# Conferring With Student Writers

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Carl Anderson is a literacy consultant and writer. He is the author of *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring With Student Writers* (2000), *Assessing Writers* (2005), and *Strategic Writing Conferences: Smart Conversations that Move Young Writers Forward Grades 3-6* (2009).

# CONFERRING CONCEPTS

- A writing conference is a conversation.
- The point of a writing conference is to help students become better writers.
- Writing conferences have a predictable structure.
- In conferences, teachers and students have predictable roles.
- It's important to communicate to students in conferences that we care about them as people and writers.

| The Role of the Teacher and Student in a Writing Conference | |
|---|---|
| **The Teacher's Role** | **The Student's Role** |
| *In the first part of the conversation:* | |
| • Invite the child to set an agenda for the conference<br>• Ask assessment questions<br>• Read the student's writing<br>• Make a teaching decision | • Set the agenda for the conference by describing her writing work<br>• Respond to her teacher's research questions by describing her writing work more deeply |
| *In the second part of the conversation:* | |
| • Give the student critical feedback<br>• Teach the student<br>• Nudge the student to "have-a-go"<br>• Link the conference to the student's independent work | • Listen carefully to her teacher's feedback and teaching<br>• Ask questions to clarify and deepen her understanding of her teacher's feedback and teaching<br>• "Have-a-go" with what her teacher taught her<br>• Commit to trying what her teacher taught her after the conference |

(This chart is adapted from my book, *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers* (2000).)

# QUALITIES OF AN EFFECTIVE TEACHING POINT

1. We give clear, precise feedback to the student.

2. We cue the student that we're about to start teaching by saying, "There's something I want to teach you today . . .", or, "Something writers do is . . .", or something similar.

3. We name what we're teaching the student—e.g. a strategy, a craft move, a language convention.

4. We give an explanation of what we're teaching—what it is, and why it's important to learn.

5. We explain how writers *do* what we want the student to learn to do—by describing how to do it, and/or by giving examples from our own writing, or published texts.

6. We have the student try what we've just taught them, usually by having them talk out how they could use it. We cue students that we want them to do a try-it by saying, "I'd like you to try this out right now . . .", or similar words.

7. We end the conference by linking the conference to the student's work, and by reminding them that they can use what we've just taught them in their writing from now on.

# 1 Finding a Topic by Making a List

**WHAT YOU FIND**

The student who could be helped by this conference has trouble generating ideas for notebook entries or for pieces. He may complain, "I have nothing to write about!" The writing in his notebook may:

- resemble diary entries, recording day-to-day events.
- appear randomly generated, without purpose, pattern, or depth.
- be sparse or virtually nonexistent.

**CONFERENCE PURPOSE**

*Teach the student to generate a topic list that he can refer to whenever he is unsure what to write about.*

**MODEL TEXT**

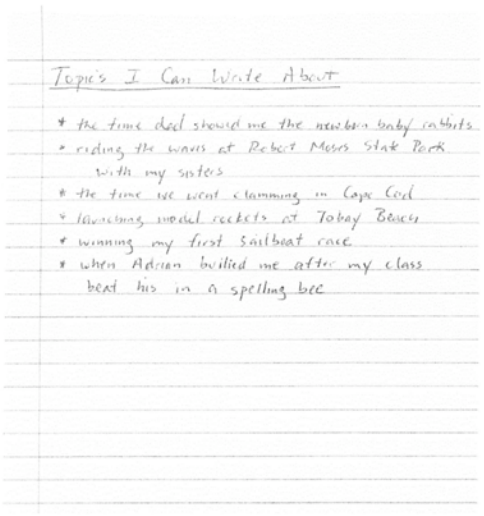
My list of writing topics or another writer's list

I NOTICE THAT you are not sure what to write about today. This is something every writer goes through at different times in his writing life. One strategy writers use to help them find a topic to write about is to brainstorm a list of possible topics, usually on a page in their writer's notebook. Making a topic list helps us figure out what to write about—not only on the day we make the list but also weeks and months later, or whenever we can't come up with a topic to write about.

### Explain a Strategy

How do writers make a list of possible topics, especially when we are having trouble coming up with even one topic? We make a list by first thinking of categories of topics to write about. These categories may include "special people," like family and friends; "memories," or events that you will never forget; "places" that you have visited or that mean a lot to you; "activities" that you enjoy; and "issues" that you feel are important. As we think about each category, we ask ourselves, "Do I have something to write about in this category?"

