

The Impact of Peer Review on Upper-Elementary Students' Writing

In this article in *Reading Research Quarterly*, Zoi Philippakos (University of North Carolina/Charlotte) and Charles MacArthur (University of Delaware/Newark) report that most elementary students have difficulty revising their own writing. Among the reasons:

- Students see revision as fixing errors (mostly wording and conventions) rather than making changes in content and organization.
- They may lack knowledge of evaluation criteria (e.g., not using a good rubric).
- They may have limited audience awareness or not consider audience concerns.
- They may be aware of problems in their writing but have difficulty applying strategies to resolve them.
- They may have cognitive overload as they try to revise.
- Writers' motivation, self-efficacy, and self-regulation may affect the time and effort they devote to revising.

There are a number of ways to combat these challenges. Philippakos and MacArthur conducted a study of one of them: peer review. They divided 145 fourth and fifth graders into three groups – peer reviewers and two control groups – and ran all students through 12 days of writing and revising to see if getting students to critique other students' persuasive essays would improve the quality, length, and inclusion of persuasive elements in their own writing. Here's how the study was conducted (each day's session lasted 40 minutes):

- Day 1: All students wrote a persuasive essay, responding to a prompt on uniforms.
- Day 2: All students wrote a second persuasive essay on field trips.
- Day 3: All students were introduced to the evaluation rubric's purpose and watched it being used to critique a strong and a weak essay.
- Day 4: Students in the reviewer group were given two papers written by peers (they didn't know their identity) and asked to give honest and helpful feedback on each one by giving it a score on each section of the rubric and then writing comments.
- Students in the first control group read the same papers but weren't asked to give feedback.
- Students in the second control group read unrelated texts.
- Day 5: Same procedures as Day 4, with the reviewers and the first control group reading different papers of varying quality.
- Day 6: Same procedures as Day 4, with the reviewers and the first control group reading different papers of varying quality.
- Day 7: All students revised their own Day 2 essays on field trips.
- Day 8: All students revised their own Day 1 essays on uniforms.
- Day 9: All students wrote another persuasive essay on a new topic (second language).
- Day 10: All students revised these essays.
- Day 11 (seven school days later): All students wrote on a new topic (chores).
- Day 12: All students revised those essays.

What were the results? Students in the reviewer group did a significantly better job than both control groups revising their own Day 1 and 2 essays, and wrote significantly better persuasive essays after the intervention, as measured by persuasive elements, considering and rebutting opposing positions, and final thoughts for the

reader.

Why the improvement? The key elements seemed to be internalizing greater familiarity with criteria for effective writing, critiquing peers' writing at different levels of proficiency, comparing strong and weak points with their own writing, and developing an improved consciousness of the audience for their own writing.

“The Effects of Giving Feedback on the Persuasive Writing of Fourth- and Fifth-Grade Students” by Zoi Philippakos and Charles MacArthur in *Reading Research Quarterly*, October/November/December 2016 (Vol. 51, #4, p. 419-433), available for purchase at <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/rrq.149/suppinfo>; the authors can be reached at zphilipp@uncc.edu and macarthu@udel.edu.