

## Writing Conferences, Part Two: Seven Common Struggles

By Beth Wunschuh | Categories: Writing

As I admitted in Part One of this two-part blog series, early in my career, I didn't confer often. If I did, it was only every once in a while, and it felt like a burden. There never seemed to be enough time and there seemed to be too many issues on the paper for me to process and address. Under that pressure, I'd turn into a grammar corrector. Spelling and punctuation were easier to tackle than larger issues that felt unwieldy or that I could not quite put my finger on. I don't know what the students got out of these sessions because I never asked. I would circle grammar errors while they stood there in silence. When I was finished, I'd hand it back to them and send them back to their desks.

Rereading that paragraph makes me cringe—now. At the time, I thought this was standard fare for how to have students go through the writing process. It synced up with so many of my experiences as a student of writing: get an assignment, write a draft, fix the mistakes, rewrite, and turn it in for a grade. So that's what I repeated for my students. I didn't even realize there could be a better way. In fact, I thought I was going above and beyond by holding these intermittent and one-sided conferences.

I share all of these admissions not to pile onto the idea that teaching is hard or that teaching writing is especially challenging. We already know this. I share my struggles because each time I admit these to other teachers, they nod their heads and look relieved that they aren't alone in this. We then usually commiserate for a bit, but then get into the real magic of teacher talk. The talk where ideas spark and we bounce ideas and experiences off of each other and we all walk away feeling seen, heard, and encouraged enough to try something different. I've come to realize that teacher magic isn't "magic." It's empowerment. When we have a new way of looking at a challenge and have the resources or support to try it, we are bolstered.

*Being a Writer* can be that source of support for anyone looking to see conferring in a new way, as many common struggles are addressed within the lessons and Teacher Notes.

***Struggle 1: There's not enough time. It's not feasible to block out whole days to confer and/or conferences feel rushed and unproductive. Or, I am now teaching virtually and am learning how to switch to an online teaching model.***

Conferring *is not* an add-on. Conferences should be part of the routine—everything else does not need to halt to make space for them. Within each week, lessons include suggested times to meet with writers as the rest of the class is writing. The expectation is to confer with each student at least 1–2 times per unit. And, when we aren't trying to jam all the conferences into one day, we can be more thoughtful and attentive to the writer we are with. Bonus: the more we practice, the easier they get.

Conferences do not need to happen in person. If you are conferring over a digital platform or via phone, the conversation is the same as in a classroom setting. In any format, the conference does not need to last longer than 5–10 minutes. You can find guiding questions in the Teacher Conference Notes within each unit in the *Teacher's Manual* or in the *Assessment Resource Book*.

***Struggle 2: Conferences take away from more important curriculum time.***

If we want to actually teach—really teach—and have kids learn, we have to know *what* they know and what they need. Conferences are an important source of that information. What we learn here can help us make smarter decisions about where we need to go in our instruction. Here are some of the revelations that can come from one-on-one conferring:

- Gain a richer insight into who the student is as a writer, student, and person. The more I know about my students, the more effectively I can engage them. The more engaged they are, the better they do academically.
- Learn what skills are resonating with whom.
- Determine which concepts need to be taught to the whole class.
- Decide which concepts need to be retaught to a small group.
- Note which concepts are being mastered that no longer require instructional time.

***Struggle 3: I don't know what the content of the conference should be.***

*Being a Writer* offers support to understand the structure of a conference. The front matter of the *Teacher's Manual* explains the purpose and structure of conferences and how they evolve over time. First, we confer to learn about our writers and then we confer to learn what support they need.

Also, watching the short professional learning videos is helpful. Accessed through the Learning Portal resources and via the Digital Teacher's Set, these videos are what helped my fuzzy picture get clearer. My mind went, "oh, that's what is supposed to happen there." And then, "Ah ok, I can do that." Any time I find myself losing sight of what conferring should look like, I watch these again. You can even access videos with your print *Teacher's Manual*. When you see a QR code inside a Teacher's Note in the purple margin, just scan the code with your smart device to watch the video.

***Struggle 4: Conferring means "fixing" all of the student's mistakes.***

Conferring is not an editing session. Repeat: conferring is not an editing session. Conferences are where we learn about our writers; they are not the place to look for mistakes to correct. In fact, as Arthur A. Hyde, Harvey Daniels, and Steven Zemelman write in *Best Practice: Bringing Standards to Life in America's Classrooms*, "[r]esearch indicates that writers grow more by praise and thoughtful questions about the topic than by criticism," (p. 146, 2012). A major study "also found that positive feedback (commenting exclusively on what writers had done well, rather than on their shortcomings) produced far greater effects in student writing than did negative feedback." (*Being a Writer Teacher's Manual*, grade 4, p. xiv).

I hate to admit it, but for a long time I viewed my students as writing producers. Their role was to produce something for me to grade. My role was to point out where they made mistakes. It's easy to see how this stance doesn't allow for real growth. Who would want to give it their all and put their heart on the page when all the reader will do is point out grammar mistakes?

