.”</td>
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