**HOW TO STRUCTURE A MEMO: THE PRAISE-QUESTION-POLISH (P-Q-P) FORMAT**

Diane Mattison, seventh-grade teacher at Springfield Middle School, Oregon, took my suggestion of assigning student-to-author memos to guide her class. She was impressed with the results and commented, “I chose the memo because it seemed less formidable to students than a letter. I think the goal of being concise and brief in their comments appealed to most kids as well.”

Yet some kids wrote an impressive amount. Here is a memo by Alicia from Diane’s class:

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**To:** Avi  
**From:** Alicia  
**Cc:** Mrs. Hughes  
**Date:** 11/2/04  
**Re:** The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle

“Charlotte” was probably the best Newbery Book I’ve ever read. The diary format made me feel like I was Charlotte. There was so much suspense because of the murders, the trials, and the storm that I couldn’t wait to keep reading. The ending was great because Charlotte got to run away and do something she loved. Though I don’t usually like “cliffhanger” endings, I didn’t mind this one because it was written very well.

Where did you come up with the idea for this story? Were any of the characters based on real people? If so, who, and did you know them? One thing that really interests me is whether or not the Seahawk is real. I’d love to find out because it sounded like an amazing ship. I thought it was mean when the captain put that Charlotte was lost at sea when she was alive. Did that kind of thing ever really happen? The biggest question I have though is, did women ever join crews like Charlotte back then?

There really wasn’t anything I disliked about this story. However, one thing did annoy me a little bit. You used the words *commence* and *punctilious* a lot. Actually, I also kind of thought you didn’t elaborate on some of the crewmembers’ characters. The only other thing was that some of the events, like captain Jaggery dying or Charlotte running away, happened too quickly. Basically, I thought this was a really good book that I would read again. I hope you make some kind of sequel to it.

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Not only was Alicia obviously successful here, but so were her ELL peers, whom Diane says, “have a hard time getting into most [reading response] assignments.”

Notice that Alicia is following the same format as the sixth graders who wrote me from El Paso: Start with what you liked, move on to questions that caused confusion or
stimulated interest, and close with suggestions or recommendations for improvement. This format is the P-Q-P: praise, question, polish. Created by Bill Lyons, a former language arts coordinator from Iowa City and introduced to me by Tom Cantwell, a seventh-grade teacher from Cal Young Middle School, Eugene, Oregon, this structure has proved to be the very best scaffolding I have used to train novice memo writers to organize their critiques for authors.

It offers students a three-paragraph organizational pattern:

**Paragraph 1**
**Praise** the author by citing elements, ideas, and aspects of the writing style that you liked. These are the features of the reading that had a positive impact on you as the reader. Complimenting the author requires citing specific examples from the story.

**Paragraph 2**
**Question** the author by addressing any confusions that confronted you while reading, any uncertainties, any wonderings about why the author decided to write what he/she wrote. Questions allow you, the reader, to inform the writer about areas that may be causing potential misunderstanding. Of course, citing specific examples from the story is essential.

**Paragraph 3**
**Polish** the writing. Offer suggestions to assist the author in improving his or her writing. Here you serve as an editor, providing ideas about how to make the story better for other readers. (This last step bumps up the level of challenge in students’ responses because suggesting meaningful revisions requires analysis, evaluation, and synthesis—the highest-order thinking skills on Bloom’s Taxonomy.)

**Scaffolding Students’ Writing with a Memo Template**

Of course, you may be committing “assumicide” if you expect your students to understand and execute a memo-writing assignment with only these instructions: *Write a three-paragraph memo. Your first paragraph will be praises to the author. Your second paragraph will be questions you have for the author. And your third paragraph will offer the author suggestions for improvement.* While these instructions are clear to you, many (perhaps most) students will not get it, and they will end up struggling unnecessarily with this memo assignment. By planning ahead and providing the class with a P-Q-P template, you’ll greatly increase students’ chances for success.

That’s what teachers Theresa Alexander and Susan Aldrich at the Calvary Christian Academy in Philadelphia did for the reluctant readers they work with in their school’s resource room. They learned about the P-Q-P memo from me in a course, but they took it a step further by designing a template to assist their students (page 28). You can use this template with your own class or create your own template to meet the needs of your students. You’ll find ideas for using the template in the strategies below.
Memo

To: _______________________________________________________

From: _____________________________________________________

Date: _______________________________________________________

Re: _________________________________________________________

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Reminders for Memo:

P stands for PRAISE. Write what you like about the selection (for example: the pictures, wide spaces, clear directions, easy-to-read words).

Sentence Starters
I like . . .
It was really neat that . . .
That was cool when . . .
I agree with . . .
I was surprised when . . .

Q stands for QUESTION. Write any questions you have about the selection (for example: how the author came up with the idea, why the author chose to write a part of the story a certain way, or whether there is a sequel to the story).

Sentence Starters
I was confused with . . .
I didn’t understand . . .
What did you mean when . . .
How did you come up with . . .

P stands for POLISH. Write any suggestions you’d like to make to the author (for example: how to make it more interesting, colorful, or exciting).

Sentence Starters
I would have ended it like . . .
I would change . . .
I wish that . . .
I’m beginning to wonder if . . .
I couldn’t believe that . . .
E-Memos: Another Easy Format

Ever notice when you compose a new e-mail, it begins with the same format?

From: Christy.G___@___.com
To: larry@larrylewin.com
Date: 10 Dec 2004 14:17:30 -0700
Subject: Your story

Look familiar? It is the memo format, right? Only instead of RE:, the e-mail program uses “Subject.” So I’ve renamed it the e-memo for talk-back assignments.

Fifth-grade teacher Craig Smith of New Hope Middle School in Pennsylvania had students compose e-memos to Russell Freedman, author of *Children of the Wild West*.

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March 18, 2004
Dear Russell Freedman,

I enjoyed reading your book *Children of the Wild West*. I thought it was great how you really had a strong background of how to describe something. Like how you had a picture to show what you were talking about and so you could visualize what the scene looked like. I also thought it was good that you had captions under the pictures so you could tell exactly what you were looking at. I had one question, where did you get all of those great pictures?? By the way, they are all really cool pictures!! I had one suggestion, while I was reading the section on Native Americans I came across a few words that I couldn’t pronounce or I didn’t know what they meant. Maybe you could try and reword or tell what some of the bigger words mean. Anyway I really enjoyed reading your book and I thought the pictures were great. I really learned a lot about the Native Americans!!

Sincerely,

Marisa