

Feedback and Revision Assignments

The Amplify ELA approach to feedback and Revision Assignments

When ELA teachers think about assessing student work, they often cringe a little. Teachers spend an enormous amount of time writing supportive comments, correcting students' work, pointing out three issues to work on, or just one—and students most often ignore the painstaking work their teachers have put in. Even when students do take the time to look at the teacher's feedback, those students most often don't show, in their next piece, that they have really taken it in and improved their writing as a result. Many teachers try to reinforce written comments with oral conferences, but struggle to keep up with the pace required to reach every student. After decades of working with ELA teachers, Amplify ELA knows that feedback on written work is the single biggest pain point for these teachers.

So, before learning more about the extensive Amplify ELA assessment program, take some time to understand how the curriculum is set up to help teachers establish an effective feedback loop based on student writing that will maximize the impact of every comment you write, every over-the-shoulder conference you give, and every classroom-sharing session you facilitate. The Amplify ELA assessment program will produce a lot of student work, a lot of data, and lot of useful suggestions about how to analyze that data and respond. But teachers need a plan for providing feedback to students about this work; otherwise, the papers, real or electronic, start to stack up.

The power of feedback embedded within the curriculum

Writing is a skill of communication, so students learn an enormous amount about whether or not their writing is communicating effectively. Amplify ELA knows, from decades of classroom testing, that the more information students get about how a piece of writing is communicating to an authentic audience, the more motivated they will be to write, and the more quickly they will make progress in the skills they are practicing. Thankfully, the teacher does not bear the burden of providing all of this feedback in written comments. In fact, while written comments are a key part of feedback on student work, they are only one part of a larger system that includes daily opportunities for students to find out whether or not their efforts at producing writing are having the intended impact.

Embedded within the curriculum are the following key feedback tools that ensure students get frequent and effective feedback from their teachers and peers.

Over-the-shoulder conferences (OTSCs) allow the teacher to provide “in the moment” feedback to students as they work through a challenging activity or complete a writing prompt.

Sharing is an essential part of the Amplify ELA writing routine. Every time the students write for an authentic audience, sitting for 10-15 minutes and producing 120-140 words to develop a specific idea about a text, they know that they are trying to communicate something to real people—not just produce words on a page to match a rubric. Significantly, this sharing protocol has been refined over decades in a diverse group of middle school classrooms to make the most of middle school students' energy and attention to their peers and to reduce the risk of negative experiences.

Spotlight is a digital app within the Amplify ELA platform that enables the teacher to easily highlight strong examples of student work and project these excerpts to use for instruction—or simply for student appreciation. The app is integrated into the platform so that while teachers are looking at student work for grading or to write comments, they can simply copy and paste a few sentences into the Spotlight app and name the “wall” that can easily be projected.

Revision Assignments ask students to do a short piece of differentiated revision on one of their pieces of writing. Students practice a particular skill at the same time as they practice the skill of revising itself, trying to improve a short piece of writing in a small, manageable way, outside of the complexities of extended essay writing.

Written comments allow students to have the teacher's recorded feedback about specific language in a piece of writing where the student used a skill effectively. These short, targeted comments both provide specific feedback on that piece of writing and a small model to guide future writing.

Good feedback


Students need to know the small ways in which they are increasing their writing power and control so they can continue on this path. In order to gain this control, they need to learn the names for the new skills they are learning, understand when the time is right to use these skills, and be able to articulate the ways their writing is improving. Vague praise can motivate students for a while, but it doesn't keep them going when they face more difficult learning challenges and practice new skills.

Whether a teacher is conducting a quick OTSC or asking students to respond to a peer's writing during Sharing, the specifics of the feedback can be the difference between feedback that acts as a pat on the back and feedback that empowers students to realize and understand the impact of their writing decisions. Below, see how to provide effective feedback in the context of each of the Amplify ELA feedback tools listed above.


Over-the-shoulder conferences (OTSCs)

OTSCs give the teacher the opportunity to work closely with individual students, while keeping the rest of the class running smoothly. Instead of lining up kids at the teacher's desk or meeting them outside class for a longer sit-down, OTSCs allow the teacher to circulate around the room while the students are writing, working independently or working in pairs. The teacher will give individual students customized feedback that is bite-sized, encouraging, and immediately actionable. Because OTSCs are meant to be quick, typically lasting less than a minute, the teacher can reach 10 or 12 students during a single in-class writing period, and can reach all students every week. All students—those who are demonstrating a skill and those who are struggling with a skill—benefit from feedback, so all students should get OTSCs.

Steps for using OTSCs

1. Note the sample OTSCs: Whenever the curriculum presents students with a writing prompt, the digital program will show a  symbol. The teacher clicks on this symbol and sees what to look for as the students are writing. When he or she taps on each of these sort of behaviors or kinds of writing, the teacher will see suggestions for things to do or say to help adjust a student's writing or simply push him or her to dig more deeply.
2. Don't try to read the whole thing: Once students have started writing, the teacher quietly approaches one student and looks over his or her shoulder to see what has been written thus far. The teacher silently reads a section of the writing to quickly assess the student's work with the targeted skill. It is not necessary to start at the beginning or read the entire piece.
3. Find something you like: The teacher points to a place in the student's writing that catches his or her attention or shows an effective use of the skill the students are practicing. The teacher whispers a sentence or two about what he or she noticed and, if needed, provides a piece of quick, specific instruction for that student. The teacher can answer the student's questions, but should not get into a long conversation.
4. Move on quickly and strategically: The teacher moves on to another student, spreading the conferences around the room based on what he or she sees in the students' writing, and on which students are most in need of feedback in order to make progress. By the time students have completed the "Get Started" sub-unit, very few students should be raising hands because they are stuck, and the teacher should instead be reacting to what he or she sees in the students' work.
5. Check back if you gave a student something to do: The teacher circles back to the students with whom he or she has already conferenced and checks on what they have done in response to the comments.

How to use sample OTSCs

- The sample OTSCs in the program itself, found when one taps on the  icon during Writing Prompts and other activities, describe likely scenarios that come up when students answer that particular question within that particular text—often anticipating misconceptions or ways in which students may get stuck with a piece of language. These instances are only suggestions to help the teacher understand the sorts of things to look for in the students' work and in the text itself—and the sorts of responses that are helpful. Teachers should see these specific suggestions as examples of general things that work.
- Below, are examples of OTSCs by skill. Note that teachers often find places in the writing where the students are using a skill well—that is the most effective OTSC. If the teacher can't find an example of the student using a skill well, the teacher can offer the student a reminder of the skill he or she should be practicing, and/or provide a student with direct instructions to practice the skill in that moment.

Sample over-the-shoulder conferences by skill

| Focus | Showing | Use of Evidence | Conventions |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Now I feel like I know just about everything there is to know about feeding a carnivorous plant! Your sharp focus made that happen. | You showed me how hot it was when you wrote about sweat dripping off the tip of your nose. The description helps me see it. | Fantastic! You quoted the exact words from a passage in the book to show how hysterical that moment was. It's convincing. | Varying sentence styles the way you do right here keeps me on my toes and makes it fun for me to read. |
| How many possible moments do you have here? (Three.) Right. Remember, your job is to choose just one moment and focus on it. That's the skill we're working on right now. | You mention several times that it was a ridiculously cold day. Write two or three sentences that show the reader just how cold it was. Use details and descriptions to really convince me that it was that cold. Raise your hand and call me over when you finish. | It's clear that you believe the character was really mad, but remember to include textual details or a quote from this scene in the book as evidence to support your idea. I love the point you're making here about how much the narrator is in awe of the older boy. Now, focus on this passage here, and write three more sentences that explain what you see happening at this moment in the book. When you've written them, let me know, and I'll come back. | Remember that a complete sentence has a subject and a predicate. This is a sentence fragment. Rewrite this sentence two different ways so that both ways include a subject and predicate. Circle the one you like best. I'll swing back shortly to see them. |

Sharing

Sharing works best when students know that the risk they took to read their writing will be rewarded with feedback about specific words and phrases that worked. Eye contact, smiles, and supportive, targeted responses make it clear to students that their classmates are paying close, careful attention. When students listen carefully and respond with specific, skill-related comments, they are also strengthening their ability to read and analyze text. Listening and responding during Sharing is good practice for the close reading and textual analysis students will perform when writing responses to fiction and non-fiction.

Steps for sharing

1. It is ideal for the teacher to move directly into Sharing after students complete the Writing Prompt, but if the lesson timing does not work out, make sure to pick up the Sharing in the next day's instruction.
2. The teacher calls on a reader to share a piece of writing loudly and clearly, and makes sure everyone can see the reader. (It is nice if students can sit in a circle, but not necessary.)
3. Each reader calls on 2-3 students for their responses, and encourages students to use the Response Starters they see on their device, especially in the beginning of the year. (The teacher will need to remind students to call on each other at first.)
4. The teacher asks follow-up questions of students who are responding to ensure that responses are specific.
5. The teacher chooses another reader and repeats the process, allowing at least two students to share every day.
6. The teacher generally cuts off Sharing after 5-10 minutes, while students are still really enjoying it; they should look forward to doing it again.

Tips for sharing

- Teachers should establish clear, consistent expectations that enable students to trust that a Sharing session will never turn into a public critique or, worse, an opportunity for unkindness.
- Teachers can post the Rules for Sharing poster, review it with students, and enforce the rules, cutting off any student before he or she has a chance to do any damage.
- Teachers can encourage students to use the Response Starters that they see on their devices to ensure they always give positive, specific, and skill-related responses to their peers. As students show they have the idea, teachers can encourage them to find their own ways of phrasing their observations.
- In cases in which students are emotionally troubled, the teacher can scaffold the Sharing session further by first asking students to write their responses on a piece of paper, then the teacher can read it out loud. At the next stage, the student shows the teacher the response written on paper and the student can read it himself or herself, building up trust until the Sharing session runs with full student participation.

Sample sharing responses

| Cheery, friendly, but vague and not useful to the writer | Positive, specific responses about the impact of a piece |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Your entry was really cool.• Yeah, that's awesome how you used all those long sentences.• I liked the descriptive words in your entry.• Your piece was really funny. | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• When you described his face as "tomato red," I could really picture that.• I liked when you used the word "scrambled" to describe getting ready in the morning because that shows me how panicked you were when you overslept.• You used a quote: "Mr Coombes was standing in the middle of it, dominating everything." This convinced me that he made the kids feel small.• I laughed when you described Tom's new way of being tricky, "pretending to pretend that he wanted to get caught." |

Move students from making those comments in the left column to comments in the right column

Very few students will start out responding to writing with comments like the ones in the right-hand column. However, students need these sorts of comments in order to understand exactly which words they wrote reached out and grabbed the audience. In any case, over time, general praise wears off and will not serve to motivate students. For the first weeks of Sharing, the teacher has to patiently push students to be more specific. After students provide the friendly but vague comments like the ones on the left, the teacher follows up by asking, "What is an example of a descriptive word that you liked?" Or, "Which words did you hear that made you laugh?" The student who read may even have to read a part of his or her piece again in order for students to listen and capture specific language. The teacher may model specific and effective responses about the impact of a piece during Sharing sessions, during the use of the Spotlight app described below and, of course, with his or her own oral and written feedback.

Spotlight

The teacher uses the Spotlight app to create and project a wall of strong student excerpts. Spotlight allows the teacher to compare two pieces of writing side by side, shine the spotlight on one piece of writing, annotate the excerpts, and/or create a slide show of many excerpts. By posting brief examples of students' effective use of skills, teachers give their students an easy, powerful way to learn from and motivate each other. Students pay close attention when they see their own words used as exemplars and are more invested in the lesson when the words belong to a classmate.

Steps for using Spotlight

1. The use of Spotlight in instruction is built into the early lessons of the first unit. The day before those lessons occur, teachers will find an icon at the end of the lesson's activities called "Before Next Lesson," which will alert the teacher of the need to create a Spotlight wall for an upcoming lesson.
2. After the early weeks of lessons, Amplify ELA recommends that teachers use Spotlight walls to greet students as they walk into the classroom the day after they complete a Writing Prompt. Something that may have taken a teacher 15 minutes or more in the past to set up with paper now takes only a minute once the teacher is used to the app. Spotlight walls are also much more visually compelling and can become part of the regular classroom routine.
3. The teacher selects Spotlights during the regular course of reading student work and writing comments or scoring it. As the teacher finds strong examples of the skill being taught, he or she copies and pastes it onto the wall and Spotlight formats it. The excerpt should be bite-sized—300 words or fewer—so that you can Spotlight at least 2-3 students a day with a big font that is easy to read quickly.
4. Like an editor preparing a piece for publication, the teacher edits the excerpts so they are free of spelling and grammar errors, but leaves a student's quirky sentence structure so that students get a sense of the different voices and perspectives coming through every day.
5. The teacher lets the students discover the excerpts projected as they walk into class; they are delighted and surprised when they see which of their classmates happen to be spotlighted on a given day. If the teacher chooses to use the excerpts to review a skill, he or she should approach the writing in the way he or she would approach any text—and let the students closely read the language, describing what they see and what meaning they make of it.
6. Spotlight keeps track of which students have been spotlighted—and how long it has been since a student has been spotlighted to encourage teachers to find something within each student's writing to spotlight on a regular basis. This sort of distributed public feedback serves to strengthen the writing community, reinforcing in concrete ways that every student has something to contribute.

Revision Assignments

Revision Assignments (RAs) ask students to practice a skill by revising a short passage of their own writing outside of the context of drafting an essay and producing a polished piece of writing.

Revision Assignments have two goals.

1. Students gain practice in a particular skill by trying to use this skill to express something that matters to the student, rather than in drills that ask students to practice with a model piece of writing that the student doesn't care about. When the student practices this skill with writing that he or she cares about, and is trying to make more clear or powerful, he or she notices the impact of the skill on his or her language and ability to communicate.

The teacher checks to see whether or not the student showed an understanding of the skill, based on how the student has made the revision: For example, he or she combines the sentences grammatically, writes additional sentences about the same idea, and finds more relevant evidence to support the claim.

2. Students gain practice in the skill of revision itself. Most students—most people, actually—dread revising work. It is most often done in high-stakes situations based on the assumption that the original work is necessarily flawed and needs to be fixed. Students need to learn how revision is actually an experimental process that is surprising and worth their time.

Amplify ELA invented the Revision Assignment to enable students to practice revision in an experimental state of mind. Students simply apply a skill to their writing, step back, and notice whether or not this instance of practicing this skill made the piece better or not.

Over time, a teacher can tell if a student is getting good at the skill of revision when:

1. The student is very comfortable and even excited about changing his or her writing (and doesn't get defensive or tired at the thought of it).
2. The student has the discernment to tell when a revision has improved a piece of writing and when it has not (and, thus, when working on a longer project, keeps working on a piece until he or she finds the right revisions and making the right improvements).
3. The student translates these skills into the essay-writing process because he or she has many ideas about how any piece of writing could be changed (and doesn't have to wait for the teacher's directions).

Steps for using Revision Assignments

1. The “Before Next” section at the end of a lesson alerts the teacher to an RA in an upcoming lesson.
2. The teacher highlights a small section in each student’s writing where that student could further practice the targeted skill.
3. During class, the teacher gives students 12-15 minutes for revising, ensuring students have the needed time to experiment and check their work.
4. The teacher checks the completed Revision Assignments to make sure students have followed directions and to assess whether they demonstrated an understanding of the targeted skill.

Writing comments on student work

All of the tools described above provide students with specific, ongoing daily feedback so that the teacher does not need to write extensive written comments on every piece of student work. Students are producing about two pieces of writing a week and most teachers would drop from exhaustion trying to keep up with that pace.

But students do benefit from seeing written comments on their work—particularly in-line comments on a specific part of the piece—that show them that the teacher took the time to consider a specific piece of writing, that some part of the writing stood out, got the teacher’s attention.

When to comment

Amplify ELA lessons start students writing on the first day of class. The students’ experiences in the first lesson itself should set up students with plenty to write about and strong motivation to turn out some sentences. But every student is going to write with some hesitation while wondering how his or her teacher will treat the work. When your students receive your first set of in-line comments, which show you have found something to enjoy in each of their written pieces, you will see a boost of energy in the writing output.

Receiving regular written comments convinces students that the teacher is interested in what they have to say and motivates students to continue to apply their best efforts to regular writing. Written comments also teach students about the impact their writing choices have on the reader. If students do not receive written comments after 2-3 weeks of lessons, we notice a fall off in production. Writing comments more often than every two weeks for certain students is one way to boost unproductive students’ output.

Steps for writing comments

1. Depending on his or her work style, the teacher should plan to comment often enough that every student receives a comment at least once every 10 lessons.
2. To comment, a teacher opens the student’s work, finds a place in the work where the student shows strength, and highlights it. This way, the student will see exactly which words got the teacher’s attention.
3. The teacher then writes a comment (see Tips below) which he or she can choose to send right then or hold until the teacher has commented on all of the students’ work.
4. The teacher should zero in on just one or at most two moments in the student’s work, choosing the skill being practiced in class, or, if the prompt asked the student to integrate skills, on the writing skill next in the hierarchy (see the Skills section about the order in which students should work on their writing skills).
5. Because the teacher is neither commenting on the overall effectiveness of the whole piece, nor making sure to catch the student’s errors, the teacher should be able to spend no more 2-3 minutes commenting on each student’s work to ensure that he or she gets to all students at least once every two weeks.

