I have used Spelling and Grammar/Usage Logs for many years in my classroom. Why do I like them?

➤ They hold students individually accountable for their own mechanical errors.

➤ They help me to maximize student work time on topics that are relevant to their individual needs: we do not spend time routinely covering topics that are only applicable to a few students.

In my experience, my role in implementing their use is essential to their success. The more emphasis I place on them and the more I hold my students accountable for them, the more effective they are. A few methods have worked well for me:

➤ With high school students it is important to allow time in class for students to log their errors—at least after the first couple of assignments. Students will need to rely on both a common usage handbook and the teacher as resources. Once we have done it a few times, I ask students to do it on their own outside of class time.

➤ Once we have logged errors from a couple different papers, I ask students to bring their logs with them to their writing groups. Before students in the writing groups work on editing their peer’s paper, they study their spelling and usage logs to see the kinds of mechanical errors they have had. Then they focus their proofreading on those errors.

➤ Before I evaluate their papers throughout the semester, I also look over their logs to get a sense of their improvement or lack of improvement. If I see patterns of errors developing, I let them know that they need to address those errors.

➤ I allow time at the end of the semester for some detailed one-on-one conferencing about the logs. In my experience, this lets students know that they must master their own errors. Here’s how it works: the students make an appointment with me, sometimes in class and sometimes outside of class. They bring with them their logs and their writing folders, which contain all drafts of all of our projects for the semester. They have their logs organized from earliest paper to the last. The students are responsible for talking me through their logs, identifying their errors and explaining them. Explanations of comma usage errors force the students to show an understanding of sentence structure (of differences, for example, between independent and dependent clauses) etc. If the students cannot explain their errors, they know that they are not ready for the conference, and I ask them to reschedule. The conferences take anywhere from five to fifteen minutes. Although it is challenging to find time for all of these sessions, I have been pleased with how it pushes the students to understand their own errors.
A Few Thoughts About Utilizing Peer Response Groups in Your Classroom
(As reflected in my experiences with 9th-12th grade students)

I recommend that you allow students to have some kind of input about who is in their writing groups. I choose the groups, but students provide confidential input on “people with whom I work well” and “people with whom I do not work well.”

My role as the teacher has a big impact on the success of the groups. If I detach myself and use the time for other work, my groups tend to be ineffective. If I am engaged in the process, and circulate around the room as a “trusted listener,” the writing groups tend to be well focused and more effective.

The objectives of each group session need to be absolutely clear, and the students need to know that I will hold them accountable for their group work.

➢ I provide a response guide sheet for each session. The response questions are focused around the criteria that the class and I have established together for that particular assignment. Sometimes I ask students to respond verbally; most of the times, I ask students to write responses. We make a distinction between the “response phase,” which focuses on ideas and the “editing phase,” which, for us, focuses on mechanics. It is a good idea to model the group behavior you would like to see, including sample comments that are helpful to writers. I have sometimes used volunteer students to do this.

   (I should note that written peer response is not just for the writer. It also tells me a great deal about how much the responder understands about our unit’s key concepts. Can a student accurately identify a thesis statement? Can a student identify arguments that are not well supported? Can a student find punctuation errors? In this way peer response functions as a kind of “formative assessment” as well as something that can help students improve their writing.)

➢ I hold the students accountable for their work in a variety of ways:
   • Sometimes their written response is worth points; generally, these points focus on the amount of effort in the response, the quality and quantity of response (including both praise and constructive suggestions for improvement)
   • Sometimes I ask students to provide feedback through a process journal; they describe to me how the group functioned and to what degree the response was valuable.
   • Once a year, I might include some kind of group accountability for the “editing” phase where the whole group will be rewarded points (or other “bribes”) if all essays in their writing group are free of mechanical errors. (In my experience, this kind of incentive needs to be used very sparingly.)
   • A key to success with accountability is to “mix it up.” Clarify expectations, but provide variety in how response is given and in accountability methods, and students will typically remain engaged.

I give my students a great deal of freedom in where their group works. They can be in my room at desks, on the floor, in our auditorium, which is adjacent to my room. I want them to be comfortable, but I make it clear to them that they need to be responsible for their work (and that I will hold them accountable for being “on task”). I do want them to have the experience, at least a couple of times during the year, of reading their writing to their peer group members. For these kinds of response sessions, it is essential that they can see each other’s eyes, so I encourage them to sit in a circle not in a row.

I hear some of my colleagues complain that writing groups can be unproductive. I agree. In my experience, however, my role in the process seems to be the deciding factor.