

10 Tips for Conferring with Student Writers Online

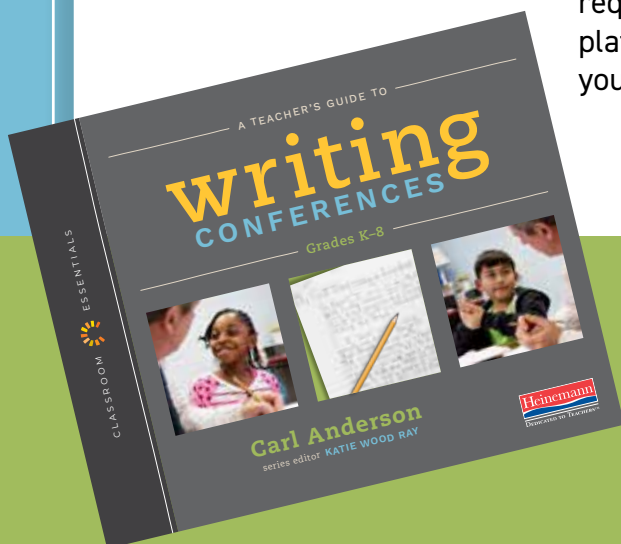
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WHEN I WROTE *A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO WRITING CONFERENCES* (2018), I couldn't imagine that in 2020, you would be conferring with student writers on virtual platforms like Zoom and Google Meet. Instead of sitting next to children in classrooms to confer, as teachers have done in writing workshops for decades, you now talk to your students through the screen of your laptop or iPad.

Writing conferences are still at the heart of teaching writing. That's because these 1:1 interactions with children give you the opportunity to provide the individualized support students need from you to grow as writers. In fact, conferring is more important than ever, as conferences give you and your students the opportunity to maintain and further develop the relationships that you miss when school is not meeting in person, or when your school is doing a version of blended learning. As John Hattie explains in *Visible Learning* (2009), these relationships help your students learn from you.

Whether you are conferring face-to-face in classrooms, or virtually, conferring effectively requires several sets of skills: you need to know how to talk with children about their writing, assess them as writers, and teach them well, all in the 5-7 minutes that conferences typically take. Conferring with children online requires one more: you need to know how to best use online platforms to confer successfully. Here are ten tips that will help you make great conferences possible online.



1.

FAMILIARIZE YOURSELF WITH THE IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS OF YOUR ONLINE PLATFORM



Most importantly, you and your students should know how to use the share screen function (on Zoom, Share Screen, and on Google Meet, Present Now). This function will allow students who are writing on their laptop or iPad to share their writing with you, and for you to share mentor texts with your students.

Also, you should know how to set up breakout rooms (Zoom currently has this functionality, but it's still in development for Google Meet). When you are doing a synchronous (live) writing workshop with your students, you can put your students in breakout rooms after your mini-lesson. This will allow you to move from small group to small group to confer with students, much like you go from table to table in your classroom.

2.

MAKE SURE YOU HAVE ACCESS TO YOUR STUDENTS' WRITING

If your students are doing their writing on paper, request that they or their parents take pictures of their writing with their cell phones, and send it to you via text or email before conferences. This will allow you to put the writing on your desktop and then share it during conferences.

If your students are writing on a word processor such as Google Docs, then they'll easily be able to share their writing with you using the share screen function during conferences.

3.

DIGITALIZE YOUR MENTOR TEXTS

Take pictures of the pages of your favorite mentor texts and place them on your desktop as a JPG or PDF. Before you have a conference, open up your mentor texts

so you can share them when you teach students about craft techniques that are in those texts.

If you have an iPad, you can import your mentor texts into an app like GoodNotes, and then (if you are using Zoom) share your iPad's screen. This allows you to expand a section of a mentor text (by pinching out—that is, spreading your fingers—on the iPad's screen), and also to highlight sections of the mentor text using an Apple Pencil.

4.

