



An Overview of Conferencing

YOU MAY HAVE several important questions about writing conferences:

- What are the goals of a writing conference?
- When should I confer with students about their writing?
- What will conferencing look like in my classroom?
- What are the teaching moves in a writing conference?
- What should I teach in a writing conference?

What are the goals of a writing conference?

When you confer with a student, it isn't your job to fix or edit the student's writing. Rather, it's to teach the student *one* writing strategy or technique he can use in a current piece of writing and continue to use in future writing. As you confer, keep in mind Lucy Calkins' wise advice: "[We] are teaching the writer and not the writing. Our decisions must be guided by 'what might help this *writer*' rather than 'what might help this *writing*'" (1994).

When should I confer with students about their writing?

You can have writing conferences anytime students are writing in your classroom. If you use the writing workshop method, you will confer with students as they spend days and even weeks working on a piece of writing. Usually, writing workshop begins with a short minilesson (a whole group lesson), then students work independently on their writing for twenty to thirty minutes. During this independent writing time, circulate around the classroom and confer with students.

If you teach writing by giving assignments or prompts, confer with students during class as they work on those assignments.

You can even confer with students if you are not a writing teacher. As long as students use your class time to work on writing—whether it is reading, math, science, or social studies—you can confer with them.

What will conferring look like in my classroom?

When conferring, you might move from table to table (or desk to desk) to sit next to students as they write. If you decide to confer at students' tables, it is helpful to carry a small “conferring chair” as you move around the classroom. Or you might sit at a “writing conference table” and call students to you one at a time.

During a conference, sit side by side with the student, with her writing in front of both of you. It is best when the conference feels like a conversation, with both you and the student talking and listening to each other. Ask what the student is doing as a writer, compliment what the student is doing well, then teach a writing strategy or technique. Prompt the student to tell you what she is working on and what she needs help with, and at the end of the conference, to describe how she will use the writing strategy you just taught.

Each writing conference is five to seven minutes; therefore, you will probably confer with four or five students in a class period, depending on how much time students have to work independently. After each conference, note on the record-keeping forms any areas of need and the student's progress. This will help you remember the strategy you taught and your ideas for follow-up conferences.

◆ See writing conferences in action on the *Modeling Strategic Writing Conferences* DVD. The conferences with Ivan (Book 1: *Topics*, Conference 4), Kansas (Book 2: *Drafts*, Conference 24), and Haley (Book 3: *Finished Projects*, Conference 17) are good to watch first.

◆ See pages 13–14 of the *Strategic Writing Conferences Teacher's Guide* for sample record-keeping forms.





What are the teaching moves in a writing conference?

The First Part of the Writing Conference: Identifying the Student's Needs

During the first part of the conference, identify an area of need. First, find out the stage of the writing process the student is in—pre-writing (or rehearsal), drafting, revising, or editing—and the specific kind of writing work she is doing at this stage. Then assess how well the student is doing that writing work. For example, the student may be in the prewriting stage, trying to find a topic to write about, but is having trouble finding a really good topic. Or the student may be drafting, trying to write with detail, but her writing is general and does not render a clear picture of the subject. Or the student may be editing by reading her draft to herself, but this strategy isn't helping her locate the end of sentences that need periods.

To identify an area of need, you can take three steps during the first part of the conference.

Step 1: Ask an open-ended question. By asking an open-ended question, you invite the student to tell you about what he's doing as a writer. Questions such as "How's it going?" "What are you doing as a writer today?" and "How can I help you today?" are good ones to start with.

Step 2: Ask follow-up questions. Once your conversation with the student gets started, ask follow-up questions. Although the best questions can't be planned—you will think of them as you listen to the student tell you what he's doing—there are a few general questions that can help move along a conference. Effective follow-up questions include "Where are you in the

writing process?”; “What strategies are you using in this stage of the writing process?”; and “What are you doing to write this piece well?”

Step 3: Look at the student’s writing. Looking at the student’s writing helps you identify an area of need. Usually it isn’t necessary to read an entire notebook entry or draft. If a student is drafting, for example, and working on a lead, just read the lead. If the student is working on topic sentences in a nonfiction draft, take a close look at those sentences.

By the end of the first part of a writing conference, you’ve identified the area of need. The next step is to use the Diagnostic Guides in *Strategic Writing Conferences* (pages 19–25) to find corresponding conferences.

