



# Making Critique Work

Briony Chown  
Explorer Elementary Charter School

Like many educators, I introduced critique to my class after reading Ron Berger’s manifesto, *An Ethic of Excellence*. Following Berger’s example, I explained to students that critique should be “kind, specific and helpful” (Berger, 2003, p.93). Initially, the feedback they gave each other was kind and specific but not particularly helpful — certainly nothing like the feedback Berger described his students giving to each other. For the most part, my students corrected each other’s punctuation and grammar.

From speaking to other teachers in elementary, middle and high schools, I have found this to be a common problem. After trying a number of strategies, from children writing a question that critiquers must answer to modeling what good critique looks like, I found a simple solution: provide children with a checklist detailing what should be in the writing. I give this to the children before they start writing and then again when they are critiquing each others’ work. This checklist differs from a rubric because it does not evaluate the piece of writing and there is no sliding scale for success: the writing either has an element or it does not. Equipped with this checklist, every child in the class can look at a peer’s work and say what the writer has included, and what is unclear or left out.

## The Goals of Critique

Creating the conditions for peer critique to thrive is one of the core principles of my classroom. Without a culture of collaboration and critique, it falls upon teachers to impart knowledge, advise, judge, and guide. This is inefficient, and it creates learners who do not have ownership of their learning. In his conversation with Paulo Freire in *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change*, Myles Horton explains that when we come to an idea ourselves, rather than because an authority has told us, it is far more likely to be retained (Horton, 1990). This sounds ridiculously

simple but it is not the way that most people experience school. In a 2013 interview, the actor Daniel Radcliffe (best known for playing Harry Potter) spoke for the majority when he said he didn't do well in school because, in his words, "I am not somebody who will learn best when you tell me to sit down and be quiet and sit still. I learn by talking back and engaging in conversation and walking around." (Hattenstone, 2013). By allowing for many voices to be heard, a culture of critique enables us to begin to build the conditions for this active learning and collaboration. Juli Ruff, a ninth grade humanities teacher at High Tech High explains this well. In her work on using student voices to improve student work, Ruff explains that critique "invites students to take a critical eye to their own and others' work, and puts the student in a place of power, by asserting that his or her opinions and judgment about what makes for quality work matter" (Ruff, 2010 p. 6).

Another reason that critique is a powerful force for improvements in student work is that it allows students to see what their peers are producing. This creates a healthy sense of competition that is not to be underestimated. In fact, the single most useful thing that I can do to improve the quality of writing in my class as it is happening (as opposed to during critique) is to walk around the classroom and read aloud exemplary words or phrases that different students have used.

Sharp-eyed readers will note that in the example above, the teacher is still the arbiter of quality and imparter of knowledge, and when I introduced critique sessions, I found it difficult to step back (and difficult for students when I did so). The trouble was that after nearly two decades of formal education and several years of experience as a teacher, I had internalized schema for the elements of high-quality work that the students had not yet developed. Thus, left to their own devices, they honed in on what they knew (or thought they knew): grammar. As a result, I observed many children leaving critique sessions disappointed - they hadn't received useful feedback, they didn't feel like their peers had noticed what they had done. This wasn't because the students I teach didn't want to critique well, it was because they didn't have the skills to do so. That is where a checklist comes in: it provides a basis for conversation, a starting point and a focus. In his 1993 article, 'Choices for Children' a teacher told Alfie Kohn "I'm in control of putting students in control." Checklists do just that.

## **Why**

## **Checklists?**

Within the last two decades, checklists have revolutionized medicine. In *The Checklist Manifesto*, surgeon Atul Gawande explains how in 2001 Peter Pronovost, a critical care specialist at John Hopkins Hospital, implemented a checklist outlining the steps needed to correctly insert lines into patients in the ICU. He plotted the five steps needed to avoid infection and then authorized nurses to stop doctors if they were skipping a step. In the year after the checklist had been implemented, the ten-day line infection rate went down from 11% to zero. After two years Pronovost and his colleagues estimated that the checklists had saved eight lives and two million dollars. In addition, he found that the checklists "helped with memory recall and clearly set out the minimum number of steps in a process." Moreover, the checklist actually

“established a higher standard of baseline performance” (Gawande, 2009, p. 39). The impact of these findings have led to other hospitals around the United States and Europe adopting checklists for patient care.

It seems absurd to equate the classroom with an intensive care unit. However, in both situations, a simple checklist has made a dramatic difference to the quality of the work. Similarly to Pronovost’s findings in the ICU, I found that checklists provided students with a map for each step of their work and a tool to help them assess the work of others. Furthermore, these checklists improved the work of every student — just as Pronovost had found in the hospital.

In addition to helping students to assess the work of others, checklists have led to greater equality of feedback in the classroom. One of the challenges in a critique session is that some students are much better at it than others. While every student has a valuable contribution to make, many are not yet able to formulate their ideas in a way that can be easily understood by their peers. Checklists provide a structure upon which students can base their responses. Every student, whatever level they are working on, can look at the work of every other student and provide them with clear and useful feedback.

### **Checklists in the Classroom: The Results**

At first, I created checklists that simply contained a series of topics that needed to be included in the work. I introduced my first checklist when students were writing artist statements for paper cuttings (see picture below) that we had produced to tell the story of somebody who immigrated to California. Each group had chosen one person who had come to California and then divided up their journey into separate sections that were worked on individually. The paper cuttings were beautiful but they needed some explanation. After much discussion, the class decided that each group should write one joint artist statement to describe what the paper cuttings showed and how they fit together as well as individual artist statements. The components that students identified were the elements I compiled into the checklist. The finished artist statements were excellent. (See them all at <http://eeroom15.weebly.com/a-room-of-their-own-online-exhibition.html>) However, this was a lot of work for the students and one group in particular needed a lot of support with the checklist.