MAKE A SCHEDULE OF CONFERENCES EACH DAY

If you are teaching asynchronously, you either do a live mini-lesson or record a writing for your students to watch by a designated time during the school day. You then schedule your writing conferences with students during a block of time during the day you've designated for that purpose after students have viewed your mini-lesson. Create a schedule of conferences (and small groups) you're going to have on a given day, and share it with students in your daily class meeting, or post it on Google Classroom. Just as when you are in your classroom with students, the goal is to confer with 3–5 students per day.

When you teach synchronously, you give a “live” mini-lesson, and then your students work on their writing independently for 20–30 minutes afterward, just as they would in your classroom. As students write, you'll confer with 3–5 of them about their work. Try putting your students in breakout rooms of 3–4 students each, as fewer students will be distracted when you have a conference. When you visit a breakout room to confer with a student, tell the others that they can either eavesdrop on the conference, and perhaps try what you teach (just like many students do in your classroom), or they can turn down the volume so that they aren't distracted by the conference.

5.

BEGIN CONFERENCES BY ENGAGING STUDENTS IN A CONVERSATION ABOUT THEIR WRITING

In the first part of a conference, your job is to figure out what work a student is doing as a writer—that is, what stage of the writing process—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing or publishing—the child is in the midst of, and what are they doing in that stage? For example, in the

- prewriting stage, finding a topic or planning a draft
- drafting phase, writing a lead or topic sentence

- revision stage, adding detail or reworking the ending
- editing stage, checking for spelling or mechanics
- publishing stage, formatting the final draft.

When you confer online, you'll discover what a child is doing as a writer by engaging in a conversation about their writing, just as you do when you sit side-by-side with them in your classroom:

- Begin conferences by asking an open-ended question, such as "How's it going?" or "What are you doing as a writer?"
- Then give students some wait time so they have time to think about what it is they're doing so they can share that information with you.
- For students who initially don't say much about their writing, ask them more specific questions, such as "What is going well in your writing today?" or "What is something challenging about what you're doing that you want to talk to me about?"
- If the student doesn't tell you what she's doing, then ask her to show you her writing (via the share screen function) if she's an older child, or read or show you her writing if she's a younger child and you don't have a photo of her writing. As you read her writing, name what you see her doing as a writer.



There are two helpful adjustments you might make in the first part of an online conference that can make the conversations flow more easily:

- Visual cues about the child's comfort or engagement in the conference can be harder to read online. Some online platforms will allow you to expand the video of the child so you can see him/her more closely. In Zoom, for example, you can "pin" the child's video by placing your cursor over the student's video and click on the three dots. Then click on Pin Video in the pull-down menu. In Google Meet, you can use the similar Spotlight function. You can also teach your students to expand the size of your video, so that you're more visible to them, too.
- It can be a helpful scaffold for the students to share their writing using the share screen function before the conference starts so that they can

look at it while they're thinking about what they're doing as writers. If you have a copy of a primary student's writing, you can share it on the screen before you say, "How's it going?"

6.

HAVE STUDENTS SHARE THEIR WRITING SO YOU CAN ASSESS THE WORK THEY'RE DOING

In the second part of a conference, you assess the student's writing to decide what to teach them. The trick of this is to look at the writing with what you learned about what they're doing as writers in mind. For example, if the student is making a plan, look at their plan, or if the student is writing a lead, look at the lead. As you read the appropriate part of the student's writing, look to see what they already know about doing that work, and see what else they could learn to be able to do that work even better.

To read the student's writing in an online conference:

- Older students who are composing their writing on a word processor (like Google Docs) can open up their current piece of writing and share it with you using the share screen function. (They may have already done this at the beginning of the conference).
- If you have received a photo of a younger student's writing, you can open it up on your desktop and read it. (Again, you may have already done this at the beginning of the conference).
- If you don't have a copy of the student's writing, you can ask them to share their writing with you by holding it up to the video camera on their computer, or by reading it aloud to you.

7.

GIVE STUDENTS FEEDBACK ABOUT THEIR WRITING

You'll begin the third part of each writing conference—in which you teach powerfully—by giving the student some feedback about their writing work by naming what they know how to do so far, and what they need to learn next.

In an online conference, when the student's writing has been shared on the screen, you can enhance your oral feedback by highlighting the part(s) of the student writing that you're discussing using the annotation functions that are embedded in the online platform. In Zoom, for example, you can do this by clicking first on the annotate function, and then the draw function.

