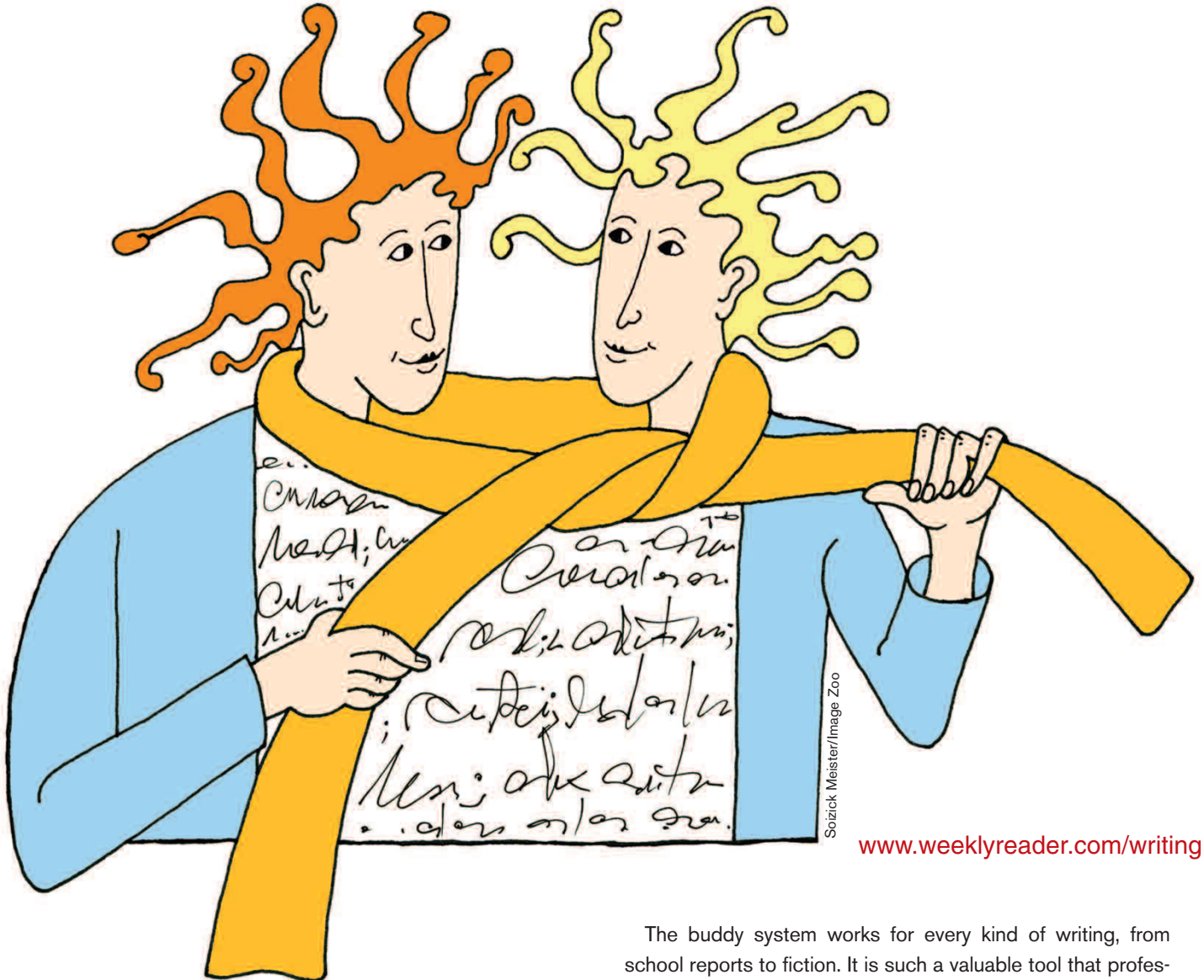


With a Little Help From My Friends

The Gifts of a Writing Buddy

By Laura Deutsch



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YOU'VE WRITTEN YOUR ESSAY FOR ENGLISH CLASS, and you think it's pretty good. But you wonder whether a certain sentence is convoluted and whether the ending makes sense. You obsess about it for a couple of days and nibble your fingernails. Then you realize—you don't have to figure it out on your own. Writing buddy to the rescue!

