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## **Making Feedback Stick: The Effects of Targeted, Verbal Formative Feedback Strategies on Writing Skill Acquisition for Secondary English Students**

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Making Feedback Stick:  
The Effects of Targeted, Verbal Formative Feedback Strategies on Writing Skill Acquisition  
for Secondary English Students

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In fulfillment of final requirements for the MAED degree

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### Abstract

Providing feedback to developing writers that creates lasting changes in their writing presents a challenge for educators. This study investigates the use of a formative feedback system in which students write in staggered groups while receiving targeted, specific verbal feedback on their writing. Participants include thirty-one 10th grade general English students in a suburban high school. Data collection methods include a Google Form data gathering tool, an observation log, teacher-generated journal, and comparison of essay scores using a writing rubric. Results showed an increase in student writing performance, a mindset shift from an external to internal locus-of-control, and a greater appreciation for verbal formative feedback in helping improve writing practice. The study showed improvement in student performance with little-to-no drawbacks presenting a simple and sustainable system of writing instruction for the secondary classroom.

*Keywords:* secondary, English, Language Arts, writing, formative feedback, verbal feedback

In order to write well, students must master and apply a multitude of skills at the same time. For instance, students must synthesize information from multiple texts, organize it on the page, vary word use and use proper subject/verb agreement. As a result, writing instruction requires the teacher to adapt and change their approach for each student, meeting every writer where they are in their own development and providing them with the support needed to improve. Additionally, the feedback provided must allow students to easily apply the changes and continue to incorporate those changes into their practice requiring the feedback to be timely and specific. The traditional method of writing instruction provides students with immense written feedback after they have completed a full draft of the assignment. While this method can prove to be effective, it requires a great deal of time on the teacher's part and often leaves students unable to integrate the changes into their practice in the long-term. Of particular interest is how to apply these methods to students in English class of average achievement at the secondary level. This paper investigates the effects of individualized, verbal feedback at the early stages of writing and their impact on student writing performance.

### **Review of Literature**

To write effectively, people must possess many high-level skills and coordinate the functioning of each of them. In the words of Olmanson et al. (2016): "Writing is a time-consuming, nonlinear process involving multiple drafts even for those who do it for a living" (p. 100). Additionally, students often view feedback in a negative way. Negative perceptions of writing feedback are often founded in a lack of interest in the subject and a fear of having mistakes and failures exposed (Zumbrunn, Marrs, & Mewborn, 2015). The challenge for the educator lies in motivating students to perform the complex process while building confidence and continually learning and improving upon previous practice.

The most efficient way to do this is with formative feedback. This form of feedback is given to students as they engage in the early stages of the writing process before they finish a first draft. Formative feedback pushes students into the “zone of proximal development”, or the space between a student’s potential level of adult support and their current level of achievement (Dinnen & Collopy, 2009, p. 240). By pushing students into the zone of proximal development, we create healthy learning climates, give information as to allow students to build upon their growing body of knowledge, and measure how each student is progressing towards the goals set forth (Frey & Fisher, 2011).

While generally accepted as a critical part of an educator’s practice, theories on how best to provide formative feedback vary in their approaches. To improve a student’s ability to write, the literature agrees on a few foundational elements. For formative feedback to move students significantly towards learning targets, the feedback must be improvement-oriented as opposed to evaluative in nature (Dinnen & Collopy, 2009). In the words of Sieben (2017):

“Secondary ELA teachers are charged with the task of providing students with intentional, caring, and conversational feedback notes that place value on students’ ideas and on their long-term development as writers with unique voices who have much to contribute to community conversations” (p. 52).

As opposed to offering feedback as to whether or not a piece of writing is “good” or “bad,” educators should offer direct feedback on what was executed successfully or what specifically needs improvement (e.g. better support of the thesis, greater explanation of quotes). Dinnen and Collopy (2009) found that both robust and weak writers receive minimal improvement-oriented feedback, however strong writers receive more positive evaluative feedback than weak writers.

While strong writers can be made to feel that they are successful, they do not get a greater volume of feedback that would yield significantly better writing.

To be most effective, feedback should also include information about the process but then move students towards information about self-regulation (Frey & Fisher, 2011). The ultimate goal of writing instruction is to provide students with the skills and knowledge to find success on their own, meaning they can look reflectively and critically at their own writing and make improvements without teacher support. Thus, educators need to provide feedback that helps students understand the thought processes associated with high-level writing to gain capability in the processes without assistance. To create feedback that is both improvement-oriented and moves students towards self-regulation, teachers should follow a formula of feedback generation (Frey & Fisher, 2011). Educators should “focus on the processes needed for the task, move to information about behaviors within the student’s influence to make changes, and steer clear of comments that are either too global or too minute to be of much use” (Frey & Fisher, 2011, p. 92). This process necessitates that feedback is built to improve student work and assist students in creating lasting changes in their writing practice.

