

GRADES 3 – 6

Strategic Writing Conferences

Smart Conversations That Move Young Writers Forward

 topics

CARL ANDERSON



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DEDICATION:

This book is dedicated to Helen and Kenneth Anderson, and Harold and Marcia Epstein.



DEDICATED TO TEACHERS

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Introduction to Book 1

THE CONFERENCES IN THIS BOOK are designed to help students with the *rehearsal* stage of the writing process—the different kinds of work that writers do before drafting, which include finding, exploring, selecting, and developing a topic. Conferences for each of these kinds of rehearsal work are located in the following sections:

Part 1: Finding Topics

The student’s first challenge as a writer is to find topics to write about. Ideally, he can identify topics that he knows and cares about—or that he wants to learn and then write about. The conferences in the Finding Topics section are designed to teach the student several strategies to find topics, including using topic categories, observing the world, “free writing,” and identifying and mining his “writing territories”—topics that he knows and cares a lot about, and that he can imagine writing about many times across the school year.

Part 2: Exploring Topics

Often writers explore many topics in a writer’s notebook before selecting one topic as the “seed” for a draft. They explore by writing a series of short entries about each topic over a period of days, weeks, even months. Typically, a student explores topics during the first week of a unit of study before she chooses one as the “seed.” Then she writes the draft during the next several weeks of the study.

The conferences in the Exploring Topics section are designed to help the student explore topics in a writer’s notebook. The student writes entries that will help her “try out” topics before writing in a

certain genre (e.g., personal narrative, memoir, feature article, opinion/editorial, personal essay, and short fiction).

Part 3: Developing Topics

Once a student has explored several topics in his writer’s notebook, he rereads his notebook entries and selects one as the “seed” for a draft. This is an important decision, since he will spend the rest of the unit writing that draft. Once the student selects the seed topic, he uses one or more strategies to develop it before starting a draft.

The conferences in the Developing Topics section are designed to teach the student strategies for choosing a “seed” and developing it. Strategies include reflecting on meaning; sketching; thinking about a story’s conflict, characters, and setting; and determining the focus of and researching nonfiction. The final conferences in Book 1 help the student to make a plan for writing and create a schedule for completing the draft.

Diagnostic Guide for Book 1: *Topics*

The Diagnostic Guide is designed to help you locate a conference that addresses a student's particular area of need. The guide lists areas of need that a student may have when he's finding, exploring, selecting, and developing topics.

Part One: Finding Topics

WHAT YOU FIND	CONFERENCES THAT CAN HELP	Page
The student...		
... is having trouble generating ideas for notebook entries or drafts.	1. Making a List * 2. Reading the World 3. Free Writing 4. Brainstorming Writing Territories *	7 12 17 22
... abandons a writing territory after writing about it only once or twice.	5. Mining a Writing Territory *	26
... has several favorite topics, but he's tired of writing about them.	6. Updating Writing Territories	35
... doesn't know much about a new topic he's eager to write about.	7. Turning an Unfamiliar Topic into a Writing Territory	39

Part Two: Exploring Topics

WHAT YOU FIND	CONFERENCES THAT CAN HELP	Page
The student...		
... has uninspired entries in his writer's notebook.	8. "Unpacking" One Moment * 9. Visualizing and Talking	47 51
... is writing entries that are focused on the object or hobby rather than on the writer's experiences with it.	10. Adding Yourself *	54
... isn't sure how to write entries that support nonfiction writing.	11. Writing about Facts and Questions	58
... isn't sure how to write entries that support fiction writing.	12. Writing about a Character	68
... writes about topics in the same way all the time.	13. Writing in a Variety of Ways	72

A conference with an * is one of Carl's Classics.

Part Three: Developing Topics

WHAT YOU FIND	CONFERENCES THAT CAN HELP	Page
The student... ... is having trouble choosing an appropriate topic to write about or a genre in which to write about it.	14. Considering Interest, Audience, or Occasion *	83
	15. Considering Interest, Content, or Purpose	85
... is having trouble explaining the meaning or significance of his topic.	16. Reflecting on Its Significance *	88
	17. Finding a Focusing Line	92
... is writing without concrete details.	18. Sketching	97
... is writing a story that lacks an important element of fiction.	19. Thinking Deeply about the Story's Conflict	103
	20. Envisioning and Writing about a Character	108
	21. Adding Sensory Details to the Setting	113
... does not have a focus to his nonfiction writing.	22. Finding a Focus in Nonfiction	117
	24. Finding a Focus in Unfamiliar Nonfiction	129
... is having trouble identifying and organizing his main ideas.	23. Brainstorming Sections	121
... does not have a repertoire of strategies for researching a topic.	25. Researching Sections	133
	26. Making a Resource List	137
	27. Gathering Notes	141
	28. Preparing to Interview	146
... does not have a plan for completing his draft.	29. Making a Plan	151
	30. Making a Schedule	157

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Finding a Topic by Brainstorming Writing Territories

WHAT YOU FIND

The student who could be helped by this conference has trouble generating ideas for notebook entries or for pieces. He may complain, “I have nothing to write about!”