Writing can often be a solitary and lonely act. Not so with a writing buddy at your side. Someone who reads and comments on your writing, a writing buddy can be a constant source of support in your creative process.

The buddy system works for every kind of writing, from school reports to fiction. It is such a valuable tool that professional writers use it frequently. For instance, suspense author Amelia Atwater-Rhodes sends her first drafts to her friends and writing buddies Ollie and Kyle. "They always get my world, even when I don't," she says.

The writing-buddy technique is a two-way street. Its value goes far beyond getting feedback. As author and writing teacher Natalie Goldberg observes, reading someone else's writing "awakens stories inside you." A good writing relationship can inspire you to move to the next level with your writing. And you might just make a great friend along the way.

Here are some rules of the road to help you get started.

Map Out a Plan

Choose a buddy who writes at the same level as you or better—someone whose feedback you respect. Writing buddies should be peers—your classmates or friends. Don't just go for talent and brains. Choose someone you like, because if the relationship works out well, you may be spending a lot of time writing and talking to each other.

Ask for What You Need

The beauty of this writing tool is that you get to ask for the kind of feedback you want. If you've done some freewriting, you might want your buddy to do no more than listen as you read it aloud—Goldberg calls this “deep listening.” There's great value for a writer in simply being heard.

For a more organized piece of writing, you'll want more specific feedback. Atwater-Rhodes suggests you ask your writing buddy questions like, “*What do you think about my character Lily?*” She does this, and it works well for her.

Start With Praise

It's a privilege to be asked to comment on someone's writing, and at the heart of the relationship is mutual respect and encouragement.

Always start giving your feedback with a compliment; this will relax your buddy and make him or her more receptive to your suggestions. Let your buddy know when you enjoy something. Use simple words. Describe your reactions: “*Good.*” “*Nice description.*” “*I'm laughing.*” Underline phrases you like, and point out sections that you'd like to hear more about. Note an original image, a strong verb, or snappy dialogue. Comment throughout the piece, and write overall comments at the end.

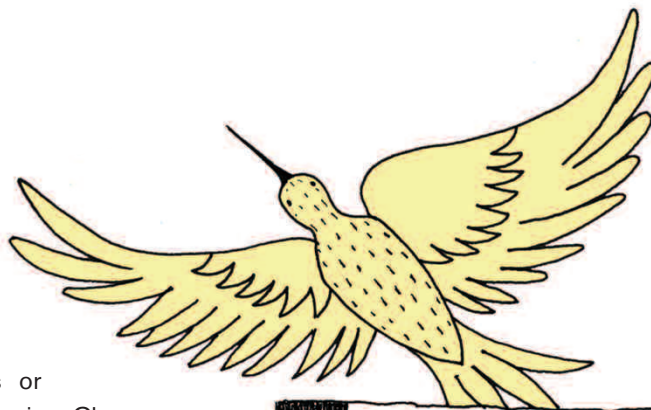
Give Thoughtful Feedback

As for criticism, you want your comments to be honest, but not brutal. Essayist Anne Lamott observes, “You don't always

have to chop with the sword of truth. You can point with it too.” The goal is not to rip your buddy to shreds, even if you think your suggestions are for his or her own good.

If there's a problem with your buddy's writing, frame your comment as a question or an “I” statement. Instead of “*This makes no sense,*” you might say, “*I'm not sure what you mean here.*” State your observation factually, and follow it up with a simple suggestion—for example, “*This might work better if you broke it up into two sentences.*”

Now back to that English assignment. Grab your buddy and get started! 📎



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“There are probably a number of ways to tell your story right, and someone else may be able to tell you whether or not you've found one of these ways.” —Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird*

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The Writer

MEAGAN'S LANGUAGE ARTS TEACHER has asked her to write an essay about "breaking the rules." Here is an excerpt of what she gives her writing buddy, Jason, to read. Notice how she inserts specific questions (in the comment boxes) after the highlighted text. She simply uses Google Docs.

