



Conferring in the Writing Workshop

Between the Ideal and the Real World of Teaching

Ideas for the Classroom from the NCTE Elementary Section
Joanne Hindley Salch and Marianne Marino, Co-Editors

The Importance of Listening

When we teachers get together and talk about conferring with students about their writing, no one ever says, “Oh, I’m great at that!” Conferring is tricky, messy stuff. We feel inadequate because there is no script, and even when we enter a conference with an agenda, the writer can so easily throw us into another line of thinking at a moment’s notice. We worry about how to enter these conferences, what to teach, what to do with the silence when students are not responsive.

We read about conferring, we talk with colleagues about our struggles with it, and we attend every workshop offered by every “expert” who just may offer the tip that will make all the difference. Some of us have even wondered if, at one of these workshops, the presenter will announce that we have struggled long enough and that it’s now time to reveal the secret to having a successful conference every time.

Truth is, there is no template for a good conference. Perhaps, in addition to looking for tips and advice, we need to think about what the three writing teachers in this issue suggest: that conferring is as much about being a good listener as it is about knowing what to say. ▼

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The Writing Conference: Breaking the Silence

by Ralph Fletcher, Author/Consultant, Durham, New Hampshire

At a party I met my niece’s first-grade teacher. He enthusiastically told me about the writing workshop, author’s chair, etc., in his classroom.

“How are the writing conferences going?” I asked.

“Oh, I don’t do that,” he admitted. “Too complicated! I just let them write.”

At the risk of sounding like a member of the “Writing Police,” I would argue that writing conferences are an essential part of the workshop. In

Australia, writer’s workshop has been called the “conference approach to teaching writing.” But these conferences are more difficult than they look. It’s not enough to uniformly praise our students. And harsh criticism with copious red pen marks will create a mental link in students’ minds between writing and pain. What to do?



“My problem,” one teacher confided to me, “is that when I go into a conference I’m so hung up on what I’m going to say that I’m not really there for my kids.”

Let’s be blunt: writing conferences are tricky. Certain people seem to have a knack for saying just the right thing at the right time. The rest of us sort of muddle along. But leading a writing conference is

a learnable skill. Here are a few guidelines that have been helpful to me.

- **Respond first as a reader.** Be human in your response. Laugh if it’s funny, show concern if it’s sad. If you want to affect a student, let the student see that his or her writing has affected you.

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- **Find specific things to praise in the writing.** Generic praise isn't nearly so helpful as pointing out particular things that work.
- **Keep conferences short.** The fifteen-minute conference is wonderful, but it's a luxury that most of us can't afford. Remember that you don't have to sit while a student decides what to do next. Frame *one* issue, discuss options, and then make an exit.
- **Get students involved.** Too often, students sit passively through writing conferences. You might try a mini-lesson in which you say, "I can help you be a problem solver in your writing. But first you need to be a problem finder."
Ask students to put an asterisk at a place in their text where the writing works well. Ask them to put a circle in the margin next to a place where the writing needs more work. Later, when you confer, go straight to the places the student has marked. This can dramatically shorten your conference!
- **Tell the student the story of your reading.** Sometimes when I just don't know what to say, I try to be a mirror and let the student know what happened to me as I read the writing. For example:

I was really hooked at the beginning, because I love sailing. I could really feel how excited you were getting ready. Later, when you all arrived at the boat, I got a little confused because there were so many people and I couldn't tell who were your friends, and which ones were your cousins . . .

Here you are not telling the student what to fix, but you're giving an honest mirror that he or she can use when revising the piece.

- **Know your tastes.** All teachers have particular things we tend to look for in writing. Some teachers look for organization, others for voice. Still

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others go for rich description or strong vocabulary. It's important to know your own tendency so you can appreciate those students who may do other things well in their writing.

