

## One-on-One Writing Conferences (Office Hours)

*“This is what we can all do to nourish and strengthen one another: listen to one another very hard, ask hard questions, too, send one another away to work again, and laugh in all the right places.”*

—Nancy Mairs, *Voice Lessons*

### *In this chapter you will learn*

- how to prepare for and conduct effective one-on-one writing conferences.
- how to use questions to encourage students to take responsibility for their own writing.
- how to use activities to involve students in revision.
- how to use constructive praise to teach and reinforce good skills.

As a TA, you will frequently be able to help students individually during your office hours. When students come to you for help, they may ask you to read their draft and tell them what they need to “fix” in order to get a good grade. You must remember you are there to teach, however, not to rewrite the paper for the student. Even if you think you have a great idea for improving the paper, you must take care not to usurp the student’s authority. Remember: This is the student’s paper, not yours. The only way the student will learn to write well is by making his or her own decisions about how to revise. Besides, the student—who knows best what he or she has to say—is likely to come up with a better plan for the paper than you could.

This chapter discusses how to conduct effective writing conferences by preparing carefully, using questions and activities to encourage independent thought, teaching skills and concepts as needed, and using praise effectively.

### ***Technology Tactics***

It is possible to conduct one-on-one writing conferences online.

- **Asynchronous communication.** Email correspondence in which a period of time elapses between each message and reply is an example of

*(continued)*

### *Technology Tactics (continued)*

*asynchronous communication.* This type of online writing conference has several benefits. First, you and the student must put all your thoughts in writing, and writing about writing further enhances instruction. Second, because there is a delay in communication, you and the student may take time to thoroughly think through questions and comments before replying. And third, there is an electronic record of your “conversation” that you and the student can print out and refer to later.

- **Synchronous communication.** A conversation that you might have in an online chat room is an example of *synchronous communication*. Just like asynchronous communication, you and the student must put all your thoughts in writing, thereby enhancing the writing instruction. The benefit of synchronous communication, however, is that you and the student may hold a finite conversation in real time on a particular date and at a particular time. If your school does not provide access to an online chat space, you can access free online chat services through Yahoo! at <www.chat.yahoo.com> and MSN at <www.chat.msn.com>. (Registration is required.)

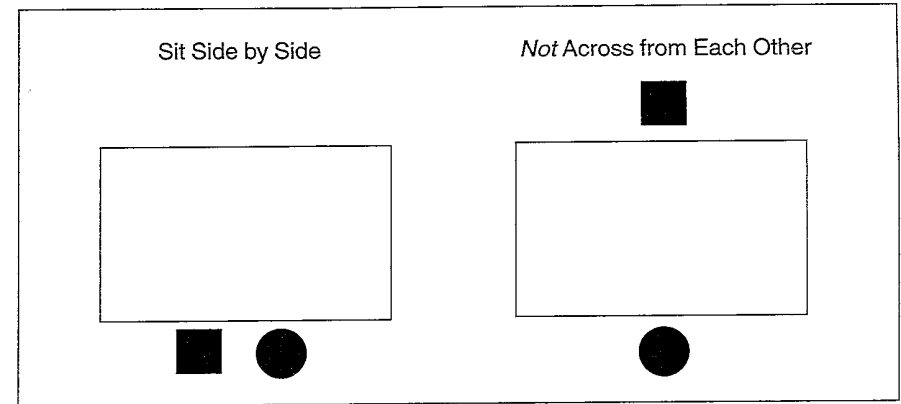
### *Prepare Carefully*

Tell students to come to the conference with a completed draft and specific questions to ask. The following are some typical questions students might ask.

- “Does this fit the assignment?”
- “Is the format all right?”
- “What do you think of the overall structure?”
- “Did I include enough specific information?”
- “Can you understand what I’m saying?”

You can prepare for the conference by anticipating such questions and being sure you understand the assignment and the professor’s expectations. If possible, get the student’s draft early so you can read it before the conference and consider specific areas that may need attention. Also, have a plan in mind for helping the student. (See the Teaching Tip box on p. 74 for a list of open-ended questions to use during conferences. See also the Teaching Tip box on p. 76 for some hands-on activities to use during conferences.)

Set up your meeting space in a way that allows you and the student to work productively. Be sure you have useful resources available, such as the written assignment instructions, sample papers, any texts the students are writing about, a writing handbook, a dictionary, pencils, and scratch paper. Arrange the table (or desk) and chairs so that you and the student can sit side by side. (See Figure 8.1.)



