

Student-Teacher Writing Conferences: Opportunities for Reflection

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CONFERCING RATIONALE

Student-teacher writing conferences allow instructors to provide the writer individual attention on their work in a face-to-face format outside the classroom. Although they can be time consuming to prepare for and exhausting to complete, the conversations that take place during conferences can help instructors build rapport with students and understand their writing needs, as well as help the writer identify areas for improvement and craft a plan for revision. The steps below are for conferences that might take place at the draft stage of an essay, but certainly could be adapted to micro-conferences (which might take place in class) on brainstorming or other steps in the writing process.

LEARNING TRAINING & TEACHER PREPARATION

1. STEP 1: Training the learner

- A. Elicit from students why conferences are important; identify and discuss the goals of conferences. This is a good opportunity to discuss cross-cultural differences in communication and conference styles.
- B. Grade a model essay together so students understand the grading criteria of the rubric you will use. This also provides practice using the rubric for self-evaluation to further promote reflection.
- C. Have students brainstorm some ways they think their own preparation might make conferences more productive. Some options for conference preparation tasks include:
 - 1) Fill out a cover sheet (examples follow). Show good models of cover sheets as examples.
 - 2) Self-evaluate their own essay using the same rubric as instructor.
 - 3) Read instructor feedback in advance (if instructor can get a paper copy with comments to student in advance or provide electronic comments in advance).
 - 4) Write 4-5 Qs to ask in the conference. Provide some modeling/training on how to write specific, concrete questions to avoid questions like, "How can I fix my paper?"

2. STEP 2: Teacher preparation and reflection

- A. Evaluate the writing before the conference. If possible, give students access to their comments in advance. If grading electronically, you might share the essay via email or a content management system; if grading on paper, ask the student to arrive early to read through your comments before the conference. If possible, review the comments yourself immediately before the conference.
- B. Provide comments on the essay throughout on global concerns. Comment on discrete items if they interfere with comprehension or logic.
- C. Consider using "shortcuts" from an electronic comment bank. If you paste in, "This evidence is straw," they understand that the comment means the source is weak because in class you used the "Three little pigs" analogy for brick (strong), stick (in-between), and straw (weak) source types.
- D. Do not overwhelm students, but think about the goals of your course and the writer's needs. Determine the "big three" areas for improvement (global concerns) and briefly reiterate them in summative comments.

How to "stretch" a learner who is already meeting the course objectives.



"Triage:" What does this learner need to earn a passing grade?

3. STEP 3: The conference

- A. Begin with a little small talk to establish rapport and then identify the goals of the conference. If you are comfortable, you might allow students to record the conference.
- B. If you have asked the student to self-evaluate their essay, you might go over their scores at this time, or you might do this at the end of the conference.
- C. Allow for student initiated comments and questions. Balance student questions with instructor initiated comments and questions, but do not take over the conference.
- D. Model how to solve specific problem(s) for students and then ask the student to do the same at a different point in the writing. Encourage the student to do the actual writing/revision after watching you.
- E. Conclude the conference by encouraging the student to summarize the "big three" things they need to do.

4. STEP 4: Don't forget! Student and teacher reflections

- A. Students: Encourage students to reflect back on the writing process and conference and consider what they might do for the next conference to make it more productive.
- B. Teachers: Identify/recognize the successes of your class globally. Identify what students still need to work on. Grab some examples of areas that need work from student writing (e.g. thesis statements, cohesion, integrating evidence, citation problems etc.) to work through together in class. You might also ask students what was helpful about the conferences and how they might be improved for the next round.

WRAPPING UP: PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE CONFERENCES

Principle	Examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open the conference. Warm students up before diving in. 	<p>“How are you?” “How’s your semester?” “How’s your writing going?”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify objectives; set agenda. This should be clear before the conference, so perhaps reiterate it briefly. Students should definitely know that they will not be passive participants. 	<p>“Today we’re going to focus on the three most important things you need to work on.” “Today you’ll have a chance to ask questions.” “Today we’ll practice revising parts of your essay together.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage self-reflection. Resist the impulse to answer the questions for the student. 	<p>“What’s the main point of your paper?” “How did you choose your topic?” “What is your purpose?” “What is the main claim in this paragraph? How does the evidence support it?”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify global concerns. Stick with the “big three.” Make sure students leave with these in mind. 	<p>“Let’s step back and look at the overall organization.” “In order for your audience to understand your purpose, you need to...” “What was the most challenging part of your essay?”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide praise. Be authentic, specific, and concrete. 	<p>“Your use of X here is very effective.” “I like how you...” “Very nice work here...”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek clarification. Be an authentic reader who is engaged with the text. 	<p>“What do you mean here?” “Here you wrote.... Do you mean, (recast)?” “Your peer reviewer wrote.... Do you agree with that comment?”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use gentle imperatives. In some cases, direct advice might be more efficient. 	<p>“Here you might/may want to...” “In order to make this clearer for your audience, you might consider...”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Model revisions. Then choose a similar issue and ask the student to address it. If the student has brought their computer, it’s a great opportunity for them to do some on-the-spot revising as you monitor. 	<p>“Let’s look at this piece of evidence. Notice how we might be able to integrate it more effectively. If I write... before the evidence, I can provide more context. Now, what might I write after the evidence to explain its significance? Good idea. I might write... and I also might include...” “Now let’s look at this next paragraph. Notice how this evidence could be better integrated. Go ahead and think about how you might frame the evidence. What might you write? Ok, and how might you synthesize the evidence with your own ideas? Go ahead and type now.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledge difficulty of task and effort. 	<p>“You’ve selected a challenging topic and you’ve made a very good effort to discuss it.” “Through this example, we can see how difficult it can be to ensure our evidence is relevant, right?” “The article you’re reading has some technical terms, but you’ve done a good job identifying the most important information.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrap up. Thank the student for their effort and provide some encouragement. 	<p>“What are the 2-3 most important changes you will take?” “It was nice working with you today, and I look forward to reading your next draft.”</p>