I have since moved on to creating separate checklists for each stage of the work. This allows the students to critique using a manageable amount of foci. For example, when my class wrote biographies, the first checklist indicated, paragraph by paragraph, what should be included, the second checklist focused on accuracy and meaningfulness to the subject of the biography, and the third checked for accuracy in writing conventions.

At the end of the project in which the students wrote biographies, I set up an anonymous survey to gain student feedback on various parts of the project. We had completed four critique cycles—the critiques based on the checklists listed above and an initial gallery walk. One question in the survey asked students to rate how the different critique sessions helped them to improve their biographies. Students chose from a Likert scale with the following options: it was extremely useful, it was useful, it wasn't useful, and I didn't do this. There are 24 students in my class and 18 of them completed the survey. Out of those 18, 16 children rated the three checklist critiques as either "useful" or "extremely useful." This is a contrast to the 11 children who rated our first gallery walk critique as "useful" or "extremely useful" (in fact, only 4 out of the 18 found that gallery walk to be "extremely useful").

### **Creating the Conditions for Success**

A good checklist is one that is created with the students (Berger, 2003, p. 70). In order to do this, my class and I pore over models, both professionally written ones and those written by me to find out what makes a good biography, diary entry, newspaper report (or whatever we are writing). We talk about what we like, jot down phrases or words that we want to use and pull out the elements that make that piece of work successful (or not). As Ron Berger points out, using student work as models is particularly effective. Typically, I know the students are ready for a checklist when they are able to



important.

## References

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To learn more about Briony's work at Explorer Elementary, visit <http://eeroom15.weebly.com>

## Appendix 1: paragraph by paragraph checklist

Tophie

Does it have?	Checked by ER	Checked by JF	Checked by SL
<b>Title at the top of the page</b>			
An introduction to the biography. It should include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• who it is about</li> <li>• when they were born</li> <li>• what they are known for (a teaser to get the reader interested)</li> </ul>	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ ✓
An early life paragraph. It should include details about: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• family</li> <li>• early/ first memories</li> <li>• starting school etc.</li> </ul>	✓ ✓ x	✓ x	✓ x
A paragraph is all about what they are known for. It should describe in detail: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• what your subject is an expert in</li> <li>• some interesting bring the paragraph to life with memories and emotions</li> </ul>	✓ ✓	✓ ✓	✓ x
A paragraph or two all about their struggle. Include: what the struggle was How did they feel and why (this brings the biography to life) How did they overcome their difficulties	✓ ✓ ✓	✓	✓
An ending paragraph. It wraps up the biography by explaining where they are now <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• how do they feel in 4<sup>th</sup> grade?</li> <li>• what do they want to achieve?</li> <li>• end by reminding the reader what they will be known for.</li> </ul>	x x ✓	x x ✓	x x ✓

Next steps: <sup>I need to add in</sup> what she wants to achieve. Starting school, how do they feel in the first

## Appendix 2: truthfulness and meaningfulness checklist

Think about...	Subject's response
<b>WWW</b> What do you like best about this biography?	I really like how you said "there were a lot of smiles that day" and how you said "and I REALLY LIKE the ending sentence"
<b>ACCURACY</b> Is there any information that isn't as you remember it being (underline it in red)? How could the biography be changed so that it fits with your memories?	We went to the snow for a party
<b>MEANINGFUL</b> Does the biography share what is most important to you? If not, what should be included?	I know you guys need to wrap it up. But can you do like 1 sentence about my leg that was a big part of my life
<b>OTHER</b> Is there anything else that you want to tell your biographer?	Thank you for writing my life story ITS GREAT! ♥ Aubrey ♥

Next steps:

How you said "remember" helps me

## Appendix 3: writing conventions checklist

### Jonathan

Jonathan Sean Andre Underhill was born on 6/7/93 in San Diego CA. He is known for loving soccer.

An early memory of Jonathan's is he almost got killed chasing his mother on the play structure at Lemon Grove. He was chasing her down the slide then he grabbed her skirt, when she was going down the slide and he hit his head on the burning hot steel pole and all his mom could hear was crying in pain and all he could see was blood dripping down his face and his mom and Aunt brought him to the car and gave him a real big band aid and when they got home they gave him a chocolate band aid.

When he first started school, Jonathan was nervous because he never met a teacher before and Mr Santa was big and tall. He came outside and gave him a handful of legos and Mr Santa said "here you go". When he did not feel nervous he went inside and played with blocks with other people.

He started soccer when he was 4 years old. Jonathan is so extreme he punted the ball from his goal to the other goal and it flew through the sky.

One of Jonathan's struggles is writing what makes it hard for him is handwriting, spelling and description it has been a struggle for a very long time it makes him feel overwhelmed and he thinks he isn't a good writer. This makes him feel discouraged and frustrated.

Jonathan wants to achieve better writing skills so he likes his writing a lot more. Jonathan feels great in fourth grade because he feels more mature and smarter. Jonathan feels awesome because he gets to use computers to type up things because it's high tech. Jonathan is still known for soccer.

#### Biography Critique Checklist

The last stage - writing partners

Writing partners Quinn and Garrett

Looking at Garrett's biography of Jonathan

**Check when you have completed:**

**To do**

1. Your writing partner should read your work out loud. They will help you find missing words, run on sentences etc. these together.
2. Spell-check your work together.
3. Challenge - Is there anything else you would like help before you turn this in to Ms. Chow? Eg. you might improve your vocabulary, the flow of the writing, your description etc. Now is your time to ask your writing partner.

**Explain any challenges that you tackled here:**

Dear Ms. Chow,

Garrett's biography of Jonathan is now ready for the exhibition.

Signed Quinn and Garrett