

# RAGs for Sharing/ Responding

## Using Read-Around Groups to Establish Criteria for Good Writing

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A few years ago, I realized that the only way my students were ever going to learn to write better was for them to write more often, revise more willingly, and edit more effectively than they had been doing. In addition, they needed a wider and more "real" audience to write to as well as a clearer sense of the purpose for each piece of writing. In short, their entire writing experience needed to be much more extensive and much more realistic than it had been.

On the other hand, I definitely did not want to read and mark any more papers of the kind my students typically handed in—dashed off the night before, bloated with generalizations and clichés, riddled with irritating errors of expression and conventions. As I began to experiment with solutions to this dilemma, I found myself relying more and more on a modified small-group technique that seemed ideally suited to the special needs of a writing class.

### The Read-Around Group Approach

Basically, the read-around group (RAG) approach gives students the opportunity to read and respond to each other's writing at various stages in the process of any assignment. For example, they read each other's first drafts to discover how others solved the problem of finding a subject and getting started. They read second and third drafts to note progress in shaping the paper according to criteria established in discussions of earlier drafts. Later, they help each other edit nearly finished papers for specific requirements of form, language use, and the conventions of writing. At the end of the process, they read and evaluate final drafts, celebrating improvements and editing for surface errors.

With each reading, students develop a more precise idea of what they want to say, to whom, and how. They experience writing as a process, and they discover that good writing rarely springs full-blown from the author's brow, but must be carefully shaped over a period of time. They begin to recognize the importance of their audience as they become accustomed to writing for real readers—their classmates—instead of just for the teacher, a most unreal creature, in their eyes. From the student's point of view, perhaps the most helpful aspect of using the RAG method is that, for the first time, each student has a clear notion of what other students do to solve writing problems. Papers written by their peers provide much more useful models than do the professionally written examples in textbooks.

For the teacher one of the most important advantages of using RAGs is that the students read, discuss, and revise their papers three or four times before ever handing them in, which means not only that the submitted papers are at a fairly advanced stage of development but also that they are relatively free from gross errors in language and mechanics. As a result, the teacher can comment more directly on issues of composition—organization, development, tone, point of view, and effective use of language—rather than devoting so much time to matters of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and other conventions.

### The Steps in the RAG Process

As I began to use RAGs regularly, I devised several procedures to streamline the process and make it more effective. I learned that small groups work best when they have a very specific task to perform and not quite as much time to complete it as they would like. Several of the procedures are so useful to me that I will describe them for you in some detail.

*The first day.* On the first day, after a brief prewriting activity (clustering or brainstorming—anything open-ended), students write for ten minutes on a topic, using code numbers instead of their names to identify their papers. Then they form groups of four. At my signal, each group leader passes his or her group's papers to the next group, where they are distributed and read

quickly—30 seconds for each paper. At the end of each 30-second interval, I give the signal to pass the papers to the next reader in the group. When the set of four papers has been read, each group chooses the paper it liked the best in that set. The group's recorder notes the code number of the chosen paper, while the leader holds up the set of papers to indicate that the group has finished making its choice. When all groups have made a choice (generally, this takes less than a minute), I give the signal for the leaders to pass the papers on to the next group. We repeat this process until all groups have read every set except their own.

When all the sets of papers have been read, I print the code numbers chosen by each group on the chalkboard. Students enjoy seeing whether any group chose their papers as best in the set of four papers theirs traveled with. Inevitably, some code numbers appear more than once. I call for any papers chosen several times and read them aloud, asking the students to identify the qualities of the best papers they read. As they enumerate the specific "best" qualities they noticed in reading around, I write them on the chalkboard. Their list usually includes such items as good details and description, interesting beginning, consistent tone, good beginning, and so forth. The list on the chalkboard becomes a simple rubric which the students are to follow in revising their ten-minute paper for the next day. In their new drafts, I ask them to include from the rubric two or three specific items related to organization and development. The new versions, stapled on top of the originals, must be at least one full page, but no longer than one and one-half pages.

*The second day.* On the second day I use the same RAG procedure, but this time I ask my students to use the criteria from the rubric in choosing the best paper in each set. Among the second day's "best" papers will be several that had not been chosen in the first day's RAG. Thus, students who worked hard to improve their original versions are rewarded for their efforts, while some of the first day's "stars," who rested on their laurels by simply recopying their popular originals, find themselves back in the middle of the pack.

After this second RAG, I generally spend a few class sessions discussing sample copies of some of

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the papers the class chose most often in order to refine the rubric on which their third versions will be based.

