

Conferring with Young Writers

Writing conferences are conversations between student and teacher/coach. The teacher observes and coaches in ways that either help the young writer do what the writer is trying to do better or direct him to take on new more challenging strategies.

Informal Conferences happen as the teacher roams among the students as they write.

- The Walk-By (for students who have the skill under control)
- The Stop and Go (for students who are halfway there.)



The basic principles of writing conferences:

- Listening (to what writer is trying to say)
- Affirming (what writer has done well)
- Reinforcing (the writer's strength, attempts)
- Assessing (confusions, strength, next steps)
- Teaching (what's most important for writer to move forward and only what the writer is ready for)
- Scaffolding (helping the writer say, write, and do what she can't quite do yet without help)
- Setting goals with students' input (for the writer to attempt to meet on his own, with minimal guidance and support).

The teacher's job in the writing conferences is **not** to correct a paper, but to teach a budding writer! The aim of the conference should not be to impart all of his/her knowledge, but to share **one thing** that is going to support genuine writing growth without overwhelming the student or getting behind by spending too much time with one student.

Effective Format for Conferencing with Young Writers



1. **SET GOAL** - tell them up front what their focus is (a target skill or trait: ideas, details, beginnings, etc.). Narrow the teaching focus to one major point.
2. **Student reads the piece.** When the student reads, it gives the student ownership but the teacher focuses on the message first-*content*.
3. **REFLECT on what was heard.** That becomes instant gratification for the reader. Many times the student *orally* fills in the gaps which can be used to add quality details. The focus should be on “*How can you add them?*” not “*Would you like to add...*”

“HOW IS ONE OF THE BEST TOOLS IN THE A TEACHER’S CONFERRING KIT!” -Jennifer Jacobson

4. **POINT** out what is going well; paying a compliment to the reader so he might repeat the success. (Read the specific sentence and comment, “It creates a wonderful picture. I can’t wait to read more!”)
5. **QUESTION-** to solicit more details:
 - What type of ____...
 - Is that allowed...
 - When does he...
 - What color is...

Always follow with “*HOW CAN YOU ADD THOSE DETAILS?*”

Teach by giving an explanation, looking at a piece of literature together, or referring back to a mini-lesson.

6. Teach One Skill- There may be students who may be ready to accelerate in skills beyond the class. Focus on ONE new skill (ex., ellipses...)

Steps 1-5 are used to teach or reteach revision techniques for developing ideas, organization, word choice, voice and sentence fluency. Understanding each of these components help the young writers know what makes good writing.

Some Additional Hints for Conferencing:

- Rather than writing on a student's paper, use sticky notes.
- Rather than re-writing a whole paper to correct a lead, or concluding paragraph; cut the paper and only re-write that portion, stapling or gluing it to another sheet.
- During the conference, you may have the student talk through what he/she is going to do in his writing after the conference.
- Before the writer leaves, have the writer repeat what he did, said, and will do.
- Write notes on what you taught in the conference and what you learned about the student on a writing conference log. See sample conference log. This "Conference Log" is a place to jot down notes of what is discussed during an individual conference. Each student would have their own log so if you have 20 students you would need to make 20 copies of this. I would just keep it in a duo tang folder. The plus would indicate the strengths and aspect of the writer's work you praised. The minus sign notes the areas of process, product, or genre that seemed weak at the time of the conference. For the next step, make a note of what the write has states as their intended follow-up. Make a duo tang folder with 30 sheets in it. It is cheap and simple!
- Not all conferences have to be individual. If several students need the same skill, pull a small group and give a mini-lesson. **However, individual conferences are the most powerful tool for moving student writing!**

Conference Log for _____

+ - next	+ - next	+ - next	+ - next
+ - next	+ - next	+ - next	+ - next
+ - next	+ - next	+ - next	+ - next
+ - next	+ - next	+ - next	+ - next