

Writing Across the Curriculum

The Writing Conference: Suggestions from Writing Studies Research

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Holding individual writing conferences can be one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of student papers. Wilhoit (2008) argues that 5 minutes of one-on-one consultation with students can be more productive than covering the same material for an hour in-class. Bean (2011) points out that effective consultations are collaborative and structured; students should be encouraged to maintain ownership of their work. He suggests that students should do the majority (80-90%) of the talking during a writing consultation.

Research shows that consultations work best when a clear agenda is determined at their beginning (Bean 2011; Wilhoit 2008). Involving the student in this process helps keep them engaged in the session (Glenn, Goldthwaite & Connors 2003). Further, students should be encouraged (or required) to prepare in advance, and bring notes, drafts, outlines, or written questions with them (Hedengren 2004).

Once the session is underway, concentrate on higher order thinking skills, rather than grammar or punctuation (Wilhoit 2008; Bean 2011). Editing or proofreading a student's work can be counter-productive. Students may come to depend on your assistance, rather than learning self-editing skills, and there is little gained in editing a paragraph that may not carry over into a finished draft. Use questions to keep the focus on argument and organization: help students focus their papers, reconsider the structure of their arguments, and be more specific (Hedengren 2004). When looking at lower order concerns, limit yourself to one or two patterns of error rather than trying to fix every single mistake. It can sometimes be useful to model proofreading strategies, by reviewing one or two paragraphs and carefully pointing out the reasons for the changes you make (Wilhoit 2008). Be sure to point out the student's strengths as well as areas for improvement.

When concluding a consultation, briefly review the main points that have been covered, and remind the students of what steps they need to take next; students should leave with a plan of action for developing their ideas and making revisions.

Five Suggestions For Consultations:

1. **Allow the student to participate in seeing an agenda.** This helps them stay engaged.
2. **Be aware of which stage of writing the student is working through.** Guide them in thinking about higher-order concerns early on, before looking at lower-order issues.
3. **Use questions and revision activities to keep students involved.** Guide students in developing their own ideas, rather than giving them your ideas.
4. **When appropriate, teach specific concepts and skills.** Sometimes students need direct instruction; follow micro-lectures with leading questions to check student comprehension.
5. **Be generous in offering constructive praise.**

Six Implications For Instructors

1. Begin each conference by asking the student what they would like to work on, and collaboratively setting an agenda.
2. Use strategies like idea maps, tree diagrams, and outlines to encourage higher order thinking.
3. Ask questions to keep the student engaged, check comprehension, and determine what areas need more work.
4. Let the student keep ownership of their own writing and ideas.
5. If you're looking at lower-order concerns, limit your scope: look at one or two paragraphs, or one or two major patterns of error. Build writing skills instead of fixing their written work.
6. Not all students need the same type of assistance, and not all respond well to the same types of instruction. Try to develop a few different consultation strategies, and stay flexible in order to better meet the specific needs of different students.

References And Resources

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