

# Workshop 5

## Conversations With Student Writers

### Video 9: Conversations With Student Writers

### Video 10: Teacher-Student Conferences

All teachers understand the value of responding personally to student work. But how do you use that feedback to help students improve their writing? In this workshop, you will explore the practical issues of planning and conducting writing conferences. You will also see classroom examples of formal and informal writing conferences.

“I still find conferring with students a very hard part of teaching writing, though it’s very rewarding. I’ve learned that even if a conference doesn’t go well, and they don’t all go all that well, just engaging children in talking about their process—what they’re writing—is huge teaching.”

—Katie Wood Ray, consultant and author or co-author of five books on teaching writing, including *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They’re All Hard Parts)*

#### Learning Goals

In this workshop, you will explore how to:

- use conferences to focus on your students’ growth as writers
- follow a predictable, comfortable, and inviting structure in writing conferences
- teach students how to use the language of writers to articulate their own writing process
- confer informally with your students

#### Materials Needed

- Examine the Literature Response Chart found at the end of this chapter
- “Conversations With Student Writers,” “Teacher Talk: Developing Voice and Choice in Writing,” and “The Writing Conference: Breaking the Silence,” articles available on the *Inside Writing Communities, Grades 3–5* Web site at [www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting)
- Key Practices To Observe (included in the section Analyze the Videos and as a PDF on the Web site)
- Journal or notebook

**Facilitators:** You may want to have several copies of the articles available for participants without Internet access, as well as copies of Key Practices To Observe and the Examine the Literature Response Chart.

# Prepare for the Workshop

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To prepare for this workshop, you will review the strategies you already use and read three articles about writing conferences from a single issue of *School Talk*, published by the National Council of Teachers of English.

**Facilitators:** Have participants complete these activities before arriving for the workshop.

## What Do You Do?



In his seminal book, *Writing: Teachers & Children at Work* (Heinemann, 2003), Donald Graves discusses the most common questions teachers ask him about writing conferences. Some questions are ancillary to the conduct of conferences (How do I find the time? What are the other children doing when I have my conferences?); others relate to the practices within the conference (What is the best way to start a conference? How do I do less talking, and the children more?).

Think about how you incorporate conferences with your students into your writing instruction. Make a list of the questions you have about conferring with students. Share the list with your colleagues, or write them in your notebook.

## Examine the Literature



To complete this activity, use the Examine the Literature Response Chart found at the end of this chapter.

Read each article listed below, recording your ideas on the chart during and after reading. When you have finished, save your chart to submit as an assignment.

You can download PDFs of these articles on the *Teaching Reading 3–5* Web site at [www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting).

### **Conversations With Student Writers**

In this article, you will learn strategies for approaching writing conferences as conversations.

Anderson, Carl. "Conversations With Student Writers." *School Talk* 6, no. 2 (January 2001): 2–5. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

### **Teacher Talk: Developing Voice and Choice in Writing**

This article focuses on the importance of talk and how teachers might talk with their students, writer to writer, in the pre-writing stage of writing.

Siu-Runyan, Yvonne. "Teacher Talk: Developing Voice and Choice in Writing." *School Talk* 6, no. 2 (January 2001): 2–5. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

### **The Writing Conference: Breaking the Silence**

In this article, you will explore the role of conferences in a writing workshop and identify practical guidelines for structuring conferences and providing feedback.

Fletcher, Ralph. "The Writing Conference: Breaking the Silence." *School Talk* 6, no. 2 (January 2001): 1–2. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

# Analyze the Videos

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**Facilitators:** When the workshop begins, you may want to spend a few minutes discussing the group's responses to What Do You Do? and the readings. You also may want to direct the participants' attention to the Key Practices listed below.

## Key Practices To Observe

"Conversations With Student Writers" and "Teacher-Student Conferences" explore the characteristics of effective writing conferences and showcase teachers talking with their students about writing in effective and meaningful ways. They feature commentary from experts on teaching writing at the elementary level as well as classroom illustrations highlighting the practices of several teachers.

As you watch, look for the following key practices:

- Conferences are conversations in which teachers relate to students as fellow writers.
- Teachers provide a predictable, comfortable, and inviting structure for student conferences.
- Teachers begin conferences with open-ended questions.
- During their conferences, teachers reinforce the language of writers and model the behaviors they want students to follow in talking about writing.
- Teachers base conferences on what will help students grow as writers, rather than on "fixing" a piece of writing.
- During conferences, teachers share specific writing strategies to help students improve.
- Teachers keep appropriate expectations in mind when conferring with student writers.
- Throughout their conferences, teachers support the intentions and independence of student writers.
- Teachers help students reflect on what they have accomplished and set goals for their writing.
- Teachers rely on quick, informal conferences to see if students are on track with their work.
- Teachers have a system in place for recording what occurs during conferences.

