

Conferring With Student Writers

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Carl Anderson is a literacy consultant and writer. He is the author of *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring With Student Writers* (2000), *Assessing Writers* (2005), and *Strategic Writing Conferences: Smart Conversations that Move Young Writers Forward Grades 3-6* (2009).

CONFERRING CONCEPTS

- A writing conference is a conversation.
- The point of a writing conference is to help students become better writers.
- Writing conferences have a predictable structure.
- In conferences, teachers and students have predictable roles.
- It's important to communicate to students in conferences that we care about them as people and writers.



The Role of the Teacher and Student in a Writing Conference

The Teacher's Role	The Student's Role
<i>In the first part of the conversation:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invite the child to set an agenda for the conference • Ask assessment questions • Read the student's writing • Make a teaching decision 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set the agenda for the conference by describing her writing work • Respond to her teacher's research questions by describing her writing work more deeply
<i>In the second part of the conversation:</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Give the student critical feedback • Teach the student • Nudge the student to "have-a-go" • Link the conference to the student's independent work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen carefully to her teacher's feedback and teaching • Ask questions to clarify and deepen her understanding of her teacher's feedback and teaching • "Have-a-go" with what her teacher taught her • Commit to trying what her teacher taught her after the conference

(This chart is adapted from my book, *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferencing with Student Writers* (2000).)

QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING POINT

1. We give clear, precise feedback to the student.
2. We cue the student that we're about to start teaching by saying, "There's something I want to teach you today . . .", or, "Something writers do is . . .", or something similar.
3. We name what we're teaching the student—e.g. a strategy, a craft move, a language convention.
4. We give an explanation of what we're teaching—what it is, and why it's important to learn.
5. We explain how writers *do* what we want the student to learn to do—by describing how to do it, and/or by giving examples from our own writing, or published texts.
6. We have the student try what we've just taught them, usually by having them talk out how they could use it. We cue students that we want them to do a try-it by saying, "I'd like you to try this out right now . . .", or similar words.
7. We end the conference by linking the conference to the student's work, and by reminding them that they can use what we've just taught them in their writing from now on.

DECISIONS WE NEED TO MAKE ABOUT OUR CONFERRING

Where should I conduct my conferences?

Carl: I found it works best to confer where students are seated. They are more at ease there, and other student can either eavesdrop or become involved in the conferences.

What tools do I need to confer?

Carl: I always carry my record-keeping forms, copies of mentor texts that I think I'll use in conferences, and a pack of post-it notes.

When should we confer with students?

Carl: I confer with students at whatever point in the writing process they happen to be in when I pull up next to them to confer. I don't wait for them to finish a draft before conferring.

Who should initiate conferences?

Carl: I initiate most conferences. Occasionally, I agree to confer with a child who asks me for a conference.

How long should conferences be?

Carl: My conferences average between five and seven minutes long. I usually confer with four, sometimes five students during a typical workshop period.

COMMON ASSESSMENT PATTERNS AND RESPONSES K-2

If I see this . . . (I recognize this assessment pattern)	I'll set this writing goal . . .	Possible Teaching Points
The student writes "all about" a topic	Include parts in pieces that develop meaning	Strategies for focusing a draft (Ask, "What's Important?" and selecting parts that help develop the meaning.
The student includes parts in a generally focused piece that don't connect to meaning.	Delete parts that don't connect to meaning.	Touch each part, ask if it is connected to what's important.
The student writes a series of undeveloped section in her drafts.	Develop parts in drafts.	"Stretch" out parts by envisioning them in your head.
The student develops parts in pieces, but not always the ones that are central to communicating meaning.	Develop parts that contribute most to meaning.	Ask, "Which parts are the ones that feel important/ really help me get my point across?" Stretch them if they're undeveloped.
The student moves abruptly from one part to another pieces.	Develop repertoire of transitions.	Time transitions, section headings, topic sentences, etc.
The student has a partial repertoire of detail in her repertoire.	Develop repertoire of genre-specific details.	Lessons on action, thoughts and feelings, dialogue, etc. in narrative; facts, definitions, quotes, etc. in nonfiction.
The student includes a smattering of a kind of detail, but doesn't yet create strings of them in a section.	Elaborate using strings of details.	Underline details and say more.
The student writes with very general kinds of details.	Write details with precision.	e.g. actions: envision what your body parts are doing; facts, ask, "What exactly to I know about this fact?"
The student reads her writing with voice, but doesn't cue the reader to do the same.	Develop repertoire of ways to give voice to a text	Punctuation, such as exclamation marks, ellipses,; font treatment.
The student overuses voice techniques.	Use voice techniques strategically	Reread draft, matching voice intonation to punctuation/font treatments.
The student uses endmarks	Use beginning and end of	Read aloud for sentence

inconsistently, or not at all	sentence markers with precision.	endings.
The student overuses the word “and.”	Punctuate compound sentences correctly.	Editing for “ands.”
The student writes dependent clause fragments.	Punctuate complex sentences with precision.	Read aloud for commas after subordinate conjunctions.
The student has trouble coming up with topics to write about.	Develop repertoire of strategies for finding worthwhile topics.	Writing territories; writing off of everyday life.
The student jumps into drafting without rehearsing his topic; consequently the draft is skimpy and undeveloped.	Brainstorm scenes/points to be made in a draft; develop repertoire of strategies for gathering details for sections before drafting.	Examples: Talk out piece before drafting; sketch parts of piece before drafting; read sources for details before drafting.
The student rehearses her writing, but jumps into a draft without planning how it will go.	Develop repertoire of planning strategies.	Sketching across pages; talking out each part; writing a simple plan.
The student does/does not rehearse her writing before drafting, but is unable to answer the question, “What do I want to say to readers in my draft?”	Write to learn to discover meaning.	Answer the question, “What do I want to say in my draft?”
The student is having trouble with writing text (avoids putting text on the page, asks for help with spelling words, etc.)	Develop repertoire of strategies for getting words on page.	Sounding out words; how to use the word wall; ask someone else how to spell a word, etc.
The student is “done” as soon as she writes a draft.	Add words, phrases, sentences to drafts.	Reread, stop pause and ask, “What else could I say?”; peer conferring.
The student makes simple revisions, but not the major one a draft needs because there is not room to do so on drafts.	Develop a repertoire of revision tools.	Using post-it notes; spiderlegs; asterisks; arrows, etc.
The student revises, but not always the most important parts.	Strategic revision	Put stars next to most important parts and develop those further if necessary.
The student edits by reading aloud to herself.	Develop repertoire of editing strategies.	Read a draft out loud to yourself or to a classmate in an editing conference.
The student complains that writing is boring.	Develop a repertoire of purposes for writing.	Introduce student to genres that (hopefully) give the

		student the chance to write for meaningful purposes.
When given a choice, the student tends to write in the same genre over and over.	Develop a repertoire of purposes for writing.	Introduce student to other writing genres give the student the opportunity to write for new purposes.
The student doesn't know who to share her writing with.	Develop a sense of audience.	Identify an audience that the student can share her writing with when completed.
The student always share his writing with the same audience.	Extend range of audiences.	Identify other audiences that the student can share his writing with.