8.

TEACH BY SHOWING A MENTOR TEXT OR BY DOING A DEMONSTRATION



In conferences when you're teaching students about writer's craft, you'll show students an excerpt from a mentor text so that they can see how an author used a particular craft technique. You can do this by opening up a photo or PDF of a mentor text on your desktop—or on your iPad—and using the share screen function. To help students focus on the part of the text that you want them to study, use the draw function to underline or circle that part, or if you're using an iPad, use an Apple Pencil to underline or circle the part of the text you're showing the student.

If you want to teach by doing some demonstration writing, you can do this by opening up a new document on your word processor, use the share screen function, and then type on the document. Or you can use the whiteboard function. If you're using Zoom, it has a built-in whiteboard that you can access when you click on the share screen function; if you're using Google Meet, you'll also need an app such as Google Canvas or Google Jamboard, and then share the whiteboard using the present now function.

You can also show a mentor text or do a demonstration by using a document camera connected to your computer and using the share screen function to show the writing you're doing live as you narrate what you're doing.

9.

COACH THE STUDENT

When you finish your teaching, you'll coach students as they try out what you taught in their writing. In most conferences, students will talk out how they can use the new strategy (e.g., making a plan for their piece) or craft technique (e.g., writing dialogue); in others, they'll do some writing (e.g., practicing finger spacing).

- Use the share screen function so that the student's writing is again visible, and using the annotate function, circle or highlight the part of the piece where the student is going to try out what you've taught. Then ask the student to talk out the writing they're going to do. As necessary, you'll coach the student as they do this "try it."
- If you want the student to practice a writing strategy, like using finger spacing, then as they're writing, periodically ask them to show you what

they're doing. For example, as they're writing, you might say, "What do you want to write next? [You listen.] Oh, so you want to write, 'I went to the park.' So write the first word, *I* . . . now make your finger space . . . write the next word, *went* . . . okay, now hold your writing up so I can see that beautiful space! . . .", etc.

10.

CHECK BACK WITH STUDENTS 5-10 MINUTES AFTER EACH CONFERENCE

You'll end each of your conferences by linking the conference to the student's independent work. You might say something like "I want you to try writing what I just taught you—how to write a counterargument. I'll take a look at what you do after I have my next conference." And then 5-10 minutes later, you'll check back in with the student to see how things went.

If you're teaching synchronously, you can come back to a student's breakout room after your next conference to follow up. If you're teaching asynchronously, put them back in the Waiting Room (on Zoom), and when you're finished with your next conference, readmit the student. Or you could remove them from the meeting and ask the student to request to be readmitted once they're finished trying what you taught.

A FEW UNEXPECTED BENEFITS OF ONLINE CONFERRING

While most of us look forward to the time when we are back in classrooms full-time, there are some unique and beneficial aspects of online conferring that should be recognized:

- When you confer with students online, you get glimpses of their at-home lives that you would not usually be privy to because the video link to a child's kitchen or bedroom can be surprisingly revealing. For example, siblings and pets sometimes come into the room where the student is working. You'll hear a baby crying in the background. You'll see things on the wall of a child's bedroom that teaches you something about their interests you didn't know they had. You find out that a child's parent or grandparent interferes with their work by telling them what to say in conferences. You see that a child has a designated place to do their work—or not. All of these things that you learn—and many, many others—can help you understand your students and their family situations better.
- Students learn things about you, too, that they might normally not know.

They might meet one of your children, who interrupts a conference (even though they've been told not to!). Or they'll see objects in your apartment or house that reveal some of your interests. When your students notice these kinds of things, it helps to humanize you, and as a result, many children will feel more comfortable with you as their teacher.

- Many students are more excited about conferring online than in the classroom. That's because during this time of virtual learning, children have been isolated and lonely. As a result, students look forward to and value the times when they get to interact with you 1:1.
- Finally, when you confer with children online, there are none of the usual classroom management issues that can sometimes distract you and students when you're conferring in your classroom!

Carl would like to thank Matt Glover and Ryan Scala for the conversations he's had with them about online conferring.

Works Cited

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