**Figure 8.1.** Seating Arrangement for a One-on-One Writing Conference

This way, you can both see the paper and you feel like partners. Make sure the student has a pencil in hand, ready to make notes on his or her paper.

### *Begin the Conference*

As the student comes in, greet him or her by name and perhaps just chat for a minute or so. Before long, turn the attention to the concern at hand. Start with a nonthreatening question such as “How’s the paper coming along?” or “What can I do to help you?” Try to get the student to lead the conversation.

If you haven’t already done so, and if it is shorter than five pages, take the time to read the student’s draft before you begin to talk about it. (After all, you can’t really advise a student if you haven’t read the paper.) Either you or the student can read the paper aloud; there are advantages to either choice. If you read it out loud, the student hears his or her words more objectively. If the student reads it, he or she can stop at will to talk about certain parts that sound “off.” Avoid reading the paper silently while the student waits. This could make the student feel awkward or think that you are judging his or her paper.

### *Use Questions to Draw the Student Out*

As you talk together about the paper, guide the student with open-ended questions. (See the Teaching Tip box on p. 74.) Phrase your questions in a way that encourages the student to think. Avoid questions that demand a certain answer. Be truly open to learning from the student.

In the following dialogue, a fictional “TA Terrible” demonstrates an ineffective way of using questions with “Lost Lonnie.” (Note: Even if you find yourself on occasion using some of the same tactics TA Terrible does, know that you are *not* a terrible TA. This is tricky stuff, and we all have lapses. You can make up for

a bad moment or two with the overall intent and quality of your interaction. You can be TA Terrific.)

*TA Terrible:* "How can you make this thesis clearer?"

*Lost Lonnie:* "I don't know. I thought it was clear. I did my best."

Instead, see how TA Terrific draws Lost Lonnie out and helps him discover the problem.

*TA Terrific:* "Tell me about what you want to say in this paper."

*Lost Lonnie:* "I want to show how the effects of X and Y cause Z. But . . . I didn't really say that in my paper, did I? I'd better fix that."

### **Teaching Tip: Questions to Use in One-on-One Conferences**

The following questions can be used in one-on-one writing conferences to help students focus their papers, organize their ideas, and discover more specific support.

#### **To Help Writers Focus Their Papers**

- "What are you mainly trying to say here?"
- "What do you think the teacher is looking for in the paper?"
- "How does this paper meet the requirements of the assignment?"
- "Why did you choose this topic?"
- "Which is the most important part of the paper? Why?"
- "Is there anything that doesn't seem to fit in the paper?"

#### **To Help Writers Reconsider the Order of Their Ideas**

- "What did you tell about first? Second? Third?"
- "Why did you choose this particular order?"
- "What effect would different orders have on the reader?"

#### **To Help Writers Be More Specific**

- "Could you explain this to me further?"
- "Tell me more about why you believe this is true. What evidence do you see for this?"
- "Help me to see this in more detail."
- "How might someone disagree with what you are saying?"
- "How could you respond to an alternate interpretation?"
- "Are there any variables you haven't mentioned?"

Questions are usually an excellent way to encourage students to take responsibility for their papers. However, be careful of questions that seem to judge and

direct rather than truly invite careful thought. For example, when a TA asks, "Why did you choose this support?" the student might think the TA means, "This support is really bad. I need something different." Instead, a TA could say, "Tell me more about why this is true." This kind of request would still lead to a careful consideration of evidence, without sounding judgmental.

Whether you use questions or requests, be sure to give the student time to think about his or her response. Don't rush in with an answer of your own to "help." Silence is used for thinking; don't let it make you or the student nervous. If the question is particularly difficult, ask the student to write about it while you busy yourself in some other way for a couple minutes, so the student won't be distracted by your looking at him or her. You could go get a drink or look up something in a book.

Practice using questions and requests to encourage student thought, and look forward to hearing the student's answers. Keep a list of general questions handy to refer to during conferences until you get the knack. (See the Teaching Tip box on p. 74.) Your attitude in asking the questions is probably the most important determinant for their effectiveness. You need to be truly interested in what the student thinks. Look forward to learning from the student's answers and enjoy coming to understand the student's ideas.

### **Use Activities to Get the Student Involved in Revision**

Along with questions, activities encourage students to work on their papers during conferences, under your coaching and direction, so you can be sure they know how to apply what you've been talking about. In the following example, TA Terrible simply evaluates Lost Lonnie's paper without giving any guidance on how Lonnie could improve it.

*TA Terrible:* "Your structure really needs work."