Not only does the content of feedback have a significant effect on student learning, but the timing for feedback delivery can make a dramatic difference. In one study, Fisher and Frey (2013) found that when high school students received feedback after completion of a summative assignment, over 80 percent of the students noted that the primary takeaway they were looking for in feedback was “To know what grade I got and generally how I did” (p. 67). Only 3 percent sought “Edits to improve my writing” (2013). At that late stage in the writing-generation process, the overwhelming majority of students only sought the end product and evaluation of their work. Very few students had a mindset geared towards improving their previous work.

The results were similar in Olmanson et al. (2016). Researchers discovered that in looking over a first draft, many students believed they had finished when they felt that the essay contained all of the information they wanted to present. Other students believed they were finished based on how the writing sounded as they reread it. Viewing these results, researchers concluded that since revision is a high-level process that is challenging both cognitively and procedurally, students rarely take the second draft of an essay as an opportunity to make substantial changes to their text (Olmanson et al., 2016). Similarly, Fisher and Frey (2013) found that “when feedback focuses on a summative task, such as an essay or research paper, it is not likely to change students’ performance because there is no opportunity for students to redo, or rethink the work” (p. 66). As a result of these roadblocks, teachers often provide feedback that does not lead to long-term improvement in the writing practice.

A common mindset when receiving feedback after the completion of a draft involves viewing the piece of writing as needing editing as opposed to revision. Frey and Fisher (2013) found that when receiving feedback on writing, students are usually compliant in making the corrections suggested by the teacher but do little to go into rounds of revision. Students were also found to be more likely to make the same editing mistakes again on the next assignment, as they do not retain the suggested corrections.

Additionally, a study by Gulley (2012) investigated the effects of feedback delivery. Gulley investigated the effects of verbal and written feedback delivery to see if either method provided greater improvements to student skills. The study showed that the method of feedback delivery did not affect student revisions in relation to content, structure, grammar or style (Gulley, 2012).

In summary, feedback is less valuable if deferred until after completion of the summative task as student focus has shifted to another task (Frey & Fisher, 2013). In an attempt to address this issue, the literature reveals three attempts at navigating these realities. Frey and Fisher (2013) streamlined summative grading with rubrics which reduced the amount of time required for each essay. This allowed instructors to focus on reteaching content based on earlier performance. Olmanson et al. (2016) used technology-driven scaffolding to create a visual representation of a student's writing structure which allowed writers to identify areas for improvement autonomously. Finally, Watson (2010) integrated reflective journaling into routine classroom practices to enhance understanding of concepts taught.

While conclusions surrounding formative writing feedback were similar in many journals, studies differed in approach to delivering formative feedback. Frey and Fisher (2013) developed an error analysis tool to collaboratively address common student errors, while directly targeting small groups of trending students with the writing instruction they needed. This led to another layer of analysis in which participant data could be used to analyze effectiveness of feedback. Frey and Fisher (2013) were quick to distinguish the difference between a mistake and an error, defining "When a mistake is pointed out, the student knows what to do next; when errors are pointed out, the student does not know what to do next" (p. 69). By eliminating mistakes, they were able to create four categories of student writing errors: factual, procedural, transformation, and misconceptions (Frey & Fisher, 2013). By identifying which type of error occurred teachers more effectively targeted instruction to effectively correct it.

In contrast, Olmanson et al. (2016) used technology-driven scaffolding to create a visual representation of a student's writing structure in order for them to identify areas for improvement autonomously. The foundational belief of this approach provides that students are better able to

self-assess their own writing if they are given tools to approach and simplify the process. This belief works a very different approach from Frey and Fisher (2013) in that it moves students towards autonomy through the use of analysis tools. Olmanson et al. (2016) used InfoWriter, a web-based program that gave students a way to diagram their writing as a concept map. Students were able to highlight sections of their text, select a label for type of information, and create arrows diagramming how their ideas connected. Essay diagramming allowed students to identify improvements that could be made within their essay, provided scaffolded ways to go about the improvements, and offered autonomy in the revision process (Olmanson et al., 2016). Data produced through this approach showed less profound of an improvement in student writing. However, Olmanson et al. (2016) claim “the experience of using rereading to create persistent, movable, visual markers of the required elements in an academic text holds promise” (p. 118). Providing students with visual feedback proved to be one useful tool in moving students towards autonomous application of writing improvement practices.

