

Asking the Right Questions

Conferences are a time to help students make connections not corrections. Good conference questions should help teach the writer and not the writing. In other words, there's an art to asking the right kinds of questions. When looking over drafts, discussing ideas, asking about drawings, or guiding students to connect to the teaching for the day, we want to ensure they comprehend not only the content of stories they read, but the craft decisions the writers of those stories make.

In the Schoolwide Writing Fundamentals Program units of study, we ask questions that encourage students to connect the choices made by the writers of the literature they read to the challenges and choices they face (and conquer) when they write. Conferencing reinforces for students that writing is a recursive process, and it affords teachers the opportunity to question students individually about their thinking. By encouraging students to articulate the reasons behind their choices, good conference questions help students solidify their understanding and their ability to see themselves as writers actively living a writer's life.

Setting the Tone with Conference Questions

Questions that Invite Students to Set the Agenda:

- How's it going?
- What work are you doing today/this period as a writer?
- What do you need help with today?

Questions that Nudge Students to Say More:

- Could you say more about that?
- What do you mean by...?
- Could you explain what you are thinking about here?

Questions that Grow out of Our Knowledge of What Good Writers Do

- Have you planned out your draft?
- What's the focus of your piece?
- What kinds of illustrations will you add?

Questions about Students' Writing Strategies

- How are you going to do this work?
- What strategies are you going to use to do this work?
- How are you planning to get started with your draft?

Questions about a Student's Decisions

- Why did you pick these places to [add-on]?
- Why did you decide to [structure your draft this way]?
- Why did you [repeat this line several times]?

Questions that Come from What We Already Know about Students

- Have you done some of the [revision work] you tried in your last piece?
- How did you [pick the idea for your draft] this time?

Questions that Sustain Student Work

- What will you work on tomorrow?
Follow-up for the next conference:
Let's look at what you told me you would be working on the last time we talked.
- What strategy or strategies will you practice in your next writing piece?
Follow-up for the next conference:
Let's look at the piece where you used that strategy you told me you wanted to try the last time we talked. How did that go?
- What do you think you need/want to work on more? Why?
Follow-up for the next conference:
Does your piece feel finished to you now? Would you like to give your piece to a reader? Will they think it feels finished?

Matching Questions to Teaching Concepts

Mini-lesson: Using a book that features a refrain or repeating line to teach list/repeating line structure

- **Conference Questions:**

Is your piece structured in a way that you could imagine adding a repeating line? What effect do you think using a repeating line structure will have on your readers?

What line do you want your readers to hear again and again?

Mini-lesson: Using a book with strong sensory images to add imagery to your writing

- **Conference Questions:**

What strong images did you use in your piece?

Can you reread your writing and find a place to create a strong image?

Close your eyes and imagine you are in that place. What do you see? What sounds do you hear? What can you feel with your hands? What do you smell? What do you feel in your heart?

Mini-lesson: Writing from a new perspective

- **Conference Questions:**

In this entry you wrote about your [soccer game]?

How would the entry be different if it were written from the point of view of [a fan, the coach, or even the soccer ball]?

How could trying a new perspective add to the piece of writing you are working on?

For more information about Schoolwide's Writing Fundamentals Program for K-1, 2-3, and 4-5 grade levels, visit [Schoolwide Online](#).