

## **Writing in the Moment**

### **Three students, three conferences, twelve minutes**

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The title represents the pressure English teachers feel to confer and move on—I've trained myself to limit my conferences to 3-4 minutes, in order to talk to 6-8 students each day during writing workshop, trying to solve one problem that might also teach other students nearby. I work to create calm and ease in my conferences, hoping students find conferences purposeful, but not rushed.

#### **Student one: I don't know what to write**

Sam is a tenth grader. He is a general level student with a wonderful attitude, but not a lot of experience with reading and writing. He hasn't been resistant, but he has been slow to work through our transition back to school this fall. For independent reading he chose a book, *April Morning*, that didn't hold his interest, so he has swapped it for one I suggested, *Guts*. I don't know yet about his reading history, except that he didn't read last year. Our first assignment is to write a scene that shows a moment in time and includes voice, sensory details and dialogue. We have been quick writing in notebooks and most students have started writing in notebooks moving to computers today. I initiate this conference because when I scan the room I see Sam not working. He didn't ask for my help, but I figure he needs it.

#### **Important things to notice and think about:**

- My model of scene writing has engaged Sam. He has offered feedback on my writing. My scene demonstrates what I'm asking of students, but I also asked them to give me feedback and help on the piece itself, drawing them into natural conversations about improving writing in my room, which is central to conferring.
- When Sam rejects hunting as a topic because 'nothing big has happened yet hunting-wise' I can respond by showing him my piece was about nothing. You can see he gets what I mean instantly. This is the power of writing with students, anticipating what they need to see modeled for them.
- Sam must maintain control over what he is going to write about and how he will do it. If I tell Sam what to write, I make him dependent on me. Writing workshop is always about encouraging independence and problem-solving.
- I try on ways to start writing while I talk to him so that he might begin writing when I leave. This move is not echoed in either of the following two conferences simply because the writers don't need this help from me.

#### **Student two: Am I doing this right?**

Before this conference starts, the chatter that happens at her table is important. These students are off camera, but listen to what they ask and how I answer. I would call the two quick clarifications I give students at this table ‘touch and go’ conferences. I find this happens a lot as I move from table to table in my room. I give them just enough to get going, then focus on the student who has asked for my help. But they quiet down as I talk to her and I am certain they are learning from what I say to Jade.

- Lindsey was absent the last time class met and wants clarification on the assignment. First of all, can she have another day to work? I say no, I want what she can do that day. This first scene writing is a pre-assessment of what students understand about narrative. I want to move forward into more complexity with story based on this baseline, so I pressure her to finish in class. You’ll notice I repeat the central goals of the writing for her, even though we just explored those in the mini-lesson on my scene.
- The other student asks a question about his user name for our school’s log-in, then adds “basically a third person account” as I talk to Lindsey about what is expected of her. I correct him that it can be first person and practice a line using that voice. I also look at Jade while I talk to them to acknowledge that I know she is waiting for me.

I begin the conference by asking Jade what she needs from me. She says she wants to know if she is doing it right. I push her to clarify. All of my students are asked this question throughout the year: how can I help you as a writer now? I seek independent writers, so I need writers who can analyze what they are doing in their writing and how that writing falls short of their goals. They need to come to conferences with questions to direct the conference: both with me and with their peers. As I push Jade, she offers more and I use her question to direct my work with her.

(I did not ask this question of Sam since he did not ask me to look at his writing, and when I ask it of the third student here, she has an answer, so I can move forward. This is the differentiation in conferences that occurs daily because writers are in such different places in their understanding and in their writing as we move through a unit of study.)

Jade finally asks if it is too much—so I skim read her piece (reading aloud so she can hear it too) and then address only this question in my response. I see all kinds of other things I could discuss with her, but when a writer asks for help on one thing, learning that thing is exactly in the zone of proximal development. I don’t miss the opportunity to address it.

After I read first I acknowledge that this is a big story (her father’s heart attack) and important, and she may want to write all of it in our next unit on narrative.

I mark in her notebook where the writing she has so far might be four scenes. I talk through how each part could be a scene, then ask her to choose one, slow down time,

and get writing. Later, when she has one scene I will follow up with how writers choose where to zoom in and where to zoom past—where to fully develop a scene and where to summarize for readers.

### **Student three: is this too long?**

Ah, the diversity of students. Kayla has a full page and a half of writing. She came to class with it and has been rereading and revising it while workshop has buzzed around her. She asks me to come and look at her work and tell her if it is too long. (You'll notice that I am at the third table of six in my classroom. I try to do one conference at a table and move on to another to keep my presence throughout the classroom and to give more students the opportunity to eavesdrop.)

Kayla asked for length and as she talks, I skim her piece. I see much to celebrate so I ask her if there is anything else she wants from me. She mentions length, so I prod her with questions about how much information she has included and why it might be too long. I sense it isn't, so I push her for questions about more than length, figuring this girl is already analyzing her writing and I might be able to help her with a more complex question about writing with her invitation to do so. She wants to know if her description is 'cheesy' and I ask her if she means 'cliché.' Then I start reading. I skim read and think about what to teach.

One thing I have learned to do in conferences is watch my confusion as a reader and then explain it to students. Donald Murray did this for me when I was writing *Public Teaching*. He called me and said, "Let me tell you what I'm thinking as I'm reading this." I made notes as he talked and learned a great deal about what was happening in my writing that I simply couldn't see yet. My skills in reading like a writer were rudimentary. I needed his guidance to hear how craft decisions I was making affected a reader's experience with my story. This is what I offer Kayla.

I talk through my confusion with her and give her direction as to how to solve it, then I tell her I'm reading for the 'cheesy' question and talk through when her description is and isn't cliché.

The class has quieted, so I take a moment to keep reading. I add a paragraph on her piece and explain how it will help readers by eliminating the proximity between she and 'Kayla' in the moment. Again, I am working with a writer I know is strong, so I explain very little here, but feel confident she understands me.

I mention what she has done in her ending. My voice is the only one in the room and I know others nearby are going to hear me, so I want to mention how it brings readers to a different place. Endings are perhaps the most challenging skill for young writers, so when I find a student who has nailed one, I often use it as a sample text in class the next day. Across the table from Kayla is another strong writer who stops typing to listen in.

This is the power of conferring with writers in the midst of the class. I talk to Kayla about why her ending works so well, and I hope Nathaniel might ask to read Kayla's piece after I leave.

The key to this clip is the differentiation of teaching made possible in conferring.