Working to increase autonomy in student writing through self-reflection, Watson (2010) undertook an approach to integrate structured journal entries to help increase student comprehension of writing lessons and increase student achievement. Watson found that by incorporating reflecting journaling, she gave students a valuable tool to improve understanding of concepts taught, but not necessarily the tools to improve writing autonomously (Watson, 2010). Reflecting journaling encourages students to learn from their writing by interpreting and framing experiences in the classroom and reproducing them at a higher level (Watson, 2010). How is growth in academic writing affected by formative feedback approaches to instruction?

In a strong hybrid of the aforementioned methods, Sieben (2017) suggests six feedback strategies to improve students writing: Relate and react to the content/ideas in the piece, provide

a balance of compliment and critique, use minimal marginal notes and summative endnotes, keep it conversational, have students reflect on their work, and use emoticons. These six strategies, when used in combination and adapted for individual scenarios were found to not only help students to grow in their abilities as writers but also engage more strongly with the process and have hope in their writing abilities (Sieben, 2017).

Additional strategies proved to be effective at increasing student participation in the revision process. In a study by Dawson (2009), students used Quaker Shares to work through the revision process. This technique allowed teachers to push inquiry in conversations, and avoid defensiveness from students (Dawson, 2009). Dawson (2009) was able to create a classroom culture that pushed authentic conversations about writing which increased student achievement and helped them to make dramatic and lasting improvements to their practice.

Though results varied in magnitude, all studies reviewed showed a positive impact on student achievement through the introduction of targeted formative writing feedback. Frey and Fisher (2013) produced the strongest quantitative data, finding that after instatement of their formative feedback system 98 percent of students passed the English course of study with a C average or higher. Additionally, the first-time pass rate for the English portion of the high school exit exam improved from 91 percent in 2009 to 97 percent in 2012 (Frey & Fisher, 2013). The heavy use of organized student tracking in relation to errors and achievement allowed Frey and Fisher (2013) to produce this qualitative result.

Both Olmanson et al. (2016) and Watson (2010) produced data that heavily relied on qualitative observation. Both studies found that while their approach to providing students with formative writing feedback were successful, they both agree in that they did not go far enough with their approaches to effectively improve student achievement. Watson (2010) found that

while reflective journaling did not directly correlate to greater achievement, it can be used as a useful tool to connect concepts from in-class instruction with practical application. Students were able to grasp a deeper understanding of concepts through journaling, however, they were not able to apply a better understanding to improved writing product or increased autonomy of error-correction. Similarly, Olmanson et al. (2016) found that

...despite a technology supported intervention that led to students identifying opportunities for transformative revision, many revision-related plans and reorganizations went un-acted upon--suggesting that while the obstacles to transform revision may begin with rereading, they do not end there (p. 117).

Both studies found that increased capability does not directly translate to action in students.

While many studies provided qualitative data, few provided quantitative data to support the theories. The study by Gausch, Espasa, Alvarez, and Kirschner (2013) provided quantitative data to support many of the qualitative findings of other studies. The results of the study found that epistemic feedback, or that involving requests for explanation or clarification, produced the greatest results. Students receiving epistemic feedback exhibited a relative improvement of 105.83 percent, in comparison to 35.11% and 40.81% by corrective and suggestive methods. This method applied to both feedback provided by teachers and students in peer-evaluations (2013). Quantitative data showed dramatic improvement in student writing through actionable formative feedback strategies.

Given these findings, the need exists for further research into practices that can incorporate formative feedback strategies into a secondary English classroom. Formative feedback strategies prove successful in their employment, however, little evidence exists of structures in which these strategies can be applied. To address this gap, I focused my research

with the following question: What are the effects of targeted, verbal formative feedback on writing skill acquisition for secondary English students?

### **Methodology**

Study participants included one class of 31 total students in a 10th Grade English. All participants were either 15 or 16 years old, and the group included 20 male and 11 female students. Of the participants, three students had IEP's and receive Special Education Services. An additional three students had 504 Plans and receive accommodations. However, no changes or modifications were needed or made to the instruction all students received as a part of the study. I explained the research process and purpose was explained to students before the study began. Students and parents were notified of the study via a parent permission form (Appendix A).