Even if we overlooked the squashing of spirit, the teacher-driven fixing sessions weren't working. I was doing all of the work. I was reading the essay. I was making the corrections. Those grammar missteps found their way back into the final drafts anyway because I told them *what* to "fix" but not the *how* or *why*. I didn't ask students to explain their thinking or participate in the session.

A change in perspective caused conferences to take on a totally different tone for me. Seeing the session as working time with the writer, not the writing, allowed a shift to happen. Viewing the students as *writers honing a craft* reveals a layer of humanity that calls on me to act with compassion. My job is to find ways to celebrate what they are trying to do and look for ways to encourage them to try new skills. Then, we can figure out the next best steps for them as writers.

Instrumental in this shift is a tool to help guide conferences. Conference Notes, provided in each unit, offer suggested questions to

ask during the session. The Conference Notes are composed of deceptively simple questions that emphasize what has been taught in the unit. This helps set the purpose of the conference, allowing us to get at the heart of a piece, eliminating the feeling of having to “do it all”—and it certainly rids me of that “fix it” mentality.

***Struggle 5: My students don't know how to talk about writing.***

We need to foster this skill. We have to model our own thinking and share language with them so they can think like writers and practice talking from their writerly point of view. So much of writing can seem invisible, natural, or out of reach. Our job is to help it become visible. We also have to remember that writing talk means more than technical jargon. It's also about how a writer gets an idea, what they do when they are stuck, how they feel when they are on a roll—all the glory and grief that goes into capturing what is in our heads. Once we free ourselves from fixating on just the words on the page, we can focus on the writer. That distinction can be transformative. It is this shift in perspective that allows us the opportunity to deepen our practice more. Here are some principles of conferring that can help foster this new skill:

- Be genuinely curious
- Let the child lead
- Be patient
- Foster students' confidence
- Assume the student has something to say
- Respect silence
- Ask open-ended questions
- Look for the teaching moment
- Point out the things you see the student trying to do
- Follow up

When practiced with intention, conferences become student-centered spaces for kids to become risk-takers and active participants in their own learning.

***Struggle 6: I don't feel like I know enough about writing to be effective. I feel pressure to be an expert.***

Writing is a complex process; there are not necessarily clear-cut explanations. I didn't have the language to explain why some of the ideas or the organization of a piece weren't working for me. At either end of the spectrum I felt lacking—overwhelmed by students who needed a lot of support and overwhelmed by students who could probably write better than I could.

The good news is, we don't have to be experts on all things at all times. Sometimes, we forget that the best way to communicate about writing is to approach it naturally— as readers. I can let the writer know what part of the piece makes me laugh or want to know more. I can point to a place where I get confused and need some more help understanding. We don't have to nor should we speak only in jargon. In fact, “it helps to discuss conventions in terms of how authors communicate with readers (‘Let me show you how writers let us know when one character stops speaking and another one begins’), rather than simply following a rule (‘All speech must have quotation marks’).” (*Being a Writer Teacher's Manual*, grade 4, p. xxxviii).

When the time does come for more technical talk, I can refer back to each unit overview, which starts with specific language that informs the students and me about the instructional focuses or the unit. Or, I can find examples to illustrate a point in the read-aloud lessons or a shared piece of writing. The best yet is when we can go back into the student's journal and call out examples of previous writing discoveries.

***Struggle 7: Conferences don't have a payoff. I'm not seeing the transfer to better final drafts.***

When I first attempted conferences, they were intermittent and one-sided. I didn't schedule them often because I didn't see that they made a difference in student work. Looking back, I realize this was a self-fulfilling prophecy. Just as we wouldn't expect to get stronger by exercising half-heartedly once and then stopping for weeks, it was unrealistic of me to think that these sporadic sessions would make any real headway.

For greater efficacy, conferences should be routine and ongoing. For example, in the fourth grade Fiction unit, there are 16 suggested opportunities to confer. If you meet with two kids a session, that brings you to 32. Depending on your class size, that might be all of them. That falls within the suggested amount that you should see each writer— remember, the expectation is to visit with each student at least 1–2 times per unit. And, since these conferences are an ongoing part of the program, you'll be meeting with students again in the next unit and all the units thereafter. There are plenty of opportunities to work with students and even follow up with those who might need more support.

Probably the biggest payoff is that these on-going conferences “teach a habit of mind. They help students reflect on their own work, review their own progress, identify their own problems, set their own goals, and make plans for and promises to themselves. As we regularly hold conferences with students, leading them through the pattern of where-am-I-and-where-do-I-want-to-go, we are truly modeling a way of thinking for oneself; we are holding out-loud conversations with kids that they can gradually internalize and have with themselves.” (Hyde, Daniels, Zemelman, 2012, p. 49). Just as this is habit-forming for the students, it is for the teacher, too. The more we do it, the more comfortable we become.

For anyone struggling with conferring, I encourage you to please spend some time with your *Being a Writer Teacher's Manual* and the Learning Portal. You may find the spark for new ideas and feel bolstered by the clear-cut support they offer. Give yourself some grace during the inevitable struggles, but also allow yourself to feel empowered by your willingness to take on something so worthwhile.