Conference Walkthrough

Every conference in Books 1–3 shows you how to teach a specific writing strategy, craft technique, or point of grammar or mechanics. The predictable features of each conference model a framework for teaching a student effectively. In addition, marginal notes offer coaching, background information, and/or ideas for modifying the conference.

The first four sections help you prepare for the conference:

- The **What You Find** section describes the area of need to be addressed in the conference.

- **Conference Purpose** is a concise summary of the main teaching point.

- The **Model Text** section lists the model texts or writing samples used to teach the strategy or craft technique.

- A **Materials** section appears if you will need additional writing tools to teach the conference.

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**Finding a Topic by Making a List**

I notice that you are not sure what to write about today. This is something every writer goes through at different times in his writing life. One strategy writers use to help them find a topic to write about is to brainstorm a list of possible topics, usually on a page in their writer’s notebook. Making a topic list helps us figure out what to write about—not only on the day we make the list but also weeks and months later, or whenever we can’t come up with a topic to write about.

**Explain a Strategy**

How do writers make a list of possible topics, especially when we are having trouble coming up with even one topic? We make a list by first thinking of categories of topics to write about. These categories may include “special people,” like family and friends; “memories,” or events that you will never forget; “places” that you have visited or that mean a lot to you; “activities” that you enjoy; and “issues” that you feel are important. As we think about each category, we ask ourselves, “Do I have something to write about in this category?”

When we think about a topic category, sometimes we come up with a specific, ready-to-go topic, such as, “The time my dad took me on the roller coaster at Coney Island.” Other times we come up with a big topic, such as “my mom,” that can give us lots of ideas for writing.
The conference teaching language begins after these four sections. It models how to begin a conference by offering feedback to the student. It shows how to talk about the area of need and name and define the writing strategy, craft technique, or point of grammar or mechanics that you will teach. The teaching language is followed by five sections:

- **The Explain a Strategy** section offers a clear, explicit explanation of how writers use a writing strategy.
- **Share Your Writing** models how to use your own piece of writing to teach a strategy, technique, or point of grammar or mechanics.
- **The Share a Model Text** section models how to teach an aspect of writer’s craft using an excerpt from children’s literature or a nonfiction piece. You can use the models provided or try one of your favorites.
- **The Coach the Student** section gives you scaffolding questions to help you guide the student to try what you’ve just taught.
- **Link to the Student’s Writing** shows how to wrap up the conference. It models how to explain what you would like the student to do right now in his own writing and helps you summarize the teaching point.
In addition to these sections, which form the bulk of the conference, three sections sometimes appear, which provide further information:

- The **Follow-Up** section gives ideas for modifying the conference during subsequent units of study and/or ideas for additional conferences about the same topic.

- **Modifications for Nonfiction Genres** provides guidelines for adapting the conference for use with students who are writing in nonfiction genres.

- A **Sources** section appears when applicable that shares the inspiration for the conference and provides references to the professional literature.

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**FOLLOW-UP**

- Later on in the year, when your class is studying a genre other than narrative, angle the conference toward that genre. For example, if the class is studying feature articles, tell students they can ask themselves, “Is there something I want to teach students about in this category, activities and hobbies?” If the class is studying op-ed, students can ask, “Do I have opinions about something in this category? What I feel passionate about?” If the class is studying personal essay, students can ask, “Do I have any ideas about something in this category, memories?”

- In a unit of study in which students choose the genre, tell students that they can ask themselves this all-inclusive set of questions: “Do I have a story in this category? Something I want to teach readers about? An opinion? Or an idea?” Angling the conference in this way helps students find ideas for writing in numerous genres.

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**SOURCES**

I learned this strategy from Randy Barney, who discusses giving kids a list of topics to write about in *Time for Meaning* (1999).

I developed many of the conferences in this book by learning from many educators. Lucy Calkins has written extensively about writer’s notebooks in *The Art of Teaching Writing* (1996), *Making the Link* (with Debra Harkaway, 1993), and *Guides to Study for Teaching Writing Grades 3-6* (with colleagues, 2006). Randy Barney’s *Time for Meaning* (1999)—which inspired *Conference 1*—describes teaching middle and high school students to use notebooks as a rehearsal tool. Don Murray’s *Writing to Learn* (2006), Ralph Fletcher’s *Breathing Out* (1996), Anne Briden’s *Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer’s Notebook* (2000), Judy Davis and Sharon Hilts's *The No-Nonsense Guide to Teaching Writing* (2003), and Ralph Fletcher and John Nuttall’s *Lessons for the Writer’s Notebook* (2003) are other invaluable resources.