The initial step in the research process included a Google Form data gathering tool (Appendix B) aimed at gathering baseline information on student perspectives towards writing and various methods of feedback that teachers use. In order to keep responses anonymous, students were not required to submit any personal identifiers with their responses. Questions on the data gathering tool were crafted to model those asked by Olmanson et al. (2016) and Watson (2010) in their respective studies. Questions required students to rate multiple elements on a scale of 1 to 5. A low score represents a negative response and a high score represents a positive response. Students were also able to provide justification for their response. Students answered the following questions: How would you rate your writing skills? How much does teacher feedback improve your writing? How much does written feedback improve your writing? How much does verbal feedback improve your writing? Any other comments?

Students were then divided into four equal groups alphabetically by last name. Each group consisted of 7 or 8 students. During daily classes, every student received the same instruction on the novel *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald. Students read the text at the same pace regardless of the group assignment. Initial instruction on the novel centered on building a foundation of understanding of the novel. The text poses a challenge for many students in its vocabulary usage and oftentimes abstract language, so students first sought to understand literally what occurred in the plot. Secondary instruction centered on character dynamics and relationships between characters. Tertiary instruction sought to increase student awareness of authorial intent and understanding how Fitzgerald's approach to writing the text influenced its meaning. All three levels of instruction required close reading of important passages in the text, group discussions, and direct instruction from the teacher. Students had previously been instructed on writing a literary analysis essay in which they select and analyze quotes from a text to support a response to an open-ended question. All students had previously written one literary analysis under my instruction, and at least three total in high school, prior to the study. Feedback on previously completed essays took place predominantly after completion of a first draft of the essay and was delivered in written form. Students only received individual support during the drafting process if they specifically asked for assistance from me during in-class work days.

Each group of participants were required to attend student support time to receive direct, actionable feedback on writing practices while writing a literary analysis of *The Great Gatsby*. Student support time is embedded into the regular school schedule every week under the name "Morning Academic Support Time" (MAST). If a student is assigned to this support time, they

are required to attend. Each week, students in the assigned writing group attended this MAST session. Due to the size of the class, 7 or 8 students participated in each MAST session.

Support sessions began with a brief introduction of the essay topic and an opportunity for students to ask questions about the assignment. Participants had not yet started writing essays when they attended the session. The essay prompt for the first week was: “F. Scott Fitzgerald’s novel focuses on the male characters, but he has several clearly delineated female characters as well, each with their own desires, motivations, and needs. Write an essay comparing and contrasting Daisy Buchanan, Myrtle Wilson, and Jordan Baker. Ultimately, what is Fitzgerald’s message to the reader about women and feminine power?” The essay prompt for the second week was: “Tom Buchanan and George Wilson are more similar than different. Write an essay in which you compare and contrast these two men according to their attributes toward women, their ways of showing violence, and their reactions to being cuckolded. What is Fitzgerald telling us about the nature of man?” The essay prompt for the third week was: “The theme of seeing and not seeing, or variations on blindness, permeates the novel. Analyze the treatment of blindness, and of seeing and not seeing, in the novel and show how these images are used to emphasize Fitzgerald’s message to the reader.” Finally, the essay prompt for the fourth week was: “Consider this final statement from Nick in Chapter 9: ‘Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther...And one fine morning - So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.’ Using characters and situations from the novel, examine this last passage from the novel and explain how it supports Fitzgerald’s message to the reader about the American Dream.” These essay prompts require that students reflect on their reading, create a thesis statement that addresses the question, gather textual

evidence aligned with their thesis, and synthesize evidence into a coherent and fluid piece of writing.

During each MAST session, students received direct feedback from me. Feedback was tailored to each student in a 2-5 minute one-on-one session at the beginning of the support time. I delivered feedback to students verbally with a particular emphasis on actionable and direct changes to the writing practice of each student based on the work they had produced. For example, one student received feedback on their use of transitional phrases between paragraphs, and another student received feedback on using speaker tags to introduce a quote. Feedback varied greatly from student to student, however trends did emerge and many pieces of feedback were given to multiple students. After receiving feedback, participants then continued working independently while the teacher observed the application of taught methods while working autonomously. I recorded observations in an observation log (Appendix C). The specific focus of observations centered on the ability for students to remember and apply individualized feedback while working independently. After each MAST session, I reflected on the session using a teacher-generated journal (Appendix D). Journal entries focused on the feedback given, whether or not that feedback proved effective, and what challenges were presented in that individual session.

