

Minnesota Writing Project

--- Demonstration Lesson Template ---

Title of lesson: **Responding to Student Writing: Teacher Writing Conferences**

Suggested grade/age: **9- 12**

Approximate time needed to complete lesson: **As long as needed to conference with all students, approximately 4- 5 class periods of 50 minutes, the days can be spread out.**

Learning objective(s) and significance of lesson:

- ▣ **To give students timely and appropriate feedback.**
- ▣ **To allow students time to speak about their writing one- on- one with the teacher**
- ▣ **To clarify any teacher comments written on a draft or final copy.**
- ▣ **To answer students' questions about their writing or the writing process in a safe, non- threatening, private environment.**
- ▣ **To reach each student's individual needs as a writer.**
- ▣ **To create and maintain a community of writers.**

Brief summary/outline of lesson:

I try to conference with each student three times a term (it was easy with semesters, but trimesters may be more difficult). I usually begin conferences the fourth week of the class, mid-term, and near the end of the term. The third conference differs significantly than the first since students have grown as writers. Typically the first conference is teacher led, the second one is a combination of both teacher and student led, and the third is mostly student led. Since each conference is different it looks different at the different levels, but typically they run like this. I have broken the process down to two parts 1) logistics—the basic/background knowledge needed to do the conferences and 2) What an actual conference may look like—i.e. how the teacher responds to students' questions...

Logistics

1. Before I actually do conferences, I model the process with the students before their first actual conference so they know what to expect and they come prepared. I tell students to come to the conference with one or two questions about their writing piece—I really try to get them to lead the conference.
2. What is the length of the conference? I try to keep the conference down to no more than 10 minutes. My original goal was five and I am still trying to get it down—some conferences are longer than others it depends on the individual needs of the student
3. How many students do I meet with at a time/per day? I can usually conference with five or six students a class period. It may take as long as 5 days to meet with all students. Please know that conferences are an ongoing thing in my classroom. I may not meet with every student for every paper, but I do meet with them three

times a term. Students know that they are always welcome to conference with me before or after school for any paper.

4. Setting up the classroom for conference: Arrange a private space in or near your room. I typically pull two desks out into the hallway and keep the classroom door open so the other students know I am watching them. When I do conferences with sophomores (and I'm guessing this would be the same for freshmen as well) I conference with students at my desk. It is important that the teacher and student sit side-by-side vs. directly across from one another. Sitting across from one another is intimidating for the student and reminds them that it is the teacher's space and that the teacher has the control (for this reason the teacher's desk isn't the best place, but do what you need to do to effectively manage your classroom). The conference is a time where the teacher is not the teacher but more like a coach, or simply just a reader.
5. In what order do I call students for a conference? Sometimes I call students alphabetically, other times the students like to write their names on the board and I call the next name on the list. If you do have students write their names on the board, make sure you haven't already met with a student...after they get used to the conferences, they like to meet with you often. Sometimes I will have collected a draft before the start of a class and I call students in the order of the drafts.
6. Grading: I give students 10 participation points for the conference—they do the conference, they get the full points. This also helps me keep track of who I've met with and who I have not. Some students do not come prepared and they do not receive their points. When that is the case, they need to be working on the writing assignment during the time I am conferencing with students.
7. What are the other students doing while I'm busy conferencing? Good question! I have had them watch a movie to the book we are reading, work on a different assignment, do peer editing, reading time (so they don't have as much to do at home), lit. circles, group work...what ideas do you have? How do I know they are working? I don't, but as long as they "look" like they are working I don't say anything because the conference time is so important. (I have noticed however, that juniors and seniors tend to be more on task than sophomores. I don't know what this is like with elementary or middle level students or with other disciplines).
8. Before the conference establish your goal as the teacher. Since I mainly have students write essays my goals reflect what I'm looking for when I grade them. I have listed my goals for each of the three conferences. Again, always tailor the conference to the student's needs. As the students get more comfortable with the conferences, you will notice that they tend to lead the conference.

1st conference: Make sure students have a clear thesis statement and that the essay is organized.

2nd conference: Make sure the thesis statement is clear and that the body information (support, facts, quotes, etc.) support the thesis. Basically I'm looking for coherence.

3rd conference: Make sure I have answered their questions and helped them with where to go next.

