

Conferencing with Students about their Writing

When students are required to write--and write well--in all their courses, they receive an important message about the expectations of other people both in and out of academia. Most people would agree that success in any academic/professional field requires the ability to write well in that field.

We believe that writing is best taught as a process. Student writers improve their writing ability when teachers or tutors intervene at various stages of that process to help the student develop effective strategies and habits of composing. Writing consultation may concentrate on any number of issues, from thinking through a topic, to drafting, to revising. While it is certainly valuable to help students overcome persistent grammatical and mechanical problems, students need to develop their own skills in general proofreading and editing. Direct students to the appropriate Writing Guide on the Writing Center website for more help.

General Guidelines for Writing Conference

Although some of the best training for conferencing with students comes through simply working with individual students and developing ways to adapt your responses to their writing processes and challenges, there are some general guidelines that may help your writing conferences be more beneficial to both your students and to you.

- **Listen** At all stages of the conferencing session, and especially when helping the student with prewriting, make sure that the student is doing most of the talking, while you listen. Some students may expect you to tell them what to do, but the point of the conference is to ask the types of questions that lead students to their own conclusions about their writing process.
- **Direct** When questions concerning specific conventions arise, it is helpful for you to refer to an authority (for example a handbook or a discipline-specific journal or style guide) in helping the student settle the issue. Directing the student to the written authority encourages students to make use of relevant reference material and teaches them how to do for themselves in the future.
- **Ask** Throughout the conference, ask questions, rather than simply informing students. Try to construct a list of basic questions that apply to a variety of situations, e.g., Was the purpose of the assignment achieved? How did you decide upon this organizational structure?
- **Position** Always sit so that both you and the student can see the text that you're working on. It is often beneficial to sit side by side, with the text between you.
- **Control** As you point out problems, questions and strengths, have the student make the relevant notations. In this way, the student maintains control over their work and becomes more at ease with the editing process.

- **Reinforce** Always tell the student what you see or hear that is clear, interesting, well-done. Remember to concentrate on achieving good writing, not on labeling bad writing.
- **Alternatives** Make sure to discuss alternative ways of addressing writing problems. Student writers need to know that there is more than one way to approach most issues, and that they have choices to make as they write.
- **Read Aloud** It is very useful to have the student read his work aloud, perhaps while you take notes about reactions/comments he makes as he reads (e.g. This part doesn't make sense, or I need to work on this paragraph), and about questions you may have (e.g. I'd like to know more about that part). These notes can provide prompts for further discussion.

Structuring a Conferencing Session

Although many conferences will focus on one particular writing issue, such as prewriting or organization, in general a conference can be organized in a top-down manner, considering the broadest writing considerations initially, and working down to more specific details. The whole point behind the top down approach is that you and the student look at the larger, broader issues first, and then move to the more specific ones. After all, it wouldn't make much sense to worry about sentence structure, and then change whole paragraphs, thus altering the sentence structure.

- First, make sure that the student has a clear sense of the assignment. It is a good practice for both you and the student to verbalize your perceptions of the assignment, so that if misunderstandings exist, they can be worked out immediately. Both in assignment design and conferencing about writing, it's best to work from the broadest considerations of the assignment to the more specific details of it--this method is called working from "top down."
- After both you and the student feel confident that the assignment is clearly understood, generate (through a variety of prewriting strategies) some strong responses to it if the student hasn't already done so. You might want to discuss the various possible responses to evaluate their potential effectiveness in relation to the assignment.
- If the student has brought in a draft for you to read, make sure that it responds to the assignment. Then consider some of the broader compositional issues: Is the purpose of the text clear? Is the message clear? Are the ideas fully developed and clear? Are the ideas logically connected to one another?
- After you have worked through the broader issues, work down to the more specific ones: are the introduction and conclusion as effective as they can be? Is the writing generally clear and effective?
- Finally, consider sentence-level issues: Are there consistent grammatical problems? Are there stylistic idiosyncrasies that cause problems? Are there many spelling errors?