Essay due dates varied by participation group. Participants were required to submit essays one week after the student support session, allowing students the same amount of writing time. One 56-minute class period per week was dedicated to student work time, either on essay writing or continued to read *The Great Gatsby*. Students received additional feedback during this time via the methods mentioned above. After essay submission, I used a rubric to assess the

writing (Appendix E). These scores were compared to previous literary analysis essays that student had previously written.

Finally, participants completed the same data gathering tool as they submitted at the beginning of the study. The second round of results was compared to the first to identify any changes in their understanding of and feelings toward teacher feedback on writing.

### **Analysis of Data**

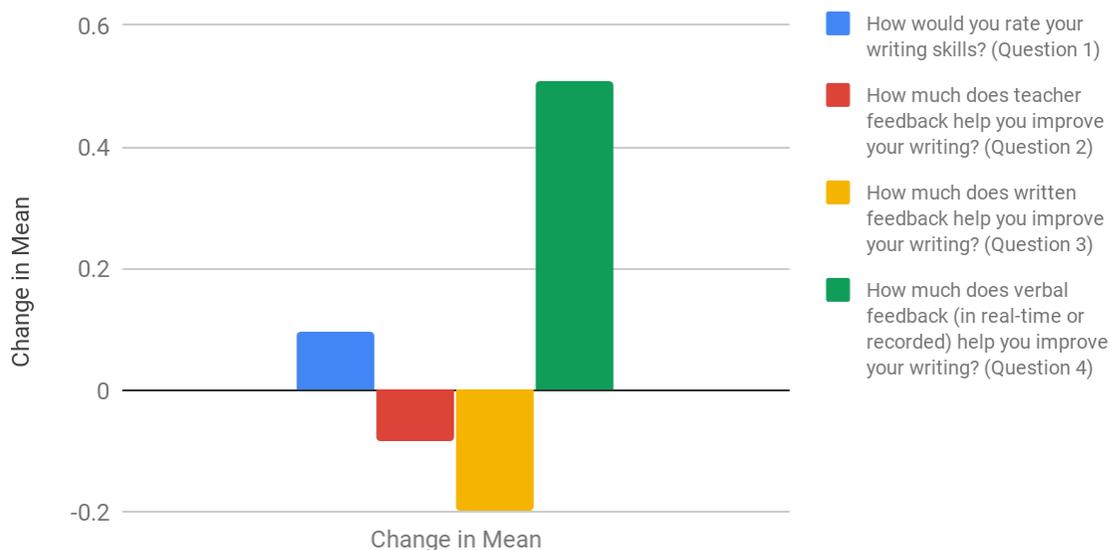
Data collected using the Google Form data gathering tool (Appendix A) showed an overall increase in student perception of their own writing skills from the beginning to the end of the study. No student indicators were received with survey data to ensure anonymity. The Google Form consisted of four questions. Each question asked respondents to choose a rating between 1 and 5, with 1 indicating a negative attitude or response and 5 indicating a positive one. Additionally, students were required to submit a written justification for the rating they selected. The Google Form was administered on the first day of the study before any formative feedback was given, as well as after completion of the study.

In order to analyze qualitative data, written justifications for each question were aggregated and categorized into thematic groups. Qualitative data trends show that student perspectives shifted from an external locus of control to an internal one. The pre-study survey produced written responses that centered on the belief that teacher feedback was difficult to remember and incorporate in the future, and that students often felt as if they did not receive adequate feedback due to teacher laziness or inability to address gaps. Results from the post-study survey demonstrate a shift in which students believe that feedback is helpful in addressing and acknowledging mistakes in order to give students a clear path towards fixing them in the future.

Quantitative results, gathered through the comparison of the numeric responses to each question on the Google Form, also showed an improvement in perspectives on writing and teacher feedback. In response to the question “How would you rate your writing skill?” (Question 1) on a 5-point scale, the mean response increased from 3.37 to 3.46. Student perception of the value of teacher feedback as evidenced by responses to the question “How much does teacher feedback help you improve your writing?” (Question 2) decreased from a mean of 4.37 to 4.29. The greatest change in responses was seen in response to the question, “How much does verbal feedback (in real-time or recorded) help you improve your writing?” (Question 4) in which the mean response increased from 3.53 to 4.04 points. The improvement in value placed on verbal feedback correlated with a decrease in the value placed on written feedback. In response to the question, “How much does written feedback help you improve your writing?” (Question 3), the mean response decreased from 3.95 to 3.75 points. Chart A shows the change in mean for each question from the beginning to the end of the study.