When we think about a topic category, sometimes we come up with a specific, ready-to-go topic, such as, "The time my dad took me on the roller coaster at Coney Island." Other times we come up with a big topic, such as "my mom," that can give us lots of ideas for writing.


Topics I Can Write About

* the time dad showed me the newborn baby rabbits
* riding the waves at Robert Moses State Park with my sisters
* the time we went clamming in Cape Cod
* finding metal rockets at Tobay Beach
* winning my first sailboat race
* when Adrian bullied me after my class beat his in a spelling bee

### Share Your Writing

I want to show you my own list of topics that I brainstormed in my writer's notebook based on categories.

I started to write this list by thinking of the topic category "family." As I thought about this category, I came up with a few important experiences that I shared with my family, such as "the time my dad showed me the newborn baby rabbits" and "riding the waves at Robert Moses State Park with my sisters."

Then I thought of the topic category "places." As I thought about places that mean a lot to me, or did when I was a kid, I came up with the idea "the time we went clamming in Cape Cod." Then I continued to think of different topic categories, and brainstormed even more ideas for writing.

### Coach the Student

I'd like to help you use categories to brainstorm a list of possible topics you could write about.

- Is there a category you would like to think about first? What can you write about in this category?
- What about the topic category "family"? Are there special people in your family that you would like to write about? What experiences or special moments with your family come to mind that you might write about?
- What about other topic categories—"friends," "places," "issues"?

◆ Suggest a category to the student, based on what you know about him. For example, if you know a student went fishing with her brother recently, you might say, "I'm sure you've got some good ideas in the category 'family.' What about when you went fishing with your brother this past weekend?"

### Link to the Student's Writing

I'd like you to make a list of topics right now in your writer's notebook that you will draw ideas from to write about. To help you do this, I'm going to give you a list of topic categories (page 11) that you can look at as you make the list.

Remember that whenever you're stuck for a topic to write about, you can make a list of possible topics by thinking about categories. The list you make can help you find a topic to write about now and also give you topics to write about in the future.

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# Revising by Focusing an "All About" Story

**WHAT YOU FIND**

The student who could be helped by this conference has written an "all about" story that:

- starts with a scene set at the beginning of the day—usually when she woke up—and ends with a scene describing the ride home or even going to bed.
- states in the lead that it is "all about" an event (e.g., "One sunny summer day, I woke up and got ready to go to the Six Flags. I'm going to tell you all about my adventure that day.").

**CONFERENCE PURPOSE**

*Teach the student to revise an "all about" story by focusing only on the parts that convey meaning.*

**MODEL TEXT**

***Shortcut*** by Donald Crews or another story that is focused on a central meaning

◆ Why do students write "all about" stories, even after we've taught them to write focused ministories in their writer's notebook? (See Book 1: ***Topics,*** Conference 8, "Exploring a Topic by 'Unpacking' One Moment.") Sometimes it's because students had trouble writing focused entries. Other times it's because although they wrote focused entries after writing several "all about" ones, they still picked an "all about" entry as the "seed" for the draft.

◆ View this conference on ***Carl on Camera: Modeling Strategic Writing Conferences*** DVD.

I JUST READ YOUR DRAFT. You've written all about your topic. And I see that you've revised by adding text to it in several places. Sometimes when writers revise, they do something very brave: they write a second draft that focuses on one or just a few scenes that convey what they really want to say about their topic. Today, I want to help you write a second, more focused draft.

### Explain a Strategy

When we finish a draft, we ask, "Did I get across what I want to say to the reader?" Then we carefully reread the draft to see if every scene helps convey our message to the reader.

Sometimes we realize that there are scenes that have little or nothing to do with what we want the reader to know about the topic. These scenes may be about what happened on the day of the story, but they don't help get the message across. We cut these scenes so that the story is stronger. Sometimes we realize that lots of scenes are unnecessary. When this happens, we start a whole new second draft, one in which we focus on and develop only the scenes that help the reader understand what we want to say.

### Share a Model Text

Let's think about Donald Crews' *Shortcut* for a moment. It's possible that when Donald Crews wrote this story, he had some other scenes in his first draft. Maybe he started the story by telling about how the kids went fishing earlier in the day. Maybe he also told about what the kids did that night after they got home—about eating dinner with their family.

◆ Teaching students to write a more focused second draft is a major intervention. Although students are usually less than overjoyed to write a second draft, doing so helps them learn to write a focused draft that gets across their point. If we don't teach them to focus an "all about" story, we miss the opportunity to teach this fundamental aspect of writing.