## Teachers Featured in Workshop 5

### Video 9: Conversations With Student Writers

- Sheryl Block, Fourth Grade
- Lindsay Dibert, Fifth Grade
- Mark Hardy, Third Grade
- Nicole Outsen, Fifth Grade

### Video 10: Teacher-Student Conferences

- Silvia Edgerton, Fifth Grade
- Mark Hansen, Third Grade
- Latosha Rowley, Third Grade

# Analyze the Videos, cont'd.

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## Guide to Video 9: Conversations With Student Writers

Use this chart to help identify the pause points in Video 9. Zero your counter at the Annenberg logo at the very beginning of the tape. The entry points below are approximate.

<b>Segment 1</b> (0:00-14:56)	<b>Interview</b> (beginning at 00:24) Benefits of conferring with students about writing	Jack Wilde
	<b>Introduction</b> (beginning at 01:38)	
	<b>Interview</b> (beginning at 03:03) Informal versus formal conferences	Jack Wilde
	<b>In the Classroom</b> (beginning at 04:04) Informal conferences during student writing time	Mark Hardy
	<b>In the Classroom</b> (beginning at 09:52) Conferring during pre-writing	Sheryl Block
<b>Segment 2</b> (14:56-20:29)	<b>In the Classroom</b> (beginning at 14:56) Structuring informal conferences	Nicole Outsen
<b>Segment 3</b> (20:29-end)	<b>In the Classroom</b> (beginning at 20:29) Informal conferences during a lesson on revising leads	Lindsay Dibert

# Analyze the Videos, cont'd.

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## Video 9: Conversations With Student Writers

Watch the 30-minute video, "Conversations With Student Writers." If you prefer to watch the video in segments, you can stop it at the times suggested below or use the detailed Video Guide outline on the previous page to help you determine other places to stop for discussion. The Video Guide is also available as a PDF at [www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting).

Answer the questions that accompany each segment below, jotting down your responses in a notebook or using them as discussion starters.



### **Understanding the Purpose of Informal Conferences** (approximate times: 00:00-15:00)

In the first segment, Mark Hardy and Sheryl Block have impromptu conferences with students. In both classrooms, the students are in the pre-writing stage of a piece of writing. (Stop after Sheryl's last conference.)

- What do you notice about the informal conferences in this segment?
- How do they differ from more formal conferences?
- What are the challenges and benefits of each type of conference?

### **Managing the Class While Conferring With One Student** (approximate times: 15:00-20:30)

In the second segment, Nicole Outsen says that she provides her students with options to help them problem solve independently while she confers with individuals. (Stop after Nicole's interview about making time for conferences.)

- What are some other strategies you might use to engage your class when you are having an individual conference?
- How can you keep students from interrupting conferences for basic needs, such as help with problems, requests for more paper or pencils, or permission to go to the restroom?
- Make a list of activities other students could be engaged in during individual conference time.

### **Listening to Students** (approximate times: 20:30-end of video)

In the final segment, Lindsay Dibert lets her students do the talking in writing conferences. (Play to the end of the program.)

- What techniques does Lindsay use to engage her students in conferences?
- What are the benefits of asking students to talk about their writing process—what they like about their pieces and where they are struggling?
- What questions might you ask your own students to help them identify the strengths and weaknesses of a particular piece of writing?

# Analyze the Videos, cont'd.

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## Video 10: Teacher/Student Conferences

Watch the 30-minute video “Teacher-Student Conferences.” Apply what you have learned in “Conversations With Student Writers” as you observe the classroom examples.

Answer the questions that follow each segment, jotting down your answers in your notebook or using them as discussion starters.



### **Silvia Edgerton’s Class** (approximate times: 00:30-14:00)

Silvia Edgerton is engaged in a formal conference with one of her students about developing a descriptive lead for the student’s personal narrative.

- Silvia asks the student what she wants to talk about during the conference. What are some benefits of this approach?
- Although Silvia makes suggestions, the student maintains ownership of the piece. Describe the ways in which Silvia keeps the work in the student’s control.
- Why do you think Silvia encourages the student to talk about the event described in the piece rather than what she has written about it?
- What types of questions does Silvia ask to get the student to open up about the details of the event?

### **Mark Hansen’s Class** (approximate times: 14:00-18:00)

Mark Hansen calls the writing conferences in his classroom “conversations.” In this particular conversation, he is talking with a student about her audience and the arguments she plans to use in her persuasive letter.

- How would you describe the difference between a “conference” and a “conversation”? Do you see a place for both in a writing workshop? If so, how can each be used?
- What kinds of questions can you ask to facilitate conversations during conferences?

### **Latosha Rowley’s Class** (approximate times: 18:00-end of video)

In the final classroom example, Latosha Rowley shares a piece of her own writing with one of her students.

- What are the benefits of Latosha showing the student her own writing and discussing her writing process?
- What are some additional benefits of talking to students writer to writer, rather than teacher to student?

