



# Conferring with Young Writers

## 5 quick reminders for your writing workshop



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**1 Writing conferences are brief.** Each student conference in writing workshop should last roughly 5 minutes. Let's work backwards a bit to see why: you want to confer with every student in your class once a week. If you have 30 students, that's 6 students per day squeezed into (ideally) 40 minutes of writing time (because hopefully you have at least 45 minutes devoted to writing workshop and reserve 10 minutes at the start for a mini-lesson and 5 minutes at the end for a share.) That means you have a strict 5 minutes per student.

That's enough time for individualized assessment and teaching, if you keep these other 4 reminders in mind.

**2 Conferences follow a structure.** Research, decide, teach. First, you need to find out what the student is writing, what her objective is, where she is in the writing process, and what challenges she is facing (research). Experienced workshop students may be articulate about these things; others may not. You may need to ask questions and model the kind of speech you want the writer to internalize. For example, *So it sounds like you want to write a story that shows readers why this place was so important to you.*

Once you know the writer's objective and where she is in achieving it, you can determine what additional support is needed (decide). Then you teach the writer something that will help move her further toward the objective (teach).

Notice that the conference is not a read-aloud. You don't need Mary to read her entire 15-page fiction story to you. You need a higher level picture of what she's working on and how it's going. You might hear a *section* of the text aloud—something that she's currently working on, struggled with, or recently completed—but this is not a time to evaluate the whole text orally.

**3 The writer sets the agenda.** You should always find out the writer's intention before offering advice. *What do you want to accomplish with this piece? What do you want readers to do/think/feel/as they read your story?* Don't make assumptions about the text or project your own ideas about what is important or what it means. Ask the writer to tell you.



## ABOUT US

The Indiana Partnership for Young Writers, a program of the Butler University College of Education, provides ongoing and in-depth professional development in the teaching of reading, writing *and* math to teachers in grades K-8. The Partnership is committed to inquiry-based workshop teaching that sustains students' lifelong academic and workplace success.

Learn more at [www.indianayoungwriters.org](http://www.indianayoungwriters.org).



You may need to have mini-lessons to teach students how to conference, demonstrating the kinds of things you want them to think about and verbalize. Students will need lots of practice to master this. If they are new to writing workshop, this kind of language and the whole idea of ownership of their writing may feel uncomfortable and challenging at first.

**4 Teach one thing. Make it an assignment.** A conference is not an opportunity to “fix papers.” You do not want to point out every minor error that might be addressed in editing. You do not want to overwhelm the student with a laundry list of major revisions. Rather, you will choose a single lesson in response to the writer’s own intention and objective, perhaps something to help overcome an immediate obstacle. *It sounds like you want readers to feel scared the way you did, so let’s think about the ways we’ve seen other writers do that...*

You will expect the writer to try the strategy that you teach. He does not have to use it in his published piece, but he does have to demonstrate that he has tried it and articulate why he chose something else instead.

**5 Take notes.** You need a good record of your one-on-one conversations with students to keep track of what you’ve taught, hold students accountable for strategies/knowledge you’ve shared and help you determine appropriate grades for students throughout your course. Your record should include what you learn from a student in conference, what you teach, and how the student responds to the assignment. It might also include any follow-up to-do notes for you.

You’ll want to refer to these notes frequently, perhaps choosing whole class mini-lessons based on concepts and challenges that recur in multiple conferences. Additionally, it is smart to plan which students you wish to confer with each day and re-read your past conference notes before beginning a new conversation. You can then begin with statements like, *So last week I remember that you were struggling with the ending of your story, and we talked about trying a circle ending like we have seen in some of our touchstone texts. How did that go? Did you decide to use that or try something else?*