What an Actual Conference Looks Like:

1. Before we begin the conference I always ask the students how they want to run the conference. i.e. do they want to lead, or do they want me to lead. Most often they want me to lead. By the third conference they are usually leading.
2. In an expository essay, I read their introduction completely and look for their thesis statement. I tell them what I think their thesis statement is and I make sure it responds to the prompt and that it is arguable or provable. Often times they have more than one thesis statement and before I tell them what I think their thesis is, I ask them what they think it is. Then I tell them they possibly have another thesis.

3. Then I look for their topic sentences—looking to be sure that the topic sentences support their thesis. Sometimes I look over an entire body paragraph, but that happens only on the 2nd or 3rd conferences or if the student asks. I’ve learned that in a conference that you do not need to read an entire essay. Essays are easier to do in a conference than say a story because the essay has more of a predictable structure to it and often students will follow the same structure for each body paragraph, so many times you can read one paragraph and it should help students revise the others—sophomores in particular, need to be reminded to look over every body paragraph and do the same thing we did in the conference to the one paragraph to the others. Again, if the student asks, I will read another paragraph or all of them—sometimes I tell students to go home and revise the one paragraph then show it to me tomorrow. The conferences are a good time to communicate with students and if a student is genuinely struggling, you can extend the due date for them as you give them “mini” assignments to do each night on their paper.
4. General Guidelines when doing a conference:
 - A. Always ask the student if they have any questions and make sure those questions are answered, or that the student is comfortable with or understands the response(s).
 - B. I always find one thing to “bless” and one thing to “press” about the work. i.e. I really like how you...” or “I noticed that you have great ideas, but the paper needs a bit more focus.”
 - C. Phrase responses as questions or as take-it-or-leave-it advice (Inside Out, pg. 107)
 - D. Point out what works with the student’s writing (Inside Out pg. 106):
 - i. Strong verbs
 - ii. Irony
 - iii. Vivid detail
 - iv. Oppositions
 - v. Voice
 - vi. Organization
 - vii. Clarity
 - viii. Sentence structure
 - ix. Comment on the paragraph structure
 - E. Try to understand what the writer is trying to say and state it at some point during the conference
 - F. Find things you like, or can relate to about the piece
 - G. Find places where the student can elaborate (Inside Out pg. 109)
 - H. Respond with “I wonder...,” “What if...,” “I notice...” or “If this were my piece, I would...” questions or statements
 - I. Really limit picking out language use and grammar errors, unless there is a consistent problem.
 - J. Comment on things that you are grading.
 - K. At the end of the conference summarize what you discussed and have student leave the conference feeling confident, and with an action plan of where to go next. I often ask the students “Did I help you?” or “What is your action plan?”
5. I summarize what we talked about in the conference, ask them if they have any questions, and I always ask them if I helped them—most of the time they say, yes and walk away with a plan to make it better, or sometimes they say no and I try to clarify.
6. For the 2nd conference, I ask the students if they have any questions if they do, then we go through those first. If they don’t have any or they just want to “see what I think” I do the same thing as I would for a first conference, but usually by this time we are working on citing sources, working on diction, voice, etc. so I tend to focus more on those items than the organization.

7. Usually by the 3rd conference students are comfortable with it as more often than not they tend to lead. They come with questions, sometimes students come with two papers, or they come with nothing, but they just want to talk about their ideas (I still give them points given that they show me something the next day)

Writing conferences change with the nature of the writing assignment, the level of the conference and the individual students. Always adjust the conference to their needs. I rarely point out awkward sentences (unless it is their thesis statement), or other language or grammar use errors because the conference in my opinion is all about communication: can I understand what the student is trying to say and do they accomplish it? I hope that they themselves, their word processor, or peer reviewer will catch the major language and grammar errors. I of course will catch errors when I grade the final.

Related Resources:

Gallagher, Kelly. *Teaching Adolescent Writers*. Stenhouse Publishers. Portland, Maine. 2006.

Kirby, Dan, Dawn Latta Kirby, and Tom Liner. *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*. 3rd ed. Heinemann. Portsmouth, NH. 2004.

Possible extensions or adaptations for different purposes/student needs:

1. Writing conferences can be done in any discipline where they do writing. The teacher could comment on the paper's ideas, organization, content, outlines, hypotheses ...etc.
2. I have conferenced with students online via email attachments of their papers. I have used the "Microsoft Word track changes" feature.
3. I have also used turnitin.com and commented on student papers.

For additional information, contact:

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