I imagine that when Crews finished his first draft, he asked himself, "Did I get across what I want to say to the reader?" I bet he thought something like "I hope I got across the idea that taking shortcuts isn't always the best decision." If he had written scenes about fishing and eating dinner, Crews cut them—because they didn't help him get across his message. And once Crews decided which scenes were important, he stretched them—to tell exactly how it happened. We can see that he stretched the scenes about the kids taking the shortcut. That's the part of the kids' day that helps Crews get his point across.

### Coach the Student

I want to help you write a second draft of your story.

- What do you want to say in your story? What do you want the reader to know about this experience and why it is important?
- Which scene or scenes help the reader understand what you want to say? Can you focus on these scenes? Which scene feels important enough to tell exactly how it happened, with lots of detail? This is the scene or scenes to focus on in your second draft.
- You described this one scene of the experience with a lot of detail. Does this scene show the reader why the experience is important? If not, that's a scene you can cut.

◆ There are times when we can choose not to have this conference. When students have written a much longer draft for the first time and feel proud of their accomplishment or there isn't much time left for revision before the publication date, we may wait until the next piece.

### Link to the Student's Writing

It's time for you to do the brave work of writing a second draft. Write *only* about the scene or scenes of the story that will help readers understand what you want to say. Take out a new piece of draft paper and get started.

Keep in mind that writing a focused second draft is something that writers have to do sometimes. Writing the second draft helps them do a better job of getting across what they want to say to readers.

# TEACHING POINT PLANNING SHEET

1. **Name the strategy, craft technique, or language convention you're going to teach.**

2. **Give an explanation of the strategy, craft technique, or language convention. (WHAT)**

3. **Explain why it's important for the student to learn this. (WHY)**

4. **Explain how writers do this. (HOW)**

5. **What example could you show the student? What will you say about this example?**

| What am I learning about this student as a writer? | What do I need to teach this student? |
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| | |

T is the symbol for teaching point. G is the symbol for instructional goal

Assessment Notes For _____ Dates _____

| COMMON CONFERENCES IN GRADES K-2 | |
|---|---|
| **If I see this . . .** | **I'll teach this to the student . . .** |
| The student has trouble coming up with topics to write about. | 1. List of Topics to Write About<br>2. Map of the Heart/Writing Territories |
| The student plunges into writing without "rehearsing" what she's going to write | 3. Talk out the story/topic before writing<br>4. Sketch part/parts of the story/topic<br>5. Gather information about the topic before writing |
| The student starts writing without envisioning the parts of her piece. | 6. Touch each page of the piece<br>7. Sketch a picture for each page/write a key word at the top of each page<br>8. Make a simple plan for a piece |
| The student needs to develop fluency in writing text. | 9. Sounding out words/using the alphabet chart (labeling, simple sentences)<br>10. Using the word wall/list of high frequency words |
| The student writes undeveloped sections in his pieces. | 11. Use picture to generate more text<br>12. Action, dialogue, thinking (narrative)<br>13. Facts, definitions, comments (nonfiction)<br>14. Similes |
| The student uses general nouns and verbs in his writing. | 15. Brainstorming a word bank before drafting.<br>16. Circling general words, and brainstorming alternatives. |
| The student "stretches" parts of her pieces, but not the most important ones. | 17. Identifying and developing the "heart" of a story, or the most important parts |

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| | of a nonfiction piece. |
| The student moves abruptly from one part to another in a piece. | 18. Time transitions (narrative)<br>19. Subheadings, bullets, topic sentences (nonfiction) |
| The student writes "all about" a topic | 20. Zoom in pictures.<br>21. Choose a "small moment" to write about.<br>22. Focus on a part of an event or topic that helps get a "message" across |
| The student is "done" as soon as she writes the last word of a draft. | 23. Basic "revisions"—adding to sketches, coloring sketches<br>24. Adding on by looking at the sketches.<br>25. Adding on by rereading<br>26. Revision tools: post-its, spiderlegs, footnotes, arrows, cutting and inserting more paper<br>27. Getting feedback from classmates |
| The student edits by reading her pieces silently to herself. | 28. Self-editing by reading aloud.<br>29. Peer editing.<br>30. Using an editing checklist |
| The student uses endmarks inconsistently, or not at all. | 31. Reading aloud for endmarks. |
| The student overuses "and" | 32. Where to use—and not to use—"and" |
| The student doesn't capitalize the beginning of sentences consistently. | 33. Touch each period and check that the next word is capitalized. |
| The student reads her writing with voice, but doesn't cue the reader to do the same. | 34. Using the exclamation mark, the ellipsis, and all caps to signal emphasis. |

