

# Writing Conferences, Part One: Getting Honest About the Struggle

By Beth Winschuh | Categories: Reading, Writing

*The beautiful part of writing is that you don't have to get it right the first time, unlike, say, a brain surgeon. You can always do it better, find the exact word, the apt phrase, the leaping simile.*

—Robert Cormier

When I first started teaching, conferring wasn't something I did. If I am being honest, it wasn't even on my radar. If I'm being really honest, once it was on my radar, I didn't have a firm grasp on what was supposed to be happening. I had a vague picture—I could see me, the student, the paper, but I couldn't hear the words I should be saying. And, when I did try sitting down and talking about writing with my students, I definitely didn't get it right the first time ... or for the next few (dozen) times after that.

And if I'm being really, really honest, I did not attempt these conferences with noble intentions. I only tried them as a way to minimize the number of lackluster essays I was getting. If we had some extra time right before a final draft was due, I'd declare "conference day" and call students up in a queue to my desk. I'd meet with as many kids as I could in one period (which usually ended up being the first two or three kids in line). In those conferences, my head would spin. My attention was split between the paper I was reading and any behavior issue that might be bubbling up in the class. The conversations were one-sided and almost always involved me making editing corrections throughout the whole piece while the student stood silently by my desk. Those corrections rarely found their way into the final draft. Since conferences seemed to take up so much time with so little impact, I didn't schedule them often. It didn't seem like conferring was worth the hassle.

I admit all of this now, because for a long time I didn't. I struggled on my own, thinking *that's just how it is or maybe it's just me* and definitely, *it's got to be the kids*. However, over time, I realized the struggle wasn't only mine. Lots of teachers, across all grade levels, find conferring daunting. For many of us, conferring was not a part of our writing history. As students, we were *assigned* writing. We wrote independently and we submitted that writing for a grade. It's no wonder that authentic, writerly talk can feel like a reach—we haven't had the practice.

Over the years, through trial and error, some intentional searching, invaluable colleagues, and helpful resources, I found the clarity I needed to see conferences for what they really are: opportunities to learn more about the writer sitting next me. I did not need to be a know-it-all expert picking through a draft to make it perfect. I need to be a reader who shares my impressions as a reader and provides support to a practicing writer. It is one of those pedagogical paradigms that seems too simple to be true. However, this shift has lessened the sense of burden and actually allows for more meaningful discussions about ideas and craft.

Once it finally clicked for me that conferences shouldn't be one-sided editing sessions, my handling of them transformed. I felt more at ease with conferring, which put the students at ease and paved the way for more poignant writing. I've seen many teachers have the same epiphany when realizing that conferring isn't an unwieldy act at all. It is simply a conversation between a reader and a writer.

While I submit that at its core, conferring is simple, we all know the reality of the classroom necessitates careful planning for anything to happen. It takes real work to plan the details of our day—lessons and photocopies, to-do lists and faculty meetings—and that was before the pandemic brought its new hurdles of virtual platforms, hybrid learning, and socially distanced classrooms. We have always known that school is made up of many puzzle pieces that we arrange each day: academics, love, food, community, structure, etc. The 2020 school year has been an inflection point for prioritizing what the kids need from us when so much is challenging and unclear.

It takes a lot of time to get all of the “nuts and bolts” of curriculum to align with these new constraints. It takes time to coordinate live sessions, small-group meetings, or one-on-one time with students. The demands on our time and energy seem endless. As many of us realize after trying to meet these demands, the nuts and bolts don’t matter if we cannot connect them to anything. Conferring is the place where we can make that connection happen.

Now more than ever in this time of uncharted uncertainty, we long for a sense of connection. We want to know that others see us, hear us, understand us. We want them to know us as people—not just a mask or a profile icon on the other end of a cyber account. We can deepen our understanding of each other as people through our conversations about our writing. I would contend that writing is one of the most personal things we can offer a person. Our writing reveals not only our skill with the writing craft (i.e., my abilities as a student of writing), but also our interests, understanding, concerns, fears, experiences—essentially, our view of the world.

I admitted that conferring wasn’t something I did when I started teaching, but if I am being honest, it’s now my favorite part of the writing process. Because here, more than anywhere else, I get to really connect with the writer in front of me. I get to learn about who they are, what they love, what they are afraid of, and I witness what they dare to try. It’s here that I get to support them and stoke their confidence. It’s here that I can watch them grow and figure out ways to nurture them. And, if I’m being really honest, it’s where I grow too. It’s where I challenge myself to slow down and listen, to respond with compassion, to trust my judgment, and to be the kind of educator I want to be. And, if I’m being really, really honest, it’s worth the struggle.

Conferences were always necessary and now they are vital. To anyone starting their conferring journey, I invite you to check out your *Being a Writer* manual for useful tips that might make your start more navigable. For anyone stumbling on that path, I hope you find it smoother as you continue. For anyone who was not planning on adding conferring to your load this year, I urge you to reconsider—it may be just what you (and certainly your students) need.

In Part Two of this two-part blog series, we will delve into ways to overcome seven common struggles you might have with writing conferences.