The Second Part of the Writing Conference: Teaching the Writing Strategy or Craft Technique

In the second part of the writing conference, you’ll teach the student a writing strategy or craft technique to help him grow as a writer. *Strategic Writing Conferences* shows you how—clearly and effectively. Every conference models the instructional language and moves that will help you teach students, following these four steps:

Step 1: Give feedback. Preface your teaching by giving the student feedback. Try to point out something the student is doing well—and also name the area of need.

Step 2: Teach. Just like a story reaches the climax, a conference builds to the teaching moment. Your success in helping a student grow as a writer in a conference depends on your skill as a teacher in the next few minutes.

Start by *naming* and *defining* the specific strategy or craft technique that you intend to teach. Explain *why* it’s important for the student to learn. To help the student understand the strategy or technique, you might show an example of how a children’s book author, such as Patricia Polacco, uses the strategy or technique. Or show how you use the strategy in your own writing. Most importantly, explain *how* the student can use the strategy or technique in his own writing.

Step 3: Try it. Before you end the conference, help the student try the strategy or technique you just taught. Gently nudge the student to talk out how he could use the strategy in his writing, or have the student try it in writing. The purpose of the “try

◆ As you watch the model conferences on the *Carl on Camera: Modeling Strategic Writing Conferences* DVD, notice each teaching step.

◆ For an extended discussion of the teaching steps, watch the *Carl on Camera: Introducing Strategic Writing Conferences* DVD, Part 3, “The Teacher’s Role in a Writing Conference,” or read *How’s It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers* (Anderson, 2000), Chapters 1 and 2.

What should I teach in a writing conference?

it” step is to give the student a taste of the strategy—enough so that you know he is ready to try it independently.

Step 4: Link to the student’s work. End the conference by linking the conference to the student’s work, that is, tell the student you expect him to try the strategy in his writing and that you hope he will continue to use it in future writing.

With that, the conference is over. Take a minute to jot down some notes about the conference on a record-keeping form. Then you’re off to the next conference!

There are many things students need to learn in order to become lifelong writers—and you can teach them as you confer with students across the school year. *Strategic Writing Conferences* shows how to teach the broad range of writing strategies and techniques students need, including the writing process, qualities of good writing, and how to be initiators of writing.

The **writing process** itself is the focus of many conferences. Students need a repertoire of strategies to help them prewrite (or rehearse a topic before drafting), draft, revise, and edit. You’ll find conferences that focus on teaching the writing process in all three books of *Strategic Writing Conferences*. For example, for students who are prewriting, you can teach the strategy of brainstorming topics (Book 1: *Topics*, Conference 1, “Finding a Topic by Making a List”). For students who are drafting, you can teach the strategy of making a plan or outline (Book 2: *Drafts*, Conference 5, “Getting Started by Making a Basic Plan”). For students who are revising, you can teach the strategy of rereading a draft to add details (Book 3: *Finished Projects*, Conference 1, “Revising by Adding Text”). For students who are editing, you can teach the strategy of reading aloud a draft in order to add punctuation (Book 3: *Finished Projects*, Conference 17, “Editing for Clarity by Reading Aloud”).

You’ll focus many conferences on the **qualities of good writing** and how students can incorporate these qualities into their writing. You’ll find conferences that focus on teaching the qualities of good writing in Book 2: *Drafts* and Book 3: *Finished Projects*. For example, you can teach students how to write a focused draft that gets their point across (Book 2: *Drafts*, Conference 6, “Getting Started by Focusing a Bed-to-Bed Story”), teach them how to write precise details (Book 2: *Drafts*, Conference 21, “Crafting a Scene with

◆ For an extended discussion of what to focus on in conferences, read *Assessing Writers* (Anderson, 2004), especially chapters two through five, or watch the DVD *Carl on Camera: Introducing Strategic Writing Conferences* DVD, Part 4, “Assessment of Student Writing.”

Model Texts in Conferences

Precise Details: Actions, Dialogue, and Thoughts”), and how to punctuate sentences to give voice to their writing (Book 3: *Finished Projects*, Conference 13, “Editing for Voice by Using Exclamations and Ellipses”).

You can also focus conferences on teaching students how to be **initiators of writing**; that is, to be writers who write purposefully and by choice. Initiators of writing know how to find appropriate audiences for their writing. For example, you can teach students how to identify an appropriate audience, such as specific classmates, for their writing (Book 2: *Drafts*, Conference 1, “Writing with Classmates as an Audience”).