*The third day.* On the day the third version is due, I use a modified RAG procedure in which I ask the students to focus on very specific elements of the rubric. In this first editing phase, students pass their papers within their own group only, checking and marking each other's papers for only one element at each reading. For example, in the first turn, readers may be asked to make a note in the margin next to the opening and closing lines if these lines contain the required content or form. In the second and third turns, I may ask readers to underline concrete details, specific examples, or lines of dialogue—whatever the rubric specifically requires in terms of organization and development.

The second phase of this editing RAG requires the students to pass the papers around their groups again to identify problems in language use. This time, on the first turn, readers are to circle all forms of *to be*. On the second turn they circle all *dead words* (e.g., *thing, very, so, really, a lot*, and other empty or overused words), while on the third turn readers bracket all repeated sentence openers (e.g., "There is," "And then," "The boy . . ."). Later in the semester, I may ask them to star all repeated words and bracket short, choppy sentences for sentence-combining work. After this RAG session, their final draft is due. It should incorporate appropriate changes suggested by the marks of the student editors.

*The fourth day.* When the students submit the fourth version of their papers, I repeat the RAG procedure from the first day, allowing a little more time for the reading of each paper (up to one minute), as these final versions tend to be more

concentrated than earlier ones. After posting the chosen numbers, I have the students proofread each other's papers for spelling and sentence errors before handing them in. Then I read aloud the best of the best, compliment the writers on a job well done, and take the whole set home to read for the first time. And a pleasant reading it is, too, compared to what it might have been had I taken home their first or second drafts. Because all earlier versions are handed in along with the newest ones, I can easily see the changes that have been made from the original writing. Thus, I can praise a student's efforts to revise, even if the overall quality of the latest version is only average in comparison with others in the class.

For longer papers (more than two pages), or more complex assignments, I use variations of the RAG method in which students read their papers aloud to their group, followed by a discussion of each paper's strengths and weaknesses. For essays of argument, I use RAGs to teach thesis paragraphs, counterarguments, supporting arguments, and concluding paragraphs, spending one RAG session on each element separately. In remedial classes I use the editing-style RAG procedure, requiring readers to find and note paragraph indentions, capitals and end punctuation, dead words, contractions, fragments, run-ons, and other specific items related to the skills we have been working on. The read-around group technique can be easily modified to suit almost any situation arising in a composition class.

#### **Suggestions for RAG Sessions**

Here are some general considerations for setting up a successful RAG session:

1. Students should use code numbers instead of names on their papers to reduce anxiety by preserving anonymity.
2. Groups should be as nearly equal in size as possible. If your class number is not divisible by four or five, make sure that the odd-sized group(s) is smaller than the others rather than larger. Groups of four or five students are best for most tasks; fewer than four provide too little interaction; more than five may have difficulty sticking to the task.
3. Appoint a leader and a recorder in each group; define their duties clearly.
4. Give the groups a specific task to perform in a strictly limited amount of time. For example, you might ask them to read quickly and select the best paper in the set or circle all forms of *to be*. As an alternative to choosing the "best" paper in each round, a different criterion could be used for each new set. For example, one round might be used to choose the paper with the best opening; the next, to choose the paper with the most information, an unusual or unexpected element, the most vivid visual images, the strongest arguments, the best ending, and so on.
5. Keep close track of time. I use a stopwatch so that students learn to pace themselves against a fixed time period. Do not let students pass papers on until you give the signal; otherwise the reading process will quickly become chaotic.
6. Set up a simple system for reading and passing papers. My students follow this system:
  - a. Group leaders collect papers from their own group members and, at my signal, pass the set to the next group in a counter-clockwise direction around the room.
  - b. Students read each paper in the prescribed time, passing it to the person on their *right* in their group. Students pass papers only when I give the signal to pass—not before and not after.
  - c. When the set has been read (I keep a tally as I time the reading so that I know when each set is finished), I tell the groups to choose the best paper, reminding them of the specific criteria for that day.
  - d. Recorders write the number of the chosen paper on a self-sticking note. Leaders then collect the papers and hold them up to signal that their group is finished.
  - e. When all the leaders indicate readiness to continue, I say, "Change groups," and the leaders pass the set on to the next group.
7. Do not ask students to choose the best paper from among the papers in their own group; it is too threatening, at least at first.
8. Keep the papers short for whole-group read-around sessions; papers longer than two pages can be handled better by being read aloud in a small group, followed by discussion.

#### Advantages of Using Read-Around Groups

There are many advantages to using read-around groups. For the student the following advantages are the most important:

1. Writing for, and getting response from, a "real" audience
2. Gaining useful ideas, approaches, and perspectives from reading and hearing other students' writing
3. Revising their papers several times before having them graded
4. Knowing where they stand in relation to other students
5. Gaining a clearer understanding of writing as a process
6. Sharpening editing skills

For the teacher these advantages stand out:

1. Students write more often, but the teacher does not read more papers.
2. Gross errors decline significantly with each revision following a RAG session and discussion.
3. Papers are better written and more interesting to read.
4. Students learn to evaluate their own and others' work.
5. Students have fewer complaints about grades.
6. Students' handwriting improves. This last phenomenon occurs when students with good ideas but poor handwriting realize that their papers are being passed over in the choosing process because they are too hard to read.

