

Embrace public writing conferences

Conferring with students is the single best way I know to move them forward as writers. From kindergarten through high school, students greatly benefit from seeing and hearing the language of conferring. In a public conference, one student has a conference with the teacher in full view of the whole class or group while the other students are looking on, listening, and thinking about how to apply to their own writing what they are learning. Begin with content conferences. Editing doesn't matter much if the writing is not worth reading. Also important to keep in mind, students cannot effectively confer with peers until we have demonstrated and they have tried out, with our guidance, the helpful language and actions of conferring.

Take action

- ◆ **Be explicit in how and why the public conference can benefit all students.** Say something like, “We are having this public conference for two reasons. First, we’re going to celebrate what the writer has done well. It’s your job to listen closely to be sure you have done those same kinds of things in your own writing. Second, we may give the writer some suggestions. Again, you want to pay close attention, as I will expect you to reread your paper and make some revisions based on what applies to your own writing.”
- ◆ **Have the first public conference with a strong writer**, so we have a good role model for other students, the work to be done is manageable, and we feel successful.
- ◆ **Have the student read the piece aloud first**, if he is willing. On the first reading, try not to look at the writing (which can lead us to focus on grammar, legibility, or poor spelling) and listen for the whole message of what the writer is trying to say. If the piece is long, have the writer orally say what the piece is about; then have him choose one part where he wants feedback.
- ◆ **Read the paper aloud a second time**—and third time, if needed—to think on our feet and go by line by line to specifically name the exact language, craft, structure, organization, and so on that the writer has used to affect the reader and convey his message.

- ◆ **Go line by line and celebrate everything the writer has done well.** Choose our language carefully, and focus on the actual words the student has used and what those words convey. It is not helpful to the writer or to other students listening in to say, “I like your beginning” or “You used good detail” because we don’t know what that means and can’t emulate it. It is helpful to say, “Listen to Sarah’s first lines (and read the exact language aloud) and notice the way her words and rhythm entice the reader into the story. Make sure you have done something similar with your own writing.”
- ◆ **Decide on what’s most important to say and do at this time to move the writer forward,** and make one or two teaching points, for example, cutting and pasting for organization, writing a better lead, or both. Remember that sometimes, the writing is “good enough” as it is. Especially for writers who struggle, we want the writer to leave the conference with the energy, confidence, and will to do any necessary revision and editing work.
- ◆ **Make conferring manageable.** Do one or two in-depth public conferences. Do not worry if such a conference takes 15 or 20 minutes. Remember that “less is more” when we want students to think and apply techniques at a deep and meaningful level.
- ◆ **Ensure the language we use can be understood.** Not only are we seeking to have students apply what we are celebrating and suggesting, but also we are also modeling the language of response for worthwhile peer conferences.