RESOURCES / SAMPLE MATERIALS

Figure 1: Cover Sheet 1

Essay #1 Cover Sheet

Essay title:

1. What do you think you have done well in this essay?
 2. What changes did you make from draft 1 to draft 2? List them here.
 3. How helpful were the suggestions you received from your peer review group? Explain. Did you incorporate their feedback into draft #2? If yes, which suggestions did you incorporate? If no, explain why.
 4. What was the most challenging part of writing this essay?
 5. List three things that you would like my feedback on:
 6. List any additional comments or questions you have below:
-

Figure 2: Cover Sheet 2

Essay #1 Cover Sheet

1. What do you think you have done well in this essay?
 2. What was the most challenging part of writing this essay?
 3. List the changes you made from draft 1 to draft 2.
 - Introduction
 - Body
 - Conclusion
 4. Answer the questions below about your group members and their peer review efforts.
Group member #1 name: _____ peer review grade: A AB B BC C F
 - Did you feel the student made thoughtful comments on your essay? Did these comments help you improve your essay? Why or why not? Explain.
 - Group member #2 name:** _____ peer review grade: A AB B BC C F
 - Did you feel the student made thoughtful comments on your essay? Did these comments help you improve your essay? Why or why not? Explain.
 5. List three things that you would like my feedback on (use the back as needed):
-

Figure 3: Info sheet on conference expectations

Conferences – What You Need to Know

Date/time: _____ **Location:** _____

What are they?

You will meet with your instructor to discuss how you can improve your second draft. Before you come to the conference, read your own essay and be ready to discuss it. Use the grade sheet to thoughtfully give yourself a grade on your essay. You should write on the form and the essay.

Preparation—REQUIRED: (Put a check next to each item you complete.)

- _____ Read your instructor’s comments and do your best to understand them.
- _____ Make a list of questions to ask during the conference.
- _____ Self-evaluate your essay using the grade sheet distributed in class.

Questions about my essay (after you have read my feedback): Write 4-5 questions below:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

What you need to bring:

1. A clean, hard copy of your OWN essay (so that you can take notes) or your PC with the electronic file.
2. The **essay grade sheet** you filled in for your essay and a **list of questions** to ask about your essay.

During the conference:

- You will conference with your instructor for **30 minutes**, in which we will discuss your essay in depth.

- We will begin by discussing aspects of your essay you believe were most challenging and in need of the most improvement. This will also be a time for you to clarify any points that your instructor as the reader misunderstood, and to discuss additional ways to improve your essay.
- At this time, your instructor will discuss how you were evaluated. This grade is what your essay would receive if it were the final version and were handed in today; however, this is not the final grade and you can substantially improve this grade in your final essay.

What happens if I miss my conference? What happens if I am late?

- You will receive **2 absences**. If you truly have a good reason (i.e. you were in a car accident or you went to the hospital for surgery or you had to return home for a funeral) it may be possible to re-schedule. However, if you overslept, forgot, or were “too busy” doing something else your conference cannot be re-scheduled.
- Each person receives 30 minutes per conference. If you are 5 minutes late, your conference becomes 25 minutes. In addition, you will **receive one late for your attendance**.

Figure 4: ESL 118 Draft Self-Evaluation

Research Paper Self- Evaluation

Introduction

___/10 Intro starts at the appropriate level (narrowed topic); all sentences play a role; organization of the paper is predictable; thesis reflects writer’s position. Only necessary background information is included (in the background paragraph).

Argument

___/30 Writer provides original ideas and argumentation/analysis and a knowledgeable consideration of the issue. Argumentation/analysis is solid, complete, accurate, and sufficiently detailed. Logic is strong. Evidence used to support argument or analysis is convincing and specific and comes from a variety of sources.

___/10 The strongest possible counter-argument(s)/alternative perspective(s) is (are) considered and presented convincingly. The response (refutation/ rebuttal/ concession) to it (them) is effective.

Organization

___/15 Organization is effective; counter-argument(s) appropriately located; transitions indicate relationships within and between paragraphs and do not simply indicate a list; paragraphing is appropriate with clear topic and concluding sentences; paragraphs are about one idea not necessarily one claim.

Sources

___/20 Good balance between source material and author’s ideas; appropriate and best sources (e.g. “bricks”) are used to back up author’s ideas; quotations and paraphrases are well-framed (contextualization/ICE); skillful use of attribution and documentation (including APA-style in-text citations); **no plagiarism. Extensive plagiarism is grounds for failure of this paper.**

___/5 The Reference Page is complete and correctly formatted in APA style.

Language

___/10 This includes grammar, appropriate academic style, clear and effective vocabulary, etc. **Very unclear language or severe problems with language use may result in further deductions. Any sign of outside help will result in immediate failure of the paper.**

Total: ___/100

Sources consulted

1. Bloxham, S. & Campbell, L. (2010). Generating dialogue in assessment feedback: Exploring the use of interactive cover sheets. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 35(3), 291-300.
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