- **Teach the writer, not the writing.** Show students how a particular strategy can be used in all other pieces of writing.
- **Follow the student's energy.** If she is slumped over, cradling her head in her hand, that tells you something. It may be time to pick a better topic. You can't squeeze blood from a stone.
- **Learn to listen.** One teacher told her students, "Our writing conferences will be the one conversation where we won't be interrupted!" But a conversation can only take place where both parties learn to listen. Every day our students offer their humor, quirky intelligence, playfulness, and wonder. We need to try to still ourselves enough to receive it.
- **Take a reflective stance.** At the end of a conference, it's a good idea to stand back and think about what worked and what didn't. Many times I've come out of a conference muttering to myself: I didn't stay quiet long enough for him to speak! Or: I shut that kid down by giving too many suggestions!
Remember, there's no magic formula for conferring on a piece of writing. There's just the student, the writing, and what you bring to the table. Conferring is a skill we can all get better at. When we speak of the "writing process," it's important to remember that as teachers, we are works-in-progress, too. ▼

Conversations with Student Writers

by Carl Anderson, Teachers College Reading and Writing Project, Columbia University

Since I launched my first writing workshop twelve years ago, I have thought of writing conferences as conversations. The word *conversation* suggests so many things about the way I believe we should talk with students about their writing: It suggests the kind of personal, intimate talk I have with friends and colleagues—the tone I want my conferences with students to have. It also suggests that, even though in conferences we are teachers talking with students, we are also writers talking to writers. In *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Don Murray (1985) explains,

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Teacher Talk: Developing Voice and Choice in Writing

by Yvonne Siu-Runyan, University of Northern Colorado School for the Study of Teaching and Teacher Education

Rehearse, draft, revise, edit, share. While all of these are important, many authors would agree that without rehearsal—which can convince a writer that a topic is worthwhile—the commitment needed to develop a piece may not be there. This is especially true for child authors who need to understand that "powerful writing begins long before the draft" (Ray 1999, p. 89). According to Lane (1993, p. 159), "Finding a voice is a slow process that begins with teaching students to value their own experiences and perception and to write them down. . . . Voice is not something that can be taught in a step-by-step fashion."

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“[Conferences] are not mini-lectures but the working talk of fellow writers sharing their experience with the writing process.”

When, as a staff developer, I talk about conferences as conversations, many teachers ask me, “What are these conversations about?” I tell them they’ve asked a crucial question about conferring, if not *the* crucial question. Our conferences go well if we—and our students—know why we’re having the conversations.

The point of a writing conference is to help students become better writers. By “better writers” I mean writers who can use the strategies, techniques, and ways of thinking about writing that we teach them in today’s conferences on their own later when they work on future pieces. In *The Art of Teaching Writing*, Lucy Calkins (1994) says that our challenge in conferences is to stay focused on the students with whom

we’re conferring and on their growth as writers.

If we can keep only one thing in mind—and I fail at this half the time—it is that we are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by what might help the writer rather than what might improve this particular piece of writing. This is not as obvious as it sounds. For example, I’ve watched some teachers get mesmerized

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by what their students are writing about and have long conversations with Tamika about her pet snake or with Andy about his coin collection. While these “content conferences” are important in that they empower students to realize they have experiences and interests worth writing about, they don’t usually help students to become better writers.

I’ve watched other teachers who can’t resist the urge to fix everything that may be wrong with their students’ drafts. If we take control over a student’s writing and make sure that the draft has our perfect lead or our brilliant dialogue, all we’ve done is given a demonstration of our expertise as writers. We shouldn’t confuse this with helping students develop their own expertise.

When we finish a conference, we should be able to name what it is we did to help a student become a better writer. We want to be able to say, “I taught Madeline a strategy for figuring out the spelling of an unfamiliar word,” or, “I helped Doran

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Thus, this article focuses on the importance of talk and how teachers might talk with their students, writer to writer, during rehearsal.

Does This Sound Like You?

Before I understood the importance of rehearsal, I too frequently used my firmest teacher stance and made unsupportive, silly comments to my students when they complained about having trouble finding a topic. I said things like, “Just sit down and think,” or, “If you would not waste your time complaining, you’d get something written. So get busy.” Does this sound familiar? Have you said things like this to your students? If you have, you are not alone. Like me, many teachers have made similar comments for lack of something better to say.

