

# Students Helping Students: Preferences and Practices for Peer Review

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## I ASKED...

What kinds of written and oral techniques work for peer review, and how can they be combined effectively?

**Background:**

In writing pedagogy, **peer review** is an activity meant to help students “look anew” at their own writing in order to improve it. At its most basic level, student peer reviewers work in pairs and read each others’ drafts, give written and oral suggestions, and then use those suggestions to write final drafts.

In the specific context of Cornell University’s First-Year Writing Seminar program, peer review fulfills the requirement of **revision**, an integral part of writing (some even say revision IS writing). Students must perform three revisions during the semester. Most FWS instructors use some variation of peer review in their classes.

**Method of data collection:**

**Anonymous surveys:** I gave an initial survey (at 4 weeks) that asked students what they thought worked and didn’t work during their past peer review experiences to help me design my own guidelines. After the final peer review activity (at 14 weeks), I gave a lengthier survey that asked them various questions about the peer review activities.

**In-class dialogue:** After the first two peer reviews, I asked them what they thought worked and didn’t, and adapted the following exercises accordingly.

**Analysis:** I gave them three peer review assignments with guidelines, and analyzed how the areas targeted for peer review seemed to fare in the essays, compared to a student’s past work.

**Observation:** General observations of how in-class activities progressed and seemed to work.

**Anticipated setbacks:**

As an interested observer and their teacher, my relationship to the students is conflicted. To mitigate this conflict, I depended heavily on surveys, general comparisons and observations. All peer review was performed with the readers and authors known, which I feared would suppress critique for less secure students.

**Peer Review Activities:**

**Activity A (“traditional”):** Performed entirely in class. A two page written worksheet asking for specific types of feedback from each reviewer, with discussion afterward.

**Activity B (“avant-garde”):** Performed entirely in class, with detailed guidelines circulated beforehand. Authors read their papers aloud to reviewers, who marked the papers as they listened. Oral discussion took place after. Special purpose: to improve diction and structure.