## Change in Mean

Chart A



Qualitative results from the Google Form show an increased focus on improving writing and a decreased focus on student mistakes. Responses to Question 2 before the study show a common trend of feedback focusing on mistakes. For instance, one student responded “[Feedback] helps me know what I did wrong so I can fix it next time.” Another wrote, “[Feedback] helps me a lot because I know what to work on and what to improve on.” Responses after concluding the study shifted to focus on leveraging student writing strengths. For instance, one student wrote, “Teacher feedback helps me because it can help clarify the objectives and also help me see where my strengths are.” Another student wrote, “[My teacher] gives me a good amount of information on how to enhance, or improve my writing style and technique.”

Perspectives of verbal feedback shifted and became more positive from before to after the study. Before the study, many students found verbal feedback less effective. One student wrote, “[Verbal Feedback] is the same thing as written feedback but I’m a way better reader than listener. When things are recorded or out loud, I tend to miss things or mishear. When it is written, I can go back and look at it and really figure out what is being said.” Two other students responded, saying, “I don’t really use verbal feedback to help me with my writing” and “It’s likely I’m not listening [to the feedback].” After the study, students found greater value in verbal feedback. One student responded, “Teacher are able to elaborate far more on things you can improve on than if they were to write it.” Another student responded, “I think when you’re face-to-face with your teacher, you have a much more interpersonal connection for understanding what you need to do to improve your paper and argument, while also getting a better connection and [learning] what kind of teacher they are.” Students valued the human connection that was established through verbal formative feedback and believed it was more effective in improving their writing.

The Student Writing Observation Log (Appendix C) yielded results showing a relatively strong ability for students to continue to apply feedback on future writing. Of the 22 students who received feedback that was actionable and demonstrable for observation, 18 students, or 82%, were able to continue applying the verbal feedback to their writing.

A comparison of grades from a previous essay with the essay grade received through the formative feedback process showed an increase in student achievement. On a 50-point scale, the mean score showed a 2 point, or 4% increase from 42.5 to 44.5 points, the median score increased from 43 to 44.5 points, and the mode increased from 38 to 43 points.

Results from the Teacher-Generated Journal (Appendix D) revealed the clear benefits of practicing and refining the practice of formative feedback. Early entries showed a focus on targeted improvements for future weeks in order to improve the efficiency and impact of feedback on student writing. For example, building foundational terminology such as “speaker tag” and “context for the quote” at the beginning of instructional periods allowed feedback to be increasingly targeted and more efficient. With 7-8 students per group, efficiency in giving feedback proved essential. Providing foundational terminology up-front led to more productive work sessions and an empirical improvement in student abilities to implement feedback into their writing.

Additionally, preparation for the drafting process, along with the quality of the writing prompt allowed for a more productive drafting session. When students were not prepared for writing with quotes selected and general ideas formed, they often found themselves unable to produce sufficient writing to receive helpful feedback. Providing students with writing prompts in advance, along with a select number of prompt options allowed for students to self-start and begin drafting more quickly and with less duress.

Data shows that the formative feedback methods improved student writing performance while increasing the value that students placed on verbal feedback from their teacher. The marked increase in essay scores demonstrates the clearest indication of the positive impact of targeted formative feedback in the early stages of the writing process. Additionally, student perspective shifted dramatically to an internal locus of control in which they felt feedback made them more capable of autonomously improving their writing in the long-term. Student perspectives shifted in favor of verbal delivery of feedback and away from written delivery, most likely due to the improvement in essay scores and individual attention they received. Nothing in the written responses to the Google Form (Appendix B) would indicate that written feedback is inherently less valuable, only that it requires unnecessary time for delivery and often occurs (for most classroom systems) after the completion of a rough or final draft of a writing piece.

The formative feedback delivered often allowed students to replicate practices autonomously after teacher interaction. While this study did not investigate student ability to replicate skills on future pieces of writing, the grand majority of students continued implementing teacher feedback through the rest of their essay. This shows a great deal of promise as the goal of all teacher feedback is to create lasting changes in student learning and skills. As with most teacher practices in education, preparation and planning play a key role in providing valuable formative feedback. Preparing students well for the writing activity, along with creating common foundational terminology allowed students to find the highest degrees of success while allowing the teacher to use their time wisely and productively in assisting students.

### **Action Plan**

The ability to write proficiently and effectively is one of the most critical skills that a student needs to learn in their educational career. However, writing is a very complex system and

requires a mastery of many different skills and abilities. Since writing necessitates knowledge of many different skills working in harmony with each other, teaching writing can prove to be a daunting and exceedingly tricky process for educators. The results of this study show that the method implemented can help teachers to serve their students better.