What Might You Do Instead?

When I read Don Graves’s book, *A Fresh Look at Writing* (1994), I was especially impressed with Chapter 2, “Learn from the Children.” In this chapter, Graves talks about the importance of learning about our students by listening to them. He states, “Through active listening, children become our informants.” Finding out what children know is important, for this informs our teaching.

I remember Mikey, a fifth-grade student who was disrupting the class by walking around moaning, “I have nothing to write about. I have nothing to write about.” Mikey was not the kind of student who took kindly to being ordered to just sit down and write. So I had to find another solution. I sat with Mikey and just chatted with him. He told me a

funny story about how he and his half-brother threw eggs at some houses. The story was such a funny one that I just naturally started laughing. As is typical, the other students wanted to know what we were laughing about. I took advantage of the situation by asking Mikey to retell his adventures as other children joined us; that day Mikey told his story several times. Finally I said to the students, “Mikey said he doesn’t have anything to write about.” The students immediately chimed, “Write about the eggs!” Mikey did, deciding to change the names and write in the third person in order to protect the guilty. As chance might have it, Mikey was one of the winners in the Colorado Council of the International Reading Association’s statewide Young Authors Writing Contest.

Why did this rehearsal strategy work? Simply stated, telling his story over and over to an interested audience

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Conferences Have a Predictable Structure

When I've watched teachers who are good at conferring, I've noticed that there is a structure to their conversations. Because these teachers know in general how they want their conversations with students to go—as do their students, once they've been in several of them—the talk flows easily and naturally, and both the teachers and students hold up their end of it.

The conference conversation generally has two parts, both of which grow from the underlying purpose of helping students become better writers. In the first part, we talk with students about the work they're doing as writers. By “work,” I mean what students are doing as they write in their writer's notebooks or compose drafts. Are they planning how their pieces will unfold? Working on an ending? Revising? Editing? As we talk with students, our job is to

assess what they are doing as writers. By listening carefully to their words and reading their writing, we gather information about who students are as writers. With this information in mind, we decide what to teach them.

In the second part of the writing conference conversation, we talk with students about how to be better writers. In this part, we teach students to improve on the writing work they're doing.

We Confer with Lines of Thinking in Mind

In a conversation, we usually focus on one subject for a while, perhaps even for the entire conversation. That is, we get on a particular line of thinking about a topic. As we confer with students, we get on a line of thinking about one kind of writing work—a line of thinking that sets the direction for the rest of the conference. In our first conference of the day, for example, we might talk with a student about how to develop the main character in the short story she is writing. In the next, we might show a student how he can make time transitions in his memoir. Once we reach the end of a particular line of thinking in a conference—when we've finished teaching—we resist the urge to pursue another, and we end the conference. This is important if we're going to keep conferences reasonably short.

In Conferences, Teachers and Students Have Different Roles

Teachers and students have particular roles in the writing conference conversation, and when all concerned understand these roles, the conferences go well. In the first part of a conference, when we talk with students about the writing work they are doing, teachers and students have several responsibilities:

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learn how to write a lead for a feature article.” Strategies and techniques such as these are ones that students can use in their current pieces, as well as in pieces they write ten or twenty years from now.

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validated Mikey's ideas and helped him find his voice. This process also helped him rehearse what he had to say so that when he finally did start to write, the ideas and words could flow.

Listening well also helped me with David, a fourth grader. David informed me that he hated to read and write, and I couldn't make him do it. So instead of making him write, we talked, and I listened to him tell me about his pet chinchillas. At the end of our conversation, I asked David if he would be willing to *teach me* about his pet chinchillas and to help me remember by putting his thoughts on paper. Without hesitation, David responded, “Sure.” That was the day David became a writer.

Three Underlying Principles to Consider

- ❶ **Talk is important in rehearsal.** Even when children use drawing to

rehearse for writing, talk is still necessary. Talking helps develop voice and choice.

- ❷ **Be the learner.** Position yourself at eye level and lean in when students talk about themselves. Enter your students' worlds to discover what it is they have to say.