The writing in his notebook may:

- resemble diary entries, recording day-to-day events.
- appear randomly generated, without purpose, pattern, or depth.
- be sparse or virtually nonexistent.

CONFERENCE PURPOSE

Teach the student to identify and use “writing territories” (topics she is passionate about) whenever she is unsure what to write about.

MODEL TEXT

My list of writing territories or another writer’s list of writing territories

◆ View this conference on *Carl on Camera: Modeling Strategic Writing Conferences* DVD.

I NOTICE YOU’RE HAVING trouble thinking of a topic to write about. Many writers have trouble thinking of topics sometimes. This is especially common for young writers, like you.

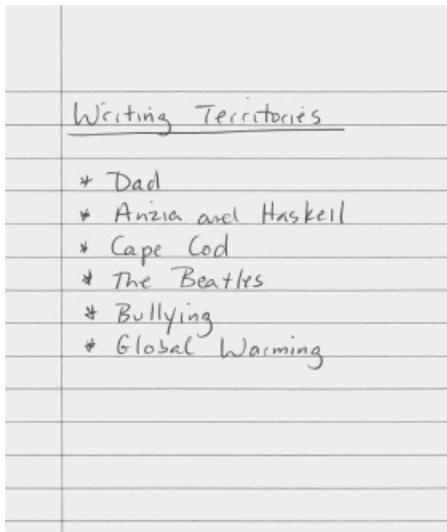
Experienced writers often have a few favorite topics that they write about again and again—we sometimes call these favorite topics “writing territories.” They are the topics that are extremely important to the writer. For example, author Patricia Polacco writes again and again about her family. She writes about her brother in *My Rotten Redheaded Older Brother* and her dad in *My Ol’ Man*. And I know you know more examples! “Family” is one of Polacco’s writing territories.

A writing territory can be anything, and it is specific to the writer. Members of your family, a friend, or anyone important to you can be a writing territory. An activity, sport, or hobby can also be a writing territory. Some writers even write often about places that are special to them, like a country, a town, or a landscape. Writers write again and again about things in the world that fascinate them, confuse them, or that they love to learn about. And many writers write about issues that concern them, that they want to do something about.

Share Your Writing

I have a list of writing territories on the first page of my writer’s notebook.

Here’s how I came up with my list: I asked myself, “What topics—people, activities, places, fascinating things in the world, issues—do I want to write about again and again?”



◆ Suggest writing territories to the student based on what you know about her. If a student and his brother are inseparable, for example, you could suggest the brother as a possible writing territory. Or, if you know that a student is a soccer fanatic and an avid butterfly collector, you might suggest those as potential territories.

When I thought about people who could be writing territories, I thought immediately of my dad, who was quite a character and had an impact on me when I was a boy. My two children, Anzia and Haskell, also came to mind.

When I thought about places, I thought right away of Cape Cod. My family goes to Cape Cod every summer, and there are so many things we do there that I can write about.

The Beatles have fascinated me since I was a teenager, and I can't read enough about them and their music, so they are on the list.

And there are several issues that concern me. Bullying and global warming are two of them. I want to write about them, so I added them to my list.

When I write in my writer's notebook, it's often about one of the territories on this list. If I don't know what to write about, I look back at this list. That usually makes me think of something to write about. I have written about each territory many times, and I'll write about each one many more times.

Coach the Student

To find your writing territories, ask yourself what is important to you. What are you very, very interested in? What topics do you think might be writing territories for you?

- ◆ Is there someone in your family that you want to write about over and over again because there's so much to think about related to that person?
- ◆ Is there an activity or interest you are passionate about?
- ◆ Is there an issue that you care deeply about that could become a territory?

Link to the Student's Writing

I'd like you to spend some more time thinking about what your writing territories are. List them in your writer's notebook as you think of them.

Whenever you're trying to decide what you want to write about in your writer's notebook, remember that many writers have favorite topics—writing territories—that they write about many times during their lives. You can use your list of writing territories to remind yourself of a topic you want to write about.

FOLLOW-UP

Some students have little trouble using a list of writing territories to generate specific ideas or topics to write about. For example, if a student writes “The Beach” on her list, it may lead her to generate narrative or fiction story ideas, such as “The Time My Dad Taught Me to Body Surf,” or nonfiction topic ideas, such as “Common Shells Found on Long Island’s South Shore.” However, some students have trouble using their list of writing territories to think of specific topics. Use Book 1: *Topics*, Conference 5, “Finding a Topic by Mining a Writing Territory” with these students.

SOURCES

I first encountered the concept of writing territories in Nancie Atwell’s *In the Middle: New Understandings About Writing, Reading, and Learning* (1998). Also, Donald Murray has a discussion of the concept in *Write to Learn* (2004).

Writing Territories

- * Dad
- * Anzia and Haskell
- * Cape Cod
- * The Beatles
- * Bullying
- * Global Warming