The study showed that providing students with actionable feedback through a verbal delivery system at the early stages of writing can lead to improved student writing. More significantly, this study provides a method to provide such feedback to students by using staggered writing groups at different stages of the novel. This structure allows the teacher to provide students with the personalized feedback they need to make significant changes to their writing. Perhaps even more significant were the changes to student perspectives as a result of this feedback method. Students viewed feedback as being more valuable, and they shifted their mindset on writing to be one of increased autonomy and control over their mastery and outcomes. Increasing student autonomy and willingness to make improvements is a goal of all teachers, and this method provides a system to bring students to that stage.

I believe that this structure has even greater potential in advanced courses. One of the greatest challenges presented by having students writing at staggered intervals was in thesis generation and quote selection for students. Early in the reading of a novel, students have less to say about a text and fewer moments to draw from for textual support. However, for advanced students, this practice prepares students for the demands of college-level literature courses. Students must dig deeply into specific moments of text and find interesting topics of discussion that lie beneath the surface. Writing about the impossibility of the American Dream in *The Great Gatsby* is much simpler than exploring the tenuous and subtle relationship dynamics between

Daisy and Tom in Chapter 1. However, advanced students should be prepared to discuss more difficult topics at length, and this structure would give them the practice required to do so.

As a result of this study, I plan to make significant changes in the way that I teach writing throughout the school year. I plan to apply this method to every major unit that I teach in which the culminating project is a piece of student writing. While the method requires a great deal of effort in creating the structures and planning the writing groups, it ran smoothly and required little adjustment once the initial structures were in place. Establishing these practices early in the school year will allow students to become more comfortable with the system and as a result, I believe the system will run even more smoothly.

I plan to implement some aspects of this system into my work every day. Whenever students are writing, I plan to circulate the room and give them specific thing to work on in their writing practice. This incremental, step-by-step approach will help students understand that writing is not an arbitrary practice but a combination of many small skills that need to be done well in coordination with each other.

I believe that by implementing this structure throughout the school year, my students will make more significant gains in writing than with previous systems. They will be able to make specific and direct changes to their writing every time they write. As students begin to see their writing improve, they will realize the value in it and continue investing in the class. I plan to see essay scores improve, and more importantly, I plan to see student writing become more fluent, coherent, and well-structured.

Additionally, I plan to see my workload and stress as a teacher of writing decrease. I will provide students will a reduced amount of feedback after they have submitted their essays, as they will have received a great deal of feedback during the writing process. Additionally, I will

have fewer essays to grade at one time through the staggered writing method, allowing me to take more time with each essay examining the piece as a whole. I will never have to approach a massive stack of papers and attempt to do each one of them justice in assessment while assessing them in a reasonable amount of time. This change will result in more accurate scoring of assessments.

Future action research would be very beneficial. In particular, research that covers an extended period with a greater number of students would be helpful in providing more complete data. This study is just one snapshot of how this system can be implemented. I would like to perform additional research that looks at the implementation of this system on a large-scale. Would this system work for a teacher to apply in every section that they teach? Will this system work as well (or better) with advanced students? Is the growth demonstrated able to be sustained over an entire semester or school year? These are some of the questions that future action research could help to answer.

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Appendix A:

**The Effects of Targeted, Verbal Formative Feedback on Writing Skill Acquisition for  
Secondary English Students  
Parental Permission Form**

January 22, 2018

Dear Parents,

In addition to being your child's English teacher, I am a St. Catherine University student pursuing a Masters of Education. As a capstone to my program, I need to complete an Action Research project. I am going to study the impact of providing individual, focused feedback on student writing because I want to improve the writing skills and abilities of my students.

In the coming weeks, I will be providing students individual feedback on their writing as a regular part of my instructional practices by assigning students to Minnetonka Academic Support Time (MAST). All students will participate in these activities as members of the class. In order to understand the outcomes, I plan to analyze the data obtained from the results of this method of feedback such as improvement in writing scores and ability to perform writing skills autonomously to determine if this supplemental feedback strategy can make significant improvements on student writing. All strategies implemented and assessments given are part of normal educational practice.

The purpose of this letter is to notify you of this research and to allow you the opportunity to exclude your child's participation and results (pre-and post- assessment, form results, observation notes) from my study.

**If you decide you want your child's data to be in my study**, you don't need to do anything at this point.

**If you decide you do NOT want your child's data included in my study**, please note that on this form below and return it by February 1, 2018. Note that your child will still participate in the feedback practices, but his/her data will not be included in my analysis.