As you review the conferences in *Strategic Writing Conferences*, you’ll notice that most of them include model texts. Some of these model texts are excerpts from children’s literature; others are excerpts from my writer’s notebook or drafts of pieces I wrote.

It’s crucial to show the student model texts during the conference. Model texts help the student “see” what it looks like when a writer uses a strategy or craft technique. It helps the student envision putting the strategy in practice in her own writing. Also, when you use a model text, you are providing guided practice with what Frank Smith (1988) and Katie Ray (1999) call “reading like a writer.” When a writer reads work by other writers, she notices the strategies and craft techniques used, then tries the same technique in her own writing. When model texts are used routinely in conferences,



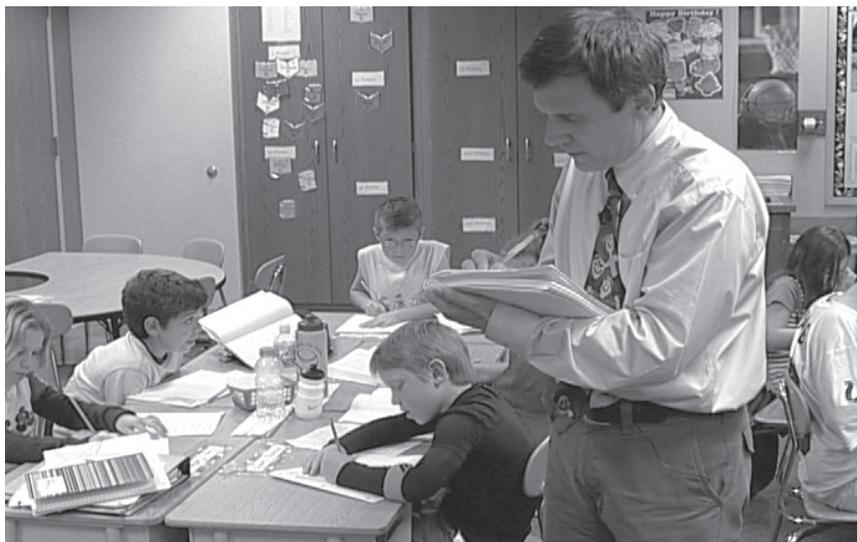


students learn that they, too, can learn from other writers—something they can do for the rest of their lives.

Whenever a conference includes a model text, have the excerpt handy before you confer with the student. To help you prepare for your conferences, each model text is embedded in the conference at point of use, so you can read when and how to use it. The model text is also included as a reproducible at the end of the conference. Of course, when you are using an excerpt of a published piece of children’s literature that you have access to, feel free to show the excerpt in the text itself. Many of the model texts are well-known children’s books, which can be found in most school libraries or bookstores; you may have several of them in your classroom library already. A list of the model texts used in the three conference books is provided in Appendix A. The model texts that are magazine and newspaper articles are provided in full in Appendix B.

When you refer to a model text during a conference, place the text between you and the student so that the student can easily see it. Take the time to read the excerpt aloud, and ask the student to follow along as you read. (Read the excerpt aloud even if you’ve already read the whole text or an excerpt to the class during read-aloud time or a minilesson. Writers often read a favorite text over and over when they are studying a technique.) As you teach, point to the features of the text that illustrate what you’re explaining so that the student matches your teaching to the appropriate part of the text.

Not only will the conferences in *Strategic Writing Conferences* help you teach writing strategies and techniques with more clarity and precision, they will help you become more comfortable in gen-



eral with the method of using model texts to teach—an important skill for every writing teacher.

Record-Keeping Forms

Like a doctor takes notes about a patient after an examination, a teacher takes notes about a student after a writing conference. These notes will help you anticipate what a student will most likely need to focus on in future conferences. They will help you use *Strategic Writing Conferences* more efficiently and wisely.

There are many kinds of record-keeping forms you can use to take notes and record important information about a conference. Two are included as reproducibles: one is a grid of students in a class, the other is a form to use for individual students. Use these or find another that fits your style and needs as a teacher.

© 2009 by Linda Ward Beech, Scholastic Teaching Resources. The grid may be reproduced for classroom use.

