

Revitalizing Response & Revision with Trait-Specific Post-Its

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Great ideas often come to those who least expect them. So was the case for Spencer Silver and Arthur Fry whose accidental invention in 1974 created one of the most widely used office products in history. The distribution of the Post-It note in 1980 revolutionized the way Americans marked their places and kept track of things. Just as this remarkable office product changed our lives, the trait-specific Post-It note will change the way you and your students see peer response in your classroom. These Post-It notes can be found throughout this guide, and they can be accessed on-line at the WritingFix website: <http://writingfix.org>.

As a teacher, I have always valued the writing process and wanted my students to engage in all aspects of the process. But like most teachers, I found response to be the most frustrating and difficult part of the process. I didn't want to be my students' sole responder, and I really wanted students to engage in meaningful conversations about their writing and the writing of their peers. I have tried all sorts of response techniques over the years, from very structured to completely unstructured peer response, and nothing ever seemed to really get students into the kind of dialogue I wanted to see happening. Even my honors students would rather rush through peer response and give the cursory, "It's great. I like it." Even good writers are stuck on what to say and how to really help their peers improve a piece of writing. Most teachers I have talked to over the years have had similar problems with response, and in fact, many (including myself at times) forgo that part of the process altogether because it becomes wasted instructional time.

Unlike some teachers, I have always taught my students about writing using the writing traits because I believe the traits give students and teachers a common language to talk about writing. The traits give the foggy and somewhat subjective "good writing" some concrete and objective criteria. While I have often had my students use traits to score their writing or their classmates' writing and even use the language to justify the score, I had never, until now, had them use that language to engage in discussion of and thinking about writing.

The trait-specific Post-It notes are a simple concept based on the idea that students should respond to writing by using traits language, and that they should discuss and think about improving their writing by using that same language. The concept is quite simple, really. There are templates for each trait. Teachers can use the templates to make Post-It notes with the trait specific language. There are many ways these custom Post-It notes can be used in your classroom, and I have experimented with several of them.

The key with the Post-Its and the traits is to focus and keep it small. Focusing on two to three traits in each response session is plenty, so choose the traits you have been working on for a given assignment. Give students a Post-It note for one trait, or several, and have them begin by evaluating themselves in each sub-skill using a score of 1 to 5, with one being weak. Then have students discuss how they scored themselves overall with a partner, and then have them discuss what they would do to revise their two lowest sub-skills. This method is especially effective for writers who still are not completely comfortable sharing their work, because they don't have to actually share the piece with a partner; they can simply talk about the score in reference to the writing. At the same time, the student has the chance to evaluate his or her work and a chance to discuss the evaluation with another person, so it gives all writers a chance to use the language to dialogue about

How goes Kim's Sentence Fluency?

Use this Post-It to rank Kim's S.F. skills in her essay. Discuss your ranking with other teachers.

- Kim's sentences mostly begin with different words.
- Kim uses a mixture of simple and complex sentences.
- Kim uses a variety of transitional words when she writes.
- If read aloud, you can hear a rhythm behind Kim's sentences.
- If Kim repeated anything, she did it for effect.

their writing. This process of scoring—and then discussing how and why they scored themselves as they did—leads students to think about their writing with more depth. This depth in thinking about their writing will ultimately lead to better writing.

When I used this Post-It technique with adults in a recent in-service, I observed something very interesting. Even though I had not asked the writers to share their pieces with a partner, most ended up reading their pieces to their partners during their conversation and asking their partner for revision suggestions. It was great to watch the teachers who had not wanted to share their writing at all share it on their own and act excited about it. The language of the Post-It, I believe, had given them more confidence about what they had done well...as well as what they might consider doing better.

A colleague of mine decided on just three traits she would evaluate her students on for a particular assignment. She had her students use those three trait-specific Post-Its to self-evaluate their own rough drafts and then had the students exchange their pieces with a partner. Without knowing how the writer had originally rated the draft, the partner carefully read the piece and did a second evaluation on the same three traits. Both writers then talked about how their evaluations of the piece were similar and different. My colleague commented that her students thought that the Post-It notes were fun to use, and she liked them because she felt students were able to leave the response session with something solid to focus on for revision. She also found the Post-It notes to be useful because students focused on the same things during their response time that she would in her own evaluation of the students' writing, and in the end, she felt her students turned in better pieces of writing. The Post-It tool gave them focus and language to talk about the focus.

There are dozens of ways to vary the above approaches to using the Post-It notes. There is no right way to use them, and any way they are used will benefit students and enrich the response process. In my experience, the traits specific Post-Its are easily used at any grade level. Elementary teachers and students experience as much success as adults because they provide writers of all levels with a common language to discuss writing. This language to discuss the writing is what is missing from most response sessions and what ultimately leads to frustrated teachers and unproductive students. So don't throw out a very valuable part of the writing process; instead, use the trait specific Post-Its and make response a meaningful part of the writing process.

Rank versus Rate?

How does the one underlined verb change the responder's task on the following Post-Its?

Idea Development:

Rate each skill from 1 (low) to 5 (high) in the following:

- ___ I used a balance of showing and telling.
- ___ My details try to paint a picture in the reader's head.
- ___ I took a unique approach when writing about this topic.
- ___ I stayed on topic throughout the entire writing.
- ___ My theme/message is clear to my reader.

Idea Development:

Rank these skills from 1 (low) to 5 (high) in the following:

- ___ I used a balance of showing and telling.
- ___ My details try to paint a picture in the reader's head.
- ___ I took a unique approach when writing about this topic.
- ___ I stayed on topic throughout the entire writing.
- ___ My theme/message is clear to my reader.