In order to help you make an informed decision, please note the following:

- I am working with a faculty member at St. Kate's and an advisor to complete this particular project.
- There are no foreseeable risks associated with this research. All students will receive the same level of writing instruction as other students in the building. All students will receive extra writing support in the form of individual, verbal feedback which will hopefully result in improved writing skills and abilities.
- I will be writing about the results that I get from this research. However, none of the writing that I do will include the name of this school, the names of any students, or any references that would make it possible to identify outcomes connected to a particular student. Other people will not know if your child is in my study.
- The final report of my study will be electronically available online at the St. Catherine University

library. The goal of sharing my research study is to help other teachers who are also trying to improve their teaching.

- There is no penalty for not having your child's data involved in the study, I will simply delete his or her responses and writing scores from my data set.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, Sean Kern ([sean.kern@minnetonkaschools.org](mailto:sean.kern@minnetonkaschools.org)). You may ask questions now, or if you have any questions later, you can ask me, or my advisor Catherine Kelly ([cmkelly@stkate.edu](mailto:cmkelly@stkate.edu)), who will be happy to answer them. If you have questions or concerns regarding the study, and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), you may also contact Dr. John Schmitt, Chair of the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board, at (651) 690-7739.

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Sean Kern

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**OPT OUT: Parents, in order to exclude your child's data from the study, please sign and return by February 1, 2018.**

I do NOT want my child's data to be included in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Child

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Parent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Appendix B:

## Writing Beliefs

Answer each question honestly. Your responses will have no bearing on your grade in this course. Please do not include any names in your responses, including your own.

\* Required

**1. How would you rate your writing skills? \***

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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I really struggle.                  I am a strong writer.

**2. Explain your answer. \***

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**3. How much does teacher feedback help you improve your writing? \***

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Not at all.                  A great deal.

**4. Explain your answer. \***

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**5. How much does written feedback help you improve your writing? \***

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Not at all.                  A great deal.

**6. Explain your answer. \***

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**7. How much does verbal feedback (in real-time or recorded) help you improve your writing? \***

Mark only one oval.

1      2      3      4      5

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Not at all.                  A great deal.

**8. Explain your answer. \***

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Appendix C:

**Student Writing Observation Log**

Name:	Date:
Participant #:	Location:
Text Used:	

Date	Skill(s) Addressed in Conference	Observations and Notes
<input type="text"/>		



Appendix E:

**Essay Rubric – Grade 10**

	<b>Excellent</b>	<b>Very Good</b>	<b>Acceptable</b>	<b>Unacceptable</b>
<b>Analysis</b>	Analysis is insightful and demonstrates depth of thought in relation to thesis/provable parts	Analysis demonstrates thinking beyond the literal text; clear connection to thesis/provable parts	Analysis address the literal text and has some inconsistencies in connection to thesis/provable parts	Analysis is repetitive or superficial in nature or does not clearly support thesis/provable parts
<b>Textual Evidence</b>	Uses ample and strategic quotations to defend argument	Uses strategic quotations to defend argument	Uses some quotations to defend argument – some seem inconsistent	Uses few or no quotations; does not clearly defend argument
<b>Organization/ Structure</b>	Structure of analysis enhances meaning (clear thesis and effective paragraphs, smooth and logical transitions)  Quotations are blended seamlessly into text	Structure of analysis enhances meaning (clear thesis and effective paragraphs, logical transitions)  Quotations are blended seamlessly into text with a few errors	Structure of analysis is uneven (weak thesis, basic paragraphs, and transitions)  Quotations are blended into text with errors or uses repetitive techniques	Structure of analysis is missing elements (thesis, basic paragraphs, and transitions)  Quotations not blended into text
<b>Mechanics</b>	Writes with clarity and coherence appropriate for audience, task, and purpose  (teacher clarifies area of focus – grammar, usage, conventions)  Very few grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors  Consistent use of present tense verbs  No use of first or second person pronouns	Writes with clarity and coherence appropriate for audience, task, and purpose  (teacher clarifies area of focus – grammar, usage, conventions)  Few grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors  Consistent use of present tense verbs  No use of first or second person pronouns	Writing lacks some clarity or coherence appropriate for audience, task, and purpose  (teacher clarifies area of focus – grammar, usage, conventions)  Some grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors  Inconsistent use of present tense verbs  First or second person pronouns present	Writing lacks clarity or coherence appropriate for audience, task, and purpose  (teacher clarifies area of focus – grammar, usage, conventions)  Lack of attention to details: too many errors and misspelled words  First or second person pronouns present