As Director of Confering 19

Grid of Students

One of the simplest forms to take notes on is a grid. Use the reproducible that follows, or simply divide a sheet of paper into a series of boxes, one for each student in your class. Put a photocopy of the grid on a clipboard that you carry as you circulate around the room. Jot down notes as you confer with students, including:

- ▶ today's date and the student's name,
- ▶ what the student is working on,
- ▶ your teaching point, and
- ▶ an area of need that you want to focus on in a future conference.

After you have conferred with all the students in your class and filled up the grid, put a blank one on top of your clipboard for the next round of conferences.

How can this form help you? When it's time to confer again with a student, read over your notes from the last conference or two. Your notes will help you anticipate and plan what to teach in the next conference. You may want to revisit the same teaching point again with a student—if you see that he needs further support with it—or you may want to address an area of need that you noted previously but didn't respond to in a previous conference.

Individual Student Form

Another form you may want to use is the “two-column” form. On it, you can record notes from several conferences with *one* student. Teachers who use this form usually have a sectioned binder, with one section for each student in their class. In each student's section are several copies of the form, which provide enough space to take notes for a student across the entire school year.

Record the student's name at the top. Then in the left column, take notes for the conference, including:

- ▶ today's date,
- ▶ what the student is working on, and
- ▶ your teaching point.

In the right column, jot down:

- ▶ your goals for future writing conferences, such as an area of need you may need to address again and/or areas of need that you haven't yet addressed.

I note my teaching point with a “T” and instructional goal with a “G” to make scanning the form before future conferences easier. Teachers who use the two-column form like how it provides more space to jot down their thoughts about a student after a conference. And when they confer with a student again, it's easy to skim the right column to see what areas of need may come up in the conference.

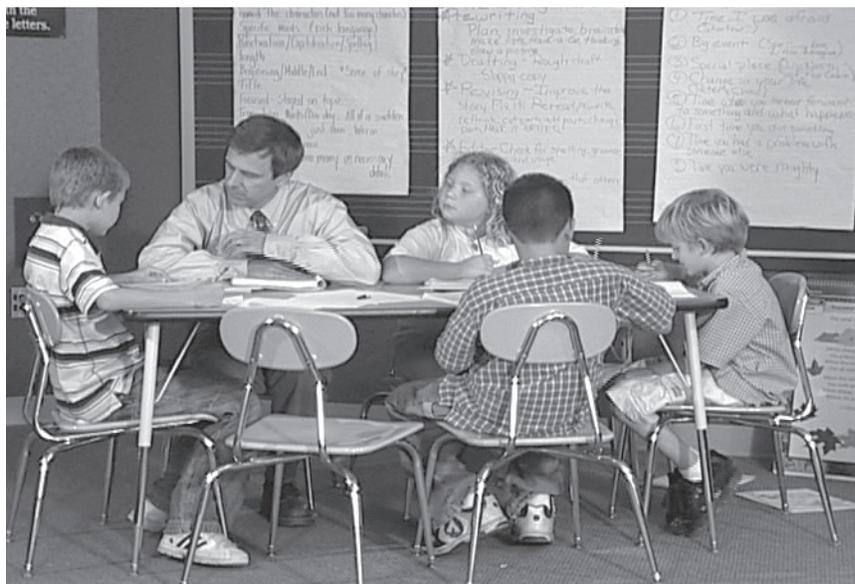
Whatever record-keeping form you use, your notes can help you use *Strategic Writing Conferences* effectively. After reviewing your notes from previous conferences and identifying the student's areas of need, you may decide to consult the Diagnostic Guides (see pages 19–25) and read through the corresponding conferences in *Strategic Writing Conferences* to prepare for your next conference with

Assessment Notes for _____ Date _____

What am I learning about this student as a writer?	What do I need to teach this student?

© is the symbol for Teaching Point
© is the symbol for Instructional Goal

14 Strategic Writing Conferences: Teacher's Guide



the student. Perhaps you want to find a conference with a teaching point you've already taught but want to revisit, or perhaps you've identified an area of need that you've not yet addressed and want to find a model conference to help you address it. In either case, *Strategic Writing Conferences* can help you imagine how to do the conference well.

As you review your notes, you will probably discover that several students have the same areas of need. If this is the case, meet with these students in a small group. Before gathering the students, consult the conference books—you can use the teaching points in the conferences with small groups as successfully as you can with individual students.

What am I learning about this student as a writer?	What do I need to teach this student?

T is the symbol for Teaching Point.

G is the symbol for Instructional Goal.

© 2005 by Carl Anderson from *Assessing Writers*. Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH.