

Conferencing

Individual student-instructor conferences are an excellent opportunity for students to ask questions, clarify assignment guidelines and written feedback, and discuss challenges they've encountered on specific assignments or in class more generally. At the same time, conferences enable you to provide **formative feedback**, assess student comprehension, identify and focus on a high-impact area for intervention, help students generate or deepen ideas, and get to know and reflect on your students' individual strengths, challenges, and processes.

During a conference, your job is to coach students toward self-improvement and **performances of understanding**: that is, to provide students the tools to develop on their own as learners in your field. It can be tempting to offer solutions that are easily apparent to you, but students will learn more deeply for transfer if you ask strategic questions that facilitate their own self-discovery.

Some techniques for conducting effective student-instructor conferences:

Before the conference:

- Establish the purpose of the conference: is it a mid-semester check-in? A thesis statement conference meant to **scaffold** a research paper? A chance to elaborate on written feedback?
- Build a stable of perennially useful conference questions, such as: “explain the purpose of this assignment; tell me your main idea; what do you still not know; how do you intend to find out; what is this sentence/paragraph/section doing in relation to the whole; I’m not sure I understand what you mean here, but it seems important, so can you explain it to me; I understand both of these points but I don’t see their connection, so can you explain it to me; I understand what you’re saying but I don’t understand why you’re saying it, so can you explain how this connects to your main argument?”

During the conference:

- Ask students to start by naming their goals. Write these down so they can be returned to.
- If you’ll be reading student work in the conference, provide a strategic writing prompt students should complete simultaneously.
- Focus on higher-order concerns, such as organization and argument, and save lower-order concerns, such as grammatical mistakes that don’t impede understanding, for the end or another conference.
- When addressing grammar, focus on one or two paragraphs, then ask students to continue on their own after the conference.
- Document the conference: ask students to take notes or chart their ideas while they talk. Ask students to explain their notes at the end as a **performance of understanding**.
- Ask students to end the conference by identifying their next steps. Encourage them to write these down and make actual plans toward their accomplishment.

References

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

“Conducting Student-Teacher Conferences.” University of Wisconsin-Madison. 2015. Digital.

See also

Formative and Summative Feedback

Performances of Understanding

Responding to Student Writing