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BELIEVING & DOUBTING a game, of sorts

The purpose of this activity is to give the writer more ideas and more material to strengthen the content and argument of an idea-based paper.

The basic notion is this: respond to a piece of writing in two ways, both of which are a kind of role-play for the writer's benefit:

1. Pretend that you believe everything in the paper (even if you don't) and give as many reasons as you can why you agree with it.
2. Pretend that you doubt everything in the paper (even if you don't) and give as many reasons as you can why the writer's ideas are wrong.

From this kind of response, two things can happen:

On the believing side, the writer can get more evidence for her assertions, more reasons why she's right, more ways of thinking about the topic that strengthen her argument.

On the doubting side, the writer can get counter-arguments, disconfirming evidence that needs to be dealt with in order to write a convincing paper.

It is best to **start with believing**, both for the sake of the writer's confidence, and because school trains us to doubt, not believe.

Note: the writer can do this with her own work.

A possible classroom scenario:

Have students bring in drafts of their papers and work in pairs.

1. Each one writes down her own reasons for **both** believing and doubting the key ideas in her own paper, including reasons that may not have found their way into the paper itself.
2. Writers exchange papers and do the same for each other's.
3. Now the writers exchange the items they wrote about their own papers in step 1. It becomes the recipient's job to respond to the author's beliefs and doubts about the paper's ideas – e.g., "I think you're right to doubt this because," "I think you missed a better reason why you're right," "This reason for believing is irrelevant to me as the reader," "Your doubt might be answered this way," etc.

If the exercise is thoughtfully carried out, students should leave with feedback enabling them to sharpen their thinking, improve their arguments.

Acknowledgement: based on & partly paraphrased from *Sharing and Responding*, 3rd ed., by Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff (McGraw-Hill, 2000), pp. 37-39.