Of all the techniques I have used over the years, the RAG has been the most useful and the most versatile. Though it requires careful planning and strict monitoring, the extra effort pays off in better writing and improved attitudes. Students enjoy it,

too, for it gives them a chance to share. Most important, it focuses attention on the act of composing itself, demystifying the process and thereby giving students more confidence in their abilities to write better at every new step.

## Practical Ideas for Read-Around Groups

### Students' Reactions to the Read-Around

By Sheila Koff

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Please take out some paper and a pen to begin writing," I shouted above the restless din of my high school composition class.

"Oh, no, do we have to write already?" moaned Eddie from the back of the room.

Although I did not want to admit it, my fourth period class was my least favorite writing class, and the 100°F Santa Ana weather condition, along with the broken air conditioner, did not help. The students were tired and restless from roasting and sitting for three straight periods. And I was exhausted from standing in the heat for the same amount of time.

Their uncomfortable tedium subsided somewhat as we began to cluster on the chalkboard descriptions of numerous vivid memories.

"What about a first kiss? Is that a vivid memory?" roared athletic Greg to successive embarrassed giggles.

"Of course, Greg," I responded, "if that kiss has already been obtained." A few more chuckles arose. "Now, I want you all to write for ten minutes about just one of these memorable events. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or punctuation. But do realize that almost everyone in this room will be reading your anonymously labeled paper. Keep your pens moving as quickly as possible, trying to

describe your story with much detail. Have you any questions? Then begin."

A rare hush visited the room as 35 minds settled down to ponder what to write. The heat did not feel quite so suffocating.

"Now that your ten minutes are up, pass your papers to your table's group leader. That person is to pass the set clockwise to the next table."

Further specific read-around instructions were given. A few more questions were answered as many impatient students eagerly began reading their peers' writing. Debbie, usually bored with existence, twittered behind her first paper. Other eyes, often glazed from daydreaming, now glinted while hurriedly dancing back and forth across the pages.

"Stop. Your minute is up. Pass your paper to the right and begin the next story," I said, glancing at my stopwatch.

"What? A minute can't be up! I just started!" howled Rosemary.

"Ah, come on, Ms. Koff. I'm just getting to the best part," complained Eddie again.

"Can't we have more time?" asked another.

"I'm sorry, but the class period is almost over. You still need to finish reading at least one full set of papers and to pick your favorite. I promise to let you finish them tomorrow." I could not believe what I had said.

Waves of heated protests from my once yawning crew greeted each of my orders to "stop" and to begin reading a new paper. Jenee Gossard's "minute read-around" captivated not only the hearts but also the imaginations of my composition students. And this enthusiasm remained for the

second and third days of subsequent sharing, revising, and peer-group responding.

To my relief and joy, this scene repeats itself every time, no matter what level of class I am teaching. Need any more be said about the significance of peer review, peer modeling, and peer recognition—all evolving from the read-around in the English composition classroom?

## Using Read-Around Groups in a Biology Class

By Judith Sanderson

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Read-around groups are highly effective for improving my students' understanding of the content of the biology course as well as helping them to express themselves accurately and clearly when writing about science. In my biology class students write for a variety of purposes, including reporting laboratory experiments, reviewing films, and summarizing articles. I may ask them to describe a process or to explain the use and care of laboratory equipment. A typical writing assignment may involve summarizing what they have learned about a major topic, such as "enzymes" or "photosynthesis," and I give my students a list of vocabulary words they must use in their papers. They must also illustrate their major points with specific examples drawn from their laboratory work or reading. The best papers contain the correct information, illustrated with pertinent examples, and written in the most readable format.

In a read-around session, students code their papers with identification numbers to preserve anonymity. They work in groups of three or four, reading and passing the coded papers at my signal. After finishing each set of papers, each group picks the best paper in that set and then passes the papers to the next group. As the papers are passed around the room, students quickly notice that the good papers are similar in content, organization, and style. This experience gives them an inductive model for good writing on this assignment.

While students are sharing papers in read-around groups, I may ask them to do several different tasks, depending on the purpose of the assignment and the time available. The simplest procedure is to ask students to pick the best of each set as they read around. At the end of the session, I tabulate the results and read aloud two or three of the papers that were chosen most often. A more involved approach is to ask students to focus on and mark a single element at each turn: bracket the main idea, underline correctly used terminology, and star effectively written sentences. These two activities can also be combined: a basic read-around followed by the marking session. Whenever appropriate, students are encouraged to revise their papers according to the good models they have read. After a read-around session on final drafts, I distribute copies of the best student-selected papers to the class and post a set of them in a display case.

