

Conference Walkthrough

Every conference in Books 1–3 shows you how to teach a specific writing strategy, craft technique, or point of grammar or mechanics. The predictable features of each conference model a framework for teaching a student effectively. In addition, marginal notes offer coaching, background information, and/or ideas for modifying the conference.

The first four sections help you prepare for the conference:

◆ The **What You Find** section describes the area of need to be addressed in the conference.

◆ **Conference Purpose** is a concise summary of the main teaching point.

◆ The **Model Text** section lists the model texts or writing samples used to teach the strategy or craft technique.

◆ A **Materials** section appears if you will need additional writing tools to teach the conference.

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 generate a topic list that he can refer to whenever he is unsure what to write about.

MODEL TEXT
My list of writing topics or another writer's list

1
Finding a Topic by Making a List

I NOTICE THAT you are not sure what to write about today. This is something every writer goes through at different times in his writing life. One strategy writers use to help them find a topic to write about is to brainstorm a list of possible topics, usually on a page in their writer's notebook. Making a topic list helps us figure out what to write about—not only on the day we make the list but also weeks and months later, or whenever we can't come up with a topic to write about.

Explain a Strategy
How do writers make a list of possible topics, especially when we are having trouble coming up with even one topic? We make a list by first thinking of categories of topics to write about. These categories may include "special people," like family and friends; "memories," or events that you will never forget; "places" that you have visited or that mean a lot to you; "activities" that you enjoy; and "issues" that you feel are important. As we think about each category, we ask ourselves, "Do I have something to write about in this category?"

When we think about a topic category, sometimes we come up with a specific, ready-to-go topic, such as, "The time my dad took me on the roller coaster at Coney Island." Other times we come up with a big topic, such as "my mom," that can give us lots of ideas for writing.

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The conference teaching language begins after these four sections. It models how to begin a conference by offering feedback to the student. It shows how to talk about the area of need and name and define the writing strategy, craft technique, or point of grammar or mechanics that you will teach. The teaching language is followed by five sections:

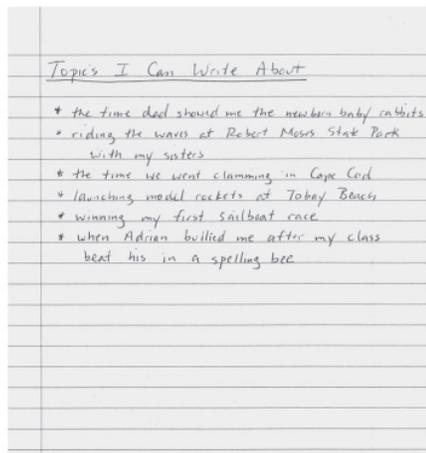
◆ The **Explain a Strategy** section offers a clear, explicit explanation of how writers use a writing strategy.

◆ **Share Your Writing** models how to use your own piece of writing to teach a strategy, technique, or point of grammar or mechanics.

◆ The **Share a Model Text** section models how to teach an aspect of writer's craft using an excerpt from children's literature or a nonfiction piece. You can use the models provided or try one of your favorites.

◆ The **Coach the Student** section gives you scaffolding questions to help you guide the student to try what you've just taught.

◆ **Link to the Student's Writing** shows how to wrap up the conference. It models how to explain what you would like the student to do *right now* in his own writing and helps you summarize the teaching point.



Share Your Writing

I want to show you my own list of topics that I brainstormed in my writer's notebook based on categories.

I started to write this list by thinking of the topic category "family." As I thought about this category, I came up with a few important experiences that I shared with my family, such as "the time my dad showed me the newborn baby rabbits" and "riding the waves at Robert Moses State Park with my sisters."

Then I thought of the topic category "places." As I thought about places that mean a lot to me, or did when I was a kid, I came up with the idea "the time we went clamming in Cape Cod." Then I continued to think of different topic categories, and brainstormed even more ideas for writing.

Coach the Student

I'd like to help you use categories to brainstorm a list of possible topics you could write about.

- ◆ Is there a category you would like to think about first? What can you write about in this category?
- ◆ What about the topic category "family"? Are there special people in your family that you would like to write about? What experiences or special moments with your family come to mind that you might write about?
- ◆ What about other topic categories—"friends," "places," "issues"?

◆ Suggest a category to the student, based on what you know about him. For example, if you know a student went fishing with her brother recently, you might say, "I'm sure you've got some good ideas in the category 'family.' What about when you went fishing with your brother this past weekend?"

Link to the Student's Writing

I'd like you to make a list of topics right now in your writer's notebook that you will draw ideas from to write about. To help you do this, I'm going to give you a list of topic categories (see page 11) that you can look at as you make the list.

Remember that whenever you're stuck for a topic to write about, you can make a list of possible topics by thinking about categories. The list you make can help you find a topic to write about now and also give you topics to write about in the future.

In addition to these sections, which form the bulk of the conference, three sections sometimes appear, which provide further information:

◆ The **Follow-Up** section gives ideas for modifying the conference during subsequent units of study and/or ideas for additional conferences about the same topic.

◆ **Modifications for Nonfiction Genres** provides guidelines for adapting the conference for use with students who are writing in nonfiction genres.

◆ A **Sources** section appears when applicable that shares the inspiration for the conference and provides references to the professional literature.

FOLLOW-UP

- ▶ Later on in the year, when your class is studying a genre other than narrative, angle the conference toward that genre. For example, if the class is studying feature articles, tell students they can ask themselves, "Is there something I want to teach readers about in this category, activities and hobbies?" If the class is studying op-eds, students can ask, "Do I have opinions about something in this category, issues I feel passionate about?" If the class is studying personal essay, students can ask, "Do I have any ideas about something in this category, memories?"
- ▶ In a unit of study in which students choose the genre, tell students that they can ask themselves this all-inclusive set of questions: "Do I have a story in this category? Something I want to teach readers about? An opinion? Or an idea?" Angling the conference in this way helps students find ideas for writing in numerous genres.

SOURCES

I learned this strategy from Randy Bomer, who discusses giving kids a list of topic categories to write about in *Time for Meaning* (1995).

I developed many of the conferences in this book by learning from many educators. Lucy Calkins has written extensively about writer's notebooks in *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1994), *Living Between the Lines* (with Shelley Harwayne, 1990), and *Units of Study for Teaching Writing Grades 3-5* (with colleagues, 2006). Randy Bomer's *Time for Meaning* (1995)—which inspired Conference 1—describes teaching middle and high school students to use notebooks as a rehearsal tool. Don Murray's *Write to Learn* (2004), Ralph Fletcher's *Breathing In, Breathing Out* (1996), Aimee Buckner's *Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook* (2005), Judy Davis and Sharon Hill's *The No Nonsense Guide to Teaching Writing* (2003) and Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Portalupi's *Lessons for the Writer's Notebook* (2005) are other invaluable resources.