Tips for effective comments

Amplify has studied the impact of teacher comments over two decades to see which sorts of comments have the greatest impact on students' motivation and skill development and finds that comments are most effective when they:

- Point to particular parts of a student's piece rather than say something about the overall impact of the piece as a whole.
- Describe what the student has done with language that got you to stop and comment (like you would if you were close reading a text).
- Name the skill the student is using, if applicable (e.g., catching the student writing in complete sentences, or highlighting an example of framing a quotation, even if it could be better).
- Explain how the student's use of language had a personal impact. For example, it made the teacher laugh, clarified a point, helped show a character's point of view, or left the teacher a little confused.
- Are generally upbeat—but not full of praise. The teacher wants the student to focus on what sort of impact he or she is having with the writing, rather than on whether or not he or she has pleased the teacher.

Sample written comments

The following sample comments provide models that can be used verbatim or as a model for a teacher's own comments. Teachers should seek to write even shorter comments than what is presented below; sometimes, words are added to make the context of the comment clear. But, generally, students respond most readily to the shortest, most specific comments.

Focus

The student is focused on a moment (either in the text or from his or her experience):

By breaking the action in this moment into much smaller pieces, you help me experience it with you—and see that it changes your opinion.

The way you fully describe this passage in the text shows me exactly what you do and don't understand about it.

The student is focused on the same topic, claim, or idea throughout the "page" of writing:

I can see here how your evidence helps introduce your claim that the narrator is not sane. And then, the second time, you support your claim with evidence and you explain more about what you mean by "not sane."

Showing**The student uses sensory details to bring the reader into the scene:**

These sound words help me hear exactly what was happening. Yum! Your description of the taste actually made my stomach growl.

These details show how creepy that place was. Glad I'm not there.

Conventions**In a piece full of fragments and run-ons, you find a complete sentence and show the student the impact.**

Right here, because you have written in a complete sentence and finished your idea, I can understand what you mean about Tom's attitude.

You find a section that, but for some missing punctuation, could be quite clear.

I've had to read this a few times and I'm still not sure if I'm understanding what you mean here—but it seems like you are getting to your main point. Almost.

Use of Evidence**The student describes what he or she notices in the text:**

When you note that he could still describe “the red poppies” even though he was on a battlefield, you show how hopeful he remains.

Using the word “shocking” to describe this quote made me think again about his treatment.

When you use the verb _____, it gets me to look more precisely at what Frederick Douglass did at that time.

This strong verb shows me how powerful the pressure was on _____ (this character).

These details (highlight a few) help me see the character’s inner conflict.

The student has selected the “just right” evidence to support his or her idea:

Quoting these two phrases, “all of them” and “he alone,” from the paragraph, illustrates your idea that he stands apart.

This quote is a convincing way to show Walter’s confidence in his ability to succeed.

That direct quote about nothing “moving his iron heart” shows me the cruelty of slavery.

This (highlight the spot in the writing) shows me that you see the difference between what the scientists knew and didn’t know, and what the author explains to us about modern science.

The student shows that he or she understands the context of the text:

Good reminder that these doctors had no access to antibiotics. It helps me understand why they “accepted death as a daily partner in their work.”

The student’s claim or idea about the text resonates with the teacher. Be careful with these sorts of comments; they need to be very specific so that students are still getting feedback about the impact of the writing—not generalized feedback that they have pleased you:

Ha! It probably is unusual for a little brother to “emerge victorious in every wrestling match.”

I agree this word describes exactly how Walter is acting.

The student has perfectly punctuated a direct quote (maybe after a few weeks of trying): Here, now finally, I don’t have to wonder which words are yours and which words are the author’s!

The student frames a direct quote with his or her own explanation of the text:

This direct quote followed by your explanation helps me see why you selected this piece of dialogue instead of the one above it.

Logical structure

The student has considered how to structure his or her writing and has made a strong choice:

This clear transition helps me follow the point you are making about the shift in Ruth's mood.

This introductory sentence gives me a heads up that this is not going to be a typical essay.

Commenting on Revision Assignments

The student's Revision Assignment shows an improved use of the skill he or she was assigned to practice:

By adding this (highlight) piece of evidence about Phineas's state of mind, you show that his brain might now be similar to an adolescent's.

When I first read this, I thought you were jumping back and forth between a couple of ideas. But combining these sentences makes me see how they are related to explaining one particular metaphor that Hughes uses.