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| The student doesn't know with whom she wants to share her writing. | 35. Selecting classmates as an audience<br>36. Selecting people outside of class as an audience |

| COMMON CONFERENCES IN GRADES 3-8 | |
|---|---|
| **If I see this . . .** | **I'll teach this to the student . . .** |
| The student has trouble coming up with topics to write about. | 1. List of Topics to Write About<br>2. Map of the Heart/Writing Territories<br>3. Reread notebook for ideas |
| The student plunges into writing without "rehearsing" what she's going to write | 4. Talk out the story/topic before writing<br>5. Sketch part/parts of the story/topic<br>6. Write in response to question, "What do I want to say about my topic?"<br>7. Brainstorm sections of piece<br>8. Gather information about the topic before writing |
| The student starts writing without envisioning the parts of her piece. | 9. Write the name of each scene/section on top of a separate piece of draft paper<br>10. Make a simple plan for a piece |
| The student writes undeveloped sections in his pieces. | 11. Action, dialogue, thinking (narrative)<br>12. Facts, definitions, comments (nonfiction)<br>13. Similes |
| The student uses general nouns and verbs in his writing. | 14. Brainstorming a word bank before drafting.<br>15. Circling general words, and brainstorming alternatives. |
| The student "stretches" parts of her pieces, but not the most important ones. | 16. Identifying and developing the "heart" of a story, or the most important parts of a nonfiction piece. |
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|---|---|
| The student moves abruptly from one part to another in a piece. | 17. Time transitions (narrative)<br>18. Subheadings, bullets, topic sentences (nonfiction) |
| The student writes "all about" a topic | 19. Focus on a part(s) of an event or topic that helps get a "meaning" across |
| The student is "done" as soon as she writes the last word of a draft. | 20. Adding on by rereading<br>21. Revision tools: post-its, spiderlegs, footnotes, arrows, cutting and inserting more paper<br>22. Getting feedback from classmates |
| The student edits by reading her pieces silently to herself. | 23. Self-editing by reading aloud.<br>24. Peer editing.<br>25. Using an editing checklist |
| The student uses endmarks inconsistently, or not at all. | 26. Reading aloud for endmarks. |
| The student overuses "and" | 27. Where to use—and not to use—"and" |
| The student reads her writing with voice, but doesn't cue the reader to do the same. | 28. Using the exclamation mark, the ellipsis, and all caps to signal emphasis. |
| The student doesn't know with whom she wants to share her writing. | 29. Selecting classmates as an audience<br>30. Selecting people outside of class as an audience |
| The student has some trouble writing independently, without the guidance provided by a unit of study. | 31. List of possible projects<br>32. Choosing a project (with a specific audience in mind, for a specific purpose, to experiment with a genre)<br>32. Making a plan for developing a seed topic.<br>33. Using a mentor text<br>34. Making a schedule for getting a piece done. |

**DECISIONS WE NEED TO MAKE ABOUT OUR CONFERRING**

*Where should I conduct my conferences?*

Carl: I found it works best to confer where students are seated. They are more at ease there, and other student can either eavesdrop or become involved in the conferences.

*What tools do I need to confer?*

Carl: I always carry my record-keeping forms, copies of mentor texts that I think I'll use in conferences, and a pack of post-it notes.

*When should we confer with students?*

Carl: I confer with students at whatever point in the writing process they happen to be in when I pull up next to them to confer. I don't wait for them to finish a draft before conferring.

*Who should initiate conferences?*

Carl: I initiate most conferences. Occasionally, I agree to confer with a child who asks me for a conference.

*How long should conferences be?*

Carl: My conferences average between five and seven minutes long. I usually confer with four, sometimes five students during a typical workshop period.

# Finding Carl

**My books, *Assessing Writers* and *How's It Going? A Practical Guide to Conferring with Student Writers,* are available through Heinemann. (www.heinemann.com). My new Heinemann firsthand series, *Strategic Writing Conferences: Smart Conversations that Move Young Writers Forward Grades 3-6, is now available.* (www.strategicwritingconferences.com)**

**If you have any questions about the workshop, please feel free to email me:**

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**Check out my website, too:**

**www.conferringguy.com**