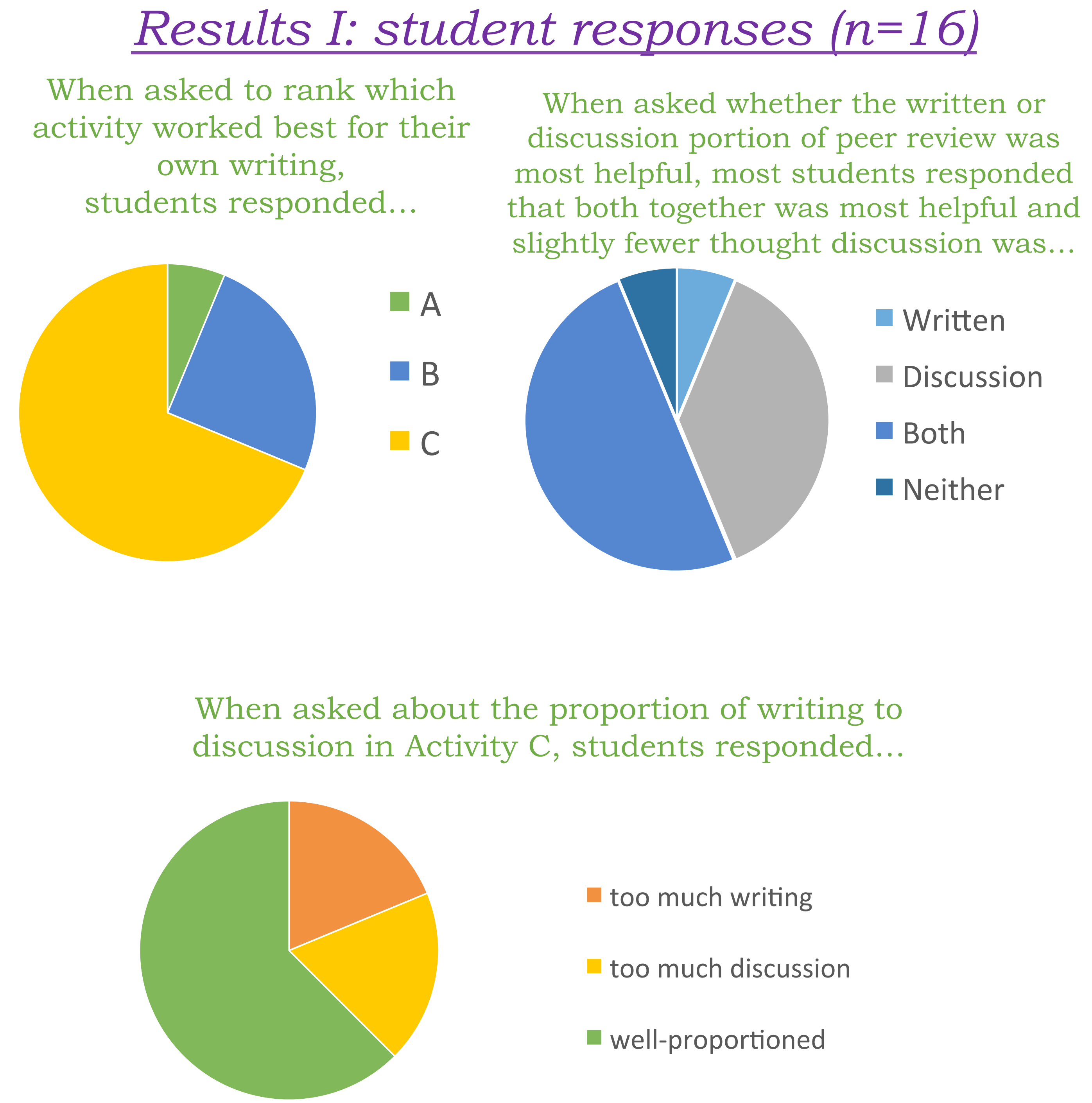
**Activity C (“homework”):** Every student took home two papers, which they reviewed according to pre-circulated guidelines (not a worksheet). The entire next class was spent in small group discussion.

**My initial predictions:**

**Activity A:** Students would feel indifferent about it, but find it fairly helpful to their writing.

**Activity B:** Students would like this one most, but find it difficult to do well.

**Activity C:** Students would resent the extra work, but find that it worked best.



**Results II: observations and comparisons using student work**

**I observed the following during class:**

It was very difficult to keep most students on task during the brief discussion portion of Activity A. It was about half-and-half wer on-task during Activity B. Activity C had about 75% on-task participation, with several groups using nearly all the time we had.

About 75% of students made an effort to provide detailed written feedback according to the guidelines, and 25% of students seemed to ignore the guidelines.

Shyer students were more outgoing than expected during the discussion portion of peer review.

Most students wrote profusely on their own essays during at least part of the discussion portion of peer review.

**When I analyzed student work, I found the following:**

Activity B was designed to help students improve style and reduce grammatical errors. It worked much better than expected to have students listen to their own work; there was a tremendous improvement in those specific areas between the first and second essays (corresponding with Activities A and B, respectively). It was not clear whether the specific practices outlined for Activities A and C helped students improve.

**Results III: synthesis and recommendations:**

I feel that I can safely say **the following would improve peer review’s effectiveness:**

**Spend more than a single class period doing peer review.** It appears that students think that working on the written portion out of class and discussing in-class is very helpful, although it was difficult, in this analysis, to determine whether that was a big factor in student improvement between essays.

**Spend at least some portion of peer review doing out-loud readings.** About a quarter of my students thought this was the best method overall, and it made a huge difference in student writing from what I could see.

**Written guidelines that allow for “free” written feedback are preferable to worksheets.** My students labored over the worksheets for Activity A but didn’t find them very helpful, and responded well to the detailed but less “fill-it-in” formats of B and C.

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