



Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

Student Conferences: Discussing Writing One-on-One

At its best, early feedback from an instructor can guide effective revision. However, this asynchronous strategy isn't the only way to help students develop their thinking and improve their writing. Brief one-to-one conferences, either in-person or electronically, can provide students with both valuable feedback on their writing and the opportunity to describe their plans for revision. Instructors of large classes might think, "Conferences? I have 50 students (or 100, or 200)!" However, even a five-minute structured dialogue can help students see the value of writing for their learning. This tip offers a brief overview of writing conferences and their benefits.

When to conference and what to prepare

Conferences work most effectively when students can share works in progress. In the preliminary stages of a writing assignment, an instructor might ask students to share their topic choices and the results of their preliminary research (in paragraph form, with citations). In this instance, the discussion may focus on search strategies and additional resources. As students are drafting, the focus may turn to the initial sections of their document or samples of their students' reasoning or analysis. In these cases, open-ended questions can prompt students' development of ideas or consideration of important information. At later stages, a conference may center on focus and coherence, looking specifically at how the pieces of their documents hold together.

Students should come to conferences with their writing, some description of what they have already done, and a plan for what they will do to complete the writing task. Instructors can prepare some standard probing questions for such a consultation, and may wish to have resources available to assist with whatever stage of writing that students will face next. In a finance course, an instructor might ask:

Students should bring a topic proposal memo to their conference that addresses the following questions: What industry have you chosen for your industry analysis brief? Why is this industry an appropriate one for analysis? What resources have you already found about the present state of the industry and its prospects? What preliminary conclusions have you drawn? (You may also bring printed copies of reports from IBIS World, Morningstar, and at least one article from a trade publication in your industry.)

The student will need to perform significant preparatory work for this conference, but summarizing their answers can be accomplished in just a few minutes.

Scheduling and timing

Conferences can be scheduled as a part of regular office hours or during class meetings (while other students are involved in other tasks). Instructors might ask students to submit written work before the meeting through Moodle or via Google Drive. Regardless, instructors do not need to read a student's entire draft to prepare for a conference. In fact, your conference might focus entirely on the writing process, what has gone well so far, what has been challenging, and what the writer's plans are to meet those challenges.

Student conferences should be time-bound. Whether you dedicate three minutes or a half hour to a student, the schedule should be rigid, and the instructor should resist the temptation to run over. Conferences earlier in the process of writing are likely to be shorter, and, perhaps not surprisingly, longer documents may require longer conferences. Yet even for long documents, shorter conferences encourage focused discussions.

Because students' schedules are loaded with classes, work, and activities, it is usually wise to schedule at least some conferences during a time when the class would normally convene. Giving other students a dedicated task or dedicated work time can provide the opportunity for one-to-one conversation. When a student needs additional attention, it is possible for that student to correspond via email or attend office hours later.

Final considerations for student conferences

Conferences are most effective when students leave with a clear sense of the instructor's priorities and a clear plan of what to write next. Setting priorities may require instructors to narrow their focus to only two or three particular assessment criteria. For that reason, it may be unwise to estimate a student's final score in the context of a conference.

While it may be wise to require conferences for all students, instructors should endeavor to accommodate students' needs, schedules, and preferences. Instructors might incorporate both face-to-face and teleconferences using WebEx or Skype to simplify the arrangement of meetings. Similarly, if a student misses a conference or arrives unprepared, the instructor can exercise discretion in whether to reschedule.

Learn more

- Charles Dawe and Edward A. Dornan, [One to One: Resources for Conference-Centered Writing](#)
- Beth L. Hewett, [The Online Writing Conference](#)
- Neal Lerner, [The Teacher-Student Writing Conference](#)

Upcoming Teaching with Writing Events: Events are filling quickly!

[Getting Grading Rubrics Right](#) (Workshop), Wednesday, February 15. 1-3 pm

[Guiding Literature Reviews](#) (Panel), Wednesday, March 8, Noon to 1:30

[Using Conferences to Support Student Writing](#) (Workshop) Wednesday, April 12, 1-3 pm

Further support: Visit us online at <http://writing.umn.edu/tww>. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).

Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.