COMMON ASSESSMENT PATTERNS AND RESPONSES 3-8

If I see this . . . (I recognize this assessment pattern)	I'll set this writing goal . . .	Possible Teaching Points
The student writes "all about" a topic	Include parts in pieces that develop meaning	Strategies for focusing a draft (Ask, "What's Important?" delete parts that aren't connected, expand parts that are.); writing a focused plan before drafting.
The student includes parts in a generally focused piece that don't connect to meaning.	Delete parts that don't connect to meaning.	Touch each part, ask if it is connected to what's important.
The student writes a series of undeveloped section in her drafts.	Develop parts in drafts.	Circle parts and "stretch" them out by envisioning them in your head.
The student develops parts in pieces, but not always the ones that are central to communicating meaning.	Develop parts that contribute most to meaning.	Ask, "Which parts are the ones that really help me get my point across?" Stretch them if they're undeveloped.
The student moves abruptly from one part to another pieces.	Develop repertoire of transitions.	Time transitions, paragraphing, section headings, topic sentences, bullets, etc.
The student has a partial repertoire of detail in her repertoire.	Develop repertoire of genre-specific details.	Lessons on action, thoughts and feelings, dialogue, etc. in narrative; facts, definitions, quotes, etc. in nonfiction.
The student includes a smattering of a kind of detail, but doesn't yet create strings of them in a section.	Elaborate using strings of details.	Underline details and say more.
The student writes with very general kinds of details.	Write details with precision.	e.g. actions: envision what your body parts are doing; facts, ask, "What exactly to I know about this fact?"
The student reads her writing with voice, but doesn't cue the reader to do the same.	Develop repertoire of ways to give voice to a text	Punctuation, such as exclamation marks, ellipses, and dashes; font treatment; types of sentences that cue voice.

The student overuses voice techniques.	Use voice techniques strategically	Reread draft, matching voice intonation to punctuation/font treatments/sentence structure.
The student uses endmarks inconsistently, or not at all	Use beginning and end of sentence markers with precision.	Read aloud for sentence endings.
The student overuses the word “and.”	Punctuate compound sentences correctly.	Editing for “ands.”
The student writes dependent clause fragments.	Punctuate complex sentences with precision.	Read aloud for commas after subordinate conjunctions.
The student has trouble coming up with topics to write about.	Develop repertoire of strategies for finding worthwhile topics.	Writing territories; writing off of everyday life.
The student jumps into drafting without rehearsing his topic; consequently the draft is skimpy and undeveloped.	Brainstorm scenes/points to be made in a draft; develop repertoire of strategies for gathering details for sections before drafting.	Examples: Talk out piece before drafting; sketch parts of piece before drafting; read sources for details before drafting.
The student rehearses her writing, but jumps into a draft without planning how it will go.	Develop repertoire of planning strategies.	Flow charts; webs; outlines; etc.
The student does/does not rehearse her writing before drafting, but is unable to answer the question, “What do I want to say to readers in my draft?”	Write to learn to discover meaning.	Write in your notebook to answer the question, “What do I want to say in my draft?”
The student writes a simple, but sketchy plan.	Write detailed plans for drafts.	Ex: Name setting, characters, major plot events in each scene in the plan.
The student is “done” as soon as she writes a draft.	Add words, phrases, sentences to drafts.	Reread, stop pause and ask, “What else could I say?”; peer conferring.
The student makes simple revisions, but not the major one a draft needs because there is not room to do so on drafts.	Develop a repertoire of revision tools.	Using post-it notes; spiderlegs; asterisks; arrows, etc.
The student revises, but not always the most important parts.	Strategic revision	Circle parts of draft; put stars next to most important parts and develop those

		further if necessary.
The student edits by reading aloud to herself.	Develop repertoire of editing strategies.	Read a draft out loud to yourself or to a classmate in an editing conference.
The student complains that writing is boring.	Develop a repertoire of purposes for writing.	Introduce student to genres that (hopefully) give the student the chance to write for meaningful purposes.
When given a choice, the student tends to write in the same genre over and over.	Develop a repertoire of purposes for writing.	Introduce student to other writing genres give the student the opportunity to write for new purposes.
The student doesn't know who to share her writing with.	Develop a sense of audience.	Identify an audience that the student can share her writing with when completed.
The student always share his writing with the same audience.	Extend range of audiences.	Identify other audiences that the student can share his writing with.

Conference	Goals
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Notes	

T is the symbol for teaching point.

G is the symbol for instructional goal

Assessment Notes For _____ Dates _____

Finding Carl

My books, *Assessing Writers* and *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers*, are available through Heinemann. (www.heinemann.com). My new Heinemann firsthand series, *Strategic Writing Conferences: Smart Conversations that Move Young Writers Forward Grades 3-6*, is now available.

(www.strategicwritingconferences.com)

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