*Lost Lonnie:* "OK . . . I guess I'll fix it . . . later."

On the other hand, TA Terrific uses an activity to get Lonnie working on his paper immediately, under the TA's supervision.

*TA Terrific:* "Tell me about your structure. How have you organized your paper?"

*Lost Lonnie:* "Gee, I don't know. It just kind of came out that way."

*TA Terrific:* "OK. Let's see what you've got here. Take this pencil and write the main idea for each paragraph in the margin. Then let's see how those ideas connect to each other."

By being guided through an activity that forces him to think about his structure, Lonnie learns a strategy that he can use again on his own in the future. Also, by doing the activity together, the TA can be sure that Lonnie understands the principles she's been trying to teach him.

### **Teaching Tip: Activities to Use in One-on-One Conferences**

The following activities can be used in one-on-one writing conferences to help teach students focus, structure, development, and transition.

#### **To Teach Focus**

- Ask students to explain verbally what they are trying to say in print. As the students speak, take notes on their comments. Often students will spontaneously come up with more focused thesis statements.
- Summarize back to students the main things they told you were important to the paper. Suggest that they try to come up with a thesis statement that includes all these aspects.
- Give students some colored highlighters and suggest that they choose one color for each main idea. Then have them go through their paper and highlight in the corresponding color the parts that expand on each idea.

#### **To Teach Structure**

- Ask students to write in the margin the main idea for each of their paragraphs.
- Ask students to create a map, chart, or outline of the structure of their paper as it is written. (See pp. 40–42.)

#### **To Teach Development**

- Ask students to explain in more detail why they believe a particular claim. Write down the evidence the students mention. Show them your list and ask if some of that information would be good to include in the paragraph.
- Brainstorm with students a list of other points that could be included in a particular section. See how many you can write in just two minutes. Then have students consider if some of the ideas or information should be added to the paper.

#### **To Teach Transition**

- Ask students to explain to you the connection between certain parts of the paper. Have them figure out a transition sentence that would make clear that connection. Be sure they write down the sentence.
- Have students underline the paper's major transitions. Ask them to evaluate the effectiveness of their transitions. Are they clear enough? Does the paper need any others?

### **When Appropriate, Teach Skills and Concepts**

Though most often students learn best through careful questioning and guided activities, sometimes they just need instruction. In the following scene, Lost Lonnie has come to his TA for specific assistance.

*Lost Lonnie:* "I don't understand what a review of the literature is."

*TA Terrible:* "What do you think it is?"

Frustration and anger could follow. Instead, TA Terrible might give a brief definition of a review of the literature and perhaps provide some examples. Then she could ask Lonnie to evaluate how well his review meets that definition. Lonnie would then be ready to apply the definition to his own paper.

But when should you teach indirectly with questions and guided activities, and when should you simply provide the needed information? This decision is a judgment call on your part, but practice and experience will help you make the choice. Consider the following student inquiries:

1. "How should I organize this paper?"
2. "Is this a good thesis?"
3. "What does the professor want?"
4. "What is a lab report?"
5. "Should this paragraph be here?"
6. "Can you understand what I'm saying here?"
7. "What is a thesis?"

Which of these questions should you answer by teaching specific information or concepts? Which of them should you meet with open-ended questions and activities that get the student thinking? The answers would vary depending on the particular student you are teaching and the particular assignment you are working on. However, questions 3, 4, and 7 would probably require specific content and direct teaching. Those questions follow, along with ways to directly teach the information requested and possible follow-up questions to direct the student back to the paper at hand.

#### **Question 3:**

"What does the professor want?"

*Direct teaching:* Read the assignment instructions together, giving added information you might have learned from your meetings with the professor.

*Follow-up question:* "What ideas do you have for this paper? How do you think you would like to meet these requirements?"

#### **Question 4:**

"What is a lab report?"

*Direct teaching:* Explain exactly what is expected in a lab report. Show examples of good lab reports.

*Follow-up question:* "How does your report meet these expectations? How do you want to improve your report?"

#### **Question 7:**

"What is a thesis?"

*Direct teaching:* Describe the qualities of a good thesis, including concepts that are important to your professor. Show an example of a good thesis

using a topic unrelated to this paper. (*Do not* create a thesis for the student.)

*Follow-up question:* "Does your thesis meet these expectations? How could you improve it?"