Breaking the Rules
By Meagan Bulb

I knew I was in big trouble when I heard the whir of a siren and saw the red lights flashing on and off in my rearview mirror. Do you think it's OK if I start where I did, or should I tell the story in order, starting with my decision to take my mom's keys? —Meagan Then the cop's voice yelled/boomed: Which verb do you prefer? —Meagan out on his loudspeaker. "Pull over to the side of the road."

Busted! But running a red light was the least of my problems.

The short, chubby cop waddled over to my window, his midnight blue uniform straining across his paunch to reveal a ribbed white undershirt. Under other circumstances I might have laughed. But now my nervous mind was shuffling through excuses for why I was driving without a license. Which story would he buy? ... Jason, Does the story keep your interest? Do you see any spelling or grammar mistakes? —Meagan

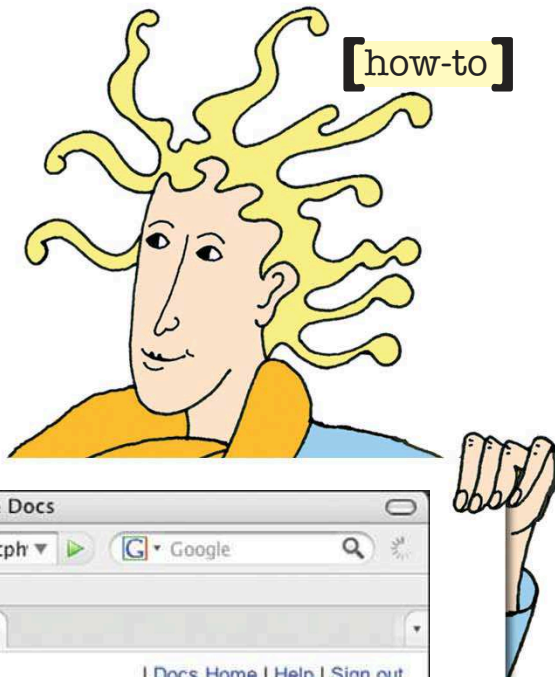
Check spelling

“Rewriting is the essence of writing.” —William Zinsser, *On Writing Well*

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The Buddy

JASON RESPONDS (in blue) TO MEAGAN'S QUESTIONS. He also highlights some sections and makes comments about them. Then he writes a few general comments.



Breaking the Rules: The Buddy [Save] [Save & close] [Discard changes]

File Edit Insert Revisions Edit HTML Preview Print Email Share Publish

Breaking the Rules
By Meagan Bulb

I knew I was in big trouble when I heard the whir of a siren. I like the use of sound! —Jason
and saw the red lights flashing on and off. You might want to cut this because 'flashing'
implies the lights are going 'on and off'. —Jason in my rearview mirror. Do you think it's OK if I start
where I did, or should I tell the story in order, starting with my decision to take my mom's keys? —Meagan
Then the cop's voice yelled/boomed. Which verb do you prefer? —Meagan I prefer "boomed." —Jason
out on his loudspeaker. "Pull over to the side of the road."

Busted! Good! But running a red light was the least of my problems. This piques my interest." —Jason

The short, chubby cop waddled over to my window, his midnight blue uniform straining across
his paunch to reveal a ribbed white undershirt. Nice description. —Jason Under other circumstances I
might have laughed. But now my nervous mind was shuffling through excuses for why I was driving
without a license. Which story would he buy? ... Jason, does the story keep your interest? Do you see any
spelling or grammar mistakes? —Meagan Meagan, I like the way you started with a tense situation and flashed
back to how you got there. It got my interest and made me want to keep reading to see what happened to you
because I could relate to how you were feeling. —Jason

Check spelling

Done

"I was working on the proof of one of my poems all the morning, and took out a comma. In the afternoon I put it back again."—Oscar Wilde, 19th-century author