I find read-around groups useful for teaching biological concepts as well as for evaluating finished pieces of writing. For example, I may ask each student to generate a large cluster around a key term, such as *organelle*. (For suggestions on clustering see Gabriele Lusser Rico's article, which appears earlier in this book.) Then my students circulate copies of their clusters until each student has read several samples. When they get their own clusters back, I tell them to add appropriate items "stolen" from the clusters they have seen. Such an activity might precede a discussion of the topic, lead to a written definition of the term, or serve as a review for a test. As a matter of fact, whenever a read-around occurs before a major examination, I encourage students to "steal" useful information by making notes as they read.

In a high school biology class, read-around groups work effectively to clarify course content and to reinforce a scientific approach to problem solving. The read-around group procedure connects students to course content in ways that teacher-student interactions do not. The process is a kind of peer teaching; when students read what other students write, they see how others organize information, use vocabulary, and follow directions. When they know that their audience is composed of their peers, they want to do a better job; they

increase the level of their performance if they know peer judgment will follow. Most important, without risking exposure, they see their written work in relation to the work of others in the class. For some this is a rewarding experience; for others it is an enlightening shock.

Through the read-around process, my students learn to distinguish between writing that expresses a concept clearly and accurately and writing that does not. In addition, they increase their understanding of the course content through sharing ideas in groups. Thus, the process improves not only their writing skills but also their mastery of basic biological concepts.

## Using Read-Around Groups for Holistic Scoring

By Trudy J. Burrus

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Having first learned about read-around groups (RAGs) in their second or third generation, I did not know the finer details of RAGs; so I took the essence of the approach, as I knew it, and improvised. What I ended up with was a RAG that incorporated holistic scoring, too. Thus, in one final-stage RAG, I get the top papers in the class and scores for all papers.

I have been training my students to score compositions holistically for several years, and I recognize the critical need for a clear, strong rubric. At the same time that it must reflect the individual assignment, I prefer a rubric that is standard in form and mechanics. As a result, I use a basic six-point rubric as the foundation for the individualized versions. (For more information on holistic scoring, see the evaluation section later in this book.) The students become quite skilled at focusing on the specifics of an assignment, so we can agree on a final rubric quite rapidly. Once it is in final form, the rubric gets three to four minutes of silent attention from everyone. If the students request additional time to

internalize the rubric, they are given it without question.

Ideally, students are placed in groups of four or five. I often sit in to round out the number, and my participation in the process lends a measure of formality that seems to encourage an even more conscientious attitude from my students. A group leader and clerk distribute papers and materials and record scores.

The leaders gather the papers from the members of their groups. (Students do not score their own papers.) Attached to the back of each set of papers are seven or eight score sheets, one for each group in the room. Each student writer has entered an identification number at the top of each score sheet and has written the letters A through E on the sheet (if there are five in the group) for the readers' scores. Each leader passes the group's papers clockwise to the next group, and they are redistributed there. Each member of each group has an assigned letter (again, usually A through E, depending on the number in the group), and the clerk records the letters on an index card for future reference. The group leader is always A; the person on the leader's left is always B. Then the holistic read-around begins.

I allow one minute for the reading of each paper. This provides ample time for the students to read the papers and to determine holistic scores. Each student turns the paper over, records in pen a holistic score on the top score sheet beside his or her letter, and holds the paper until given the signal to pass the paper to the person on the left. After all papers have been read by the group, the leader records the best paper of the stack and collects the papers. Then the clerk collects the completed score sheets and clips them together. (Because the scores given by any one group are not seen by the next group, it is easy for me to tell if one group is grading consistently high or low and to remedy the situation rapidly. Using the clerk's

*Editing is easy. All you have to do is  
cross out the wrong words.*

MARK TWAIN

record of readers' letters assigned before the RAG began, I can also tell if any one student is grading inconsistently.) The scored stack of papers is passed to the next group, and the process is repeated until the stack is returned to the originating group.

The final step is for the clerks to hand the clipped score sheets to the leader of the appropriate group, who then distributes them to the writers. Each student can immediately figure his or her average score. The students staple their score sheets to the back of their papers before they turn them in. I also call for the best paper from each stack, and we discuss those papers, focusing on their outstanding aspects.

With a well-trained class and an efficient handling of the papers, a class of 35 can complete the entire RAG process in a 50-minute period. While my students are scoring, they are internalizing criteria for evaluating the papers of others; they can apply the criteria to their own first and final drafts of subsequent papers. At the same time, I am lightening my own paper load without reducing the number of writing assignments. I can then respond to selected papers or particular assignments in more depth and can provide the kind of content-based feedback that will genuinely help students improve their writing.