Direct teaching of concepts is very important. However, when students ask you to make writing decisions for them ("How should I organize this paper?"), direct the responsibility back to them with a question of your own ("Tell me about the organization. Why have you chosen the order that you have?") or an activity ("Let's make an outline of the paper as it is written. Then you can decide if you like it this way or if you want to find a better way."). As you continue to practice this skill, you will learn when to teach directly and when to teach indirectly through questions or activities.

### *Use Constructive Praise to Build Students' Confidence*

When working individually with students, you will want to build their confidence by praising their work. Praising specific good points in students' writing teaches them what they should continue doing. Pointing out when you are truly impressed with a certain aspect of their writing—a great title or a strong transition, for example—warms any writer's heart and can motivate hard work on the rest of the piece.

Praise can be counterproductive to learning if it is used inappropriately, however. Insincere praise will only make the student distrust you. If you give general praise, students may think they don't need to improve. Comparing students to their peers usually just leads to bad feelings. Praise that ignores students' ideas gives the impression that the paper's content is unimportant. Following is an example of a poor use of praise.

*TA Terrible:* "This is a really great paper. It's better than any other paper I read."

*Lost Lonnie:* "Gee, I thought I needed to work on it more. I guess I should just turn it in the way it is. I mean . . . now I'm sure I'll get an A."

On the other hand, praise that is specifically anchored to certain parts of the paper can teach and reinforce a general principle. Students need to know what they are doing right so that they can do those same things again next time. The following is a good example of using praise to teach.

*TA Terrific:* "I like the way your thesis clearly predicts the structure of your paper. Notice how each main transition in your paper links back to the thesis."

*Lost Lonnie:* "Thanks! I worked hard on the thesis and structure. And I can see how the transitions help the reader. But I wonder if I have enough support in the second section. Do you think I need to include more specific evidence? And what about the wording of the conclusion? Do you think it works?"

Used appropriately, praise can motivate original thinking in students, and it can build confidence while leaving room for improvement. Effective praise might address the ideas in the paper, focus on effective writing processes, and value originality. The following are some examples of effective uses of praise.

- "Your ideas on XYZ were very creative. You made me think about the topic in new ways."
- "It was easy to follow your argument because the structure of your paper follows the plan you set forth in your introduction."
- "The evidence in this paragraph is compelling. These quotes from the text convince me of your claim."
- "Using the colon in this sentence really sets up the reader for the startling assertion you make."
- "Notice how the sentences in this paragraph connect to each other. You do a good job repeating key words to keep the paragraph unified."

In your conferences use praise liberally, but make sure it is sincere and specific, not just meant to make the student feel good. In other words, make sure your praise is *constructive*.

### *Conclusion*

One-on-one writing conferences are in many ways the ideal teaching situation because you can tailor the teaching activities to the particular needs of an individual student, and you can coach specific skills as the student writes.

For more effective writing conferences, prepare carefully, help the student to feel comfortable as you begin, teach through questions and activities, and use specific, sincere praise to encourage progress. Before completing a conference, ask the student, "What are you going to do with the paper next?" Suggest writing down the main areas to work on so that the student will remember to practice the skills he or she has been learning. Then follow up. Ask about progress next time you see the student. When you grade the final draft, point out areas of improvement. Show that you care about the student's learning.

#### **Chapter Checklist**

- Encourage students to come to conferences prepared with plans, specific questions, and all the necessary materials (drafts, resources, notes, etc.).
- Have the assignment sheet, a writing handbook, a dictionary, and scratch paper available. Be sure you understand the assignment and the professor's priorities.

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### *Chapter Checklist (continued)*

- Try to read the draft before you meet with a student. Think of a plan for helping the student address the paper's weaknesses.
- Sit side by side, with the writing project where you both can see it.
- Use open-ended questions and specific activities to encourage students to evaluate their own writing. Let them have "power of the pen."
- Follow up and be supportive. Determine if the students have had problems implementing the plans and changes you discussed.

### *Applications to Your Own Situation*

1. Draft a dialogue for a bad conference in your discipline. Then draft a dialogue for a model good conference.
2. Perform one of these dialogues in front of a group of TAs and discuss it.
3. Think of five open-ended questions you could use when meeting with a student in your class. Keep the list nearby during conferences as a handy reference.
4. What might be a common problem for a student completing a writing assignment in your class? Devise an exercise that would help a student address that problem during a conference.

### *Working with Your Professor*

1. Ask your professor what specific expectations for conferences he or she may have.
2. Discuss the possibility of requiring students to have a conference with you before a paper is due. Ask what the student should bring—such as a thesis statement, an outline, a bibliography, and/or an early draft—to the conference.