- ❸ **Put yourself in situations where you are writing and getting response.** Know yourself as a writer, and reflect on the kinds of response you have found most helpful.

Graves (1994, p. 27) offers, “Unless we begin to understand what our students know, how they know it, and what they value about it, we waste their time. Worse, if our students think we don't know something special about them, which they value, they may find learning to be an isolated and meaningless exercise.” ▼

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- At the beginning, it's our job to invite students to set an agenda for the conference. We ask them an open-ended question such as, "How's it going?" or "What are you doing as a writer today?" It's then the student's job to describe the writing work that he or she is doing.
- Once the agenda for the conference is set, it's our role to ask questions about the student's writing work, and to look at the student's writing. It's the student's role to respond to the teacher's questions, and to share his or her writing.

Next it's our job to decide what to teach the student. In the second part of a conference, when we teach students how to do better work as writers, the responsibilities of teacher and student can be described in these ways:

- We begin by giving students feedback about their writing work. We point out what we've noticed about their work and tell them what we're going to teach.
- Next we teach, sometimes by giving a concise explanation and other times by referring to model pieces of literature. It's the student's role to ask questions to clarify and deepen understanding.
- In some conferences, we ask students to "have-a-go" with what we've just taught. That is, we nudge them to talk out how they can use a particular strategy in their writing.
- Finally, we link the conference to students' independent writing by letting them know that we expect them to try what we've taught once the conference is over. We might say, "I'll check back with you in ten minutes to see how you're doing," or "Would you show what you've done later in the period?" It's the student's job to commit to trying out what we've taught.



We Show That We Care

With all the pressure we feel today as teachers to raise test scores and to get our students to meet standards, it's too easy to forget to communicate how much we care about them. We enter into many conversations, after all, because we care about the person with whom we're talking. It's easy to focus so intently on the work students are doing as writers that we see only the work and not the young writers who are doing it. In the end, the success of a conference often rests on the extent to which students sense that we are interested in them as writers—and as individuals.

We can show students we care about them by how we talk with them about their writing work. When we ask, "How's it going?" at the beginning of conferences, students can hear in our tone of voice and see by the expression on our faces that we really are interested in how their writing is going. As conferences unfold, we listen intently to everything students tell us about what they're doing because we're genuinely curious to learn more about their work.

By truly listening as we confer, we let students know that the work they're doing as writers matters. It's the way we listen, more than anything else, that will nudge our students to look at us with a smile instead of a frown when we kneel down next to them and ask, "How's it going?" It's the way we listen that can inspire students to stretch themselves as writers. It's the way we listen that can change students' writing lives. ▼

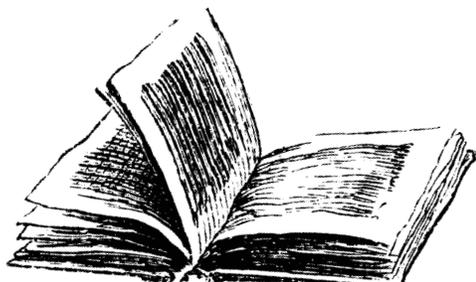
It's the way we listen that can inspire students to stretch themselves as writers. It's the way we listen that can change students' writing lives.

We have found it helpful to trust our students and ourselves and to follow our instincts. Make sure you look into the child's eyes and let her know that you are really listening, and always respond as a fellow reader and writer, not as the expert.

It is also helpful to share your own writing with students and to invite their responses. Listen closely to the ways in which they respond, and tell what you found most helpful. This will help students begin to understand ways in which they can become successful peer conference partners.

Finally, guard the dissonance you feel, because that is the way you continue to grow as a teacher.

In her book *Lasting Impressions*, Shelley Harwayne suggests, "I think we've complicated the idea of conferring. Teachers need to see that they've been conferring their whole lives. They need to recall moments when they've been good listeners and moments when they've helped someone see options, make decisions, and take risks. Of course, conferring about writing is usually not that simple. But we have to begin with the belief that we can do it, that indeed, we've been doing it well for years." ▼



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