# Extend Your Learning

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## Examine Your Practice

Learning to talk about their own writing process is a metacognitive skill students need to be taught. Read the following quote, consider your own students, and then answer the questions that follow.

“It’s much more useful to teach children to talk you through their process [than to just have them read their pieces] because one of the main things you’re teaching in the conference is how to become articulate about their process and about the products they’re creating. I want children to learn to do that. They understand much better how their draft works if they have to explain it, and the goal is to help students see themselves as writers who can do that.”

—Katie Wood Ray

### Guiding Questions Notebook:

- In a typical writing conference, how much time do you spend on average talking and how much time do you spend listening to the student?
- Think of students who are reluctant to discuss their work. What are some possible reasons behind their reticence? What are some ways to help reluctant students become actively involved during writing conferences?

## Try an Activity

### Respond to Student Writing Interactive:

Go to the *Inside Writing Communities, Grades 3–5* Web site at [www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting](http://www.learner.org/channel/workshops/elemwriting)

One of the most important things teachers can do in a writing conference is avoid overwhelming the student with too much feedback. In this interactive exercise, you’ll identify strengths and areas for improvement in an authentic piece of student writing and then decide what to focus on to help the student become a better writer.

# Put It Into Practice

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The videos, activities, and readings in this workshop illustrate that successful writing conferences begin with questions that lead students to discover what they have to say and that encourage them to talk about their work. Now apply what you have learned to modify or develop your own approach to conferring with students.

## Asking Good Questions Assignment:

Talking with students about their writing means having conversations that are student driven. In this assignment, you will create a list of questions to help you keep the conversation focused on the student.

Begin by thinking about some of the strategies you have learned in this workshop. Then consider your own students and the types of questions that will encourage them to talk about their process, help them reflect on their piece, and ultimately enable them to identify the strategies they can use to improve their writing craft.

List questions that you can use to facilitate conversation during writing conferences. Be sure to include questions that:

- open up writing conversations
- encourage students to talk meaningfully about their work
- invite students to share information about their writing that the reader wouldn't know
- ask students to talk about their writing process; specifically, how they decided what to write about, solved problems, or developed the piece
- probe students' knowledge of the writing craft and their ability to apply what they know to their own work
- encourage students to reflect on their growth as writers

When you have finished, save your list to submit as an assignment.

# Reflect on Your Learning

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## What Did You Learn? Assignment:

Summarize what you have learned about writing conferences from the experts' statements, classroom examples, and the readings and activities in this workshop. Use the questions below to guide your thinking. When you have finished, save your written summary to submit as an assignment.

- Which classroom practices from the two videos reflect what you currently do?
- Which conference practices or ideas are new to you?
- What changes, if any, do you plan to make?
- What support and/or resources will you need to implement these ideas?

# Assignments

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If you are taking this workshop for graduate credit, submit the following assignments for Workshop 5: Conversations With Student Writers:

## 1. Examine the Literature

Read three articles about teacher-student conferences and complete the Examine the Literature Response Chart.

## 2. Asking Good Questions

Talking with students about their writing means having conversations that are student-driven. Create a list of questions to help you keep the conversation focused on the student.

## 3. What Did You Learn?

Write a summary of the ideas and strategies you explored in this workshop.

# Related Resources

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## Print Resources

Anderson, Carl. *Assessing Writing*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005. ISBN: 0325005818

The author presents a down-to-earth, practical resource to help teachers learn how to assess student writers and use these observations to shape instruction.

Anderson, Carl. *How's It Going?: A Practical Guide to Conferencing With Student Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2000. ISBN: 032500224X

This conversational book is full of enlightening examples and anecdotes and offers excellent advice on talking with young students about writing.

Calkins, Lucy McCormick, Amanda Hartman, and Zoe Ryder White. *One on One: The Art of Conferencing With Young Writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2005. ISBN: 0325007888

This book demonstrates how to conduct clear and purposeful conferences that support student writers.

Lee, Christopher, and Rosemary Jackson. *Faking It—A Look Into the Mind of a Creative Learner*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1992. ISBN: 0867092963

The author recounts his personal struggle with dyslexia and its effect on his learning experiences.

Ray, Katie Wood, and Lester Laminack. *The Writing Workshop: Working Through the Hard Parts (And They're All Hard Parts)*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 2001. ISBN: 0814113176

The authors include a chapter on how to confer effectively with students.

Strickland, Dorothy S., Kathy Ganske, and Joanne K. Monroe. *Supporting Struggling Readers and Writers: Strategies for Classroom Intervention 3–6*. Portland, ME: Stenhouse Publishers, 2001. ISBN: 1571100555

This book focuses on practical strategies for improving the skills of at-risk readers and writers and second language learners.

# Workshop 5: Conversations With Student Writers

## Examine the Literature Response Chart

Title	Big Ideas	Notes and Questions
1. Conversations With Student Writers		
2. Teacher Talk: Developing Voice and Choice in Writing		
3. The Writing Conference: Breaking the Silence		

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