

Conferring with Young Writers

What to Do When You
Don't Know What to Do

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INTRODUCTION

You know the deep, reflective thinking we try to have with our colleagues during five minutes of kid-free time as we walk back from the copy machine and see another adult for the first time that day? That is where our journey started. We happened to see each other on a day when writing workshop was not going well in either of our classrooms. The conversation began.

Jen: Ugh . . . Writing time was a mess in first grade today!

Kristin: (*nodding*) I know. It isn't any easier in third grade!

In unison: What the heck are we going to do??

We knew we couldn't continue the way things were going and knew we needed to spend our time more wisely.

What *were* we going to do? We needed a plan. We decided to meet once every few weeks during our planning time, after school, or whenever we passed each other in the hall to start brainstorming what was going well and what we needed to work on. We also talked a lot on the phone after our kids were in bed that first year, trying to hash out ideas. We started by writing down our questions and concerns around writing in our classrooms. Here are some of them:

- What is essential to teaching kids about writing?

- Are there specific foundational strategies I should be teaching? What are they?
- When I teach genre units of study, why can't kids transfer what they learn and know about writing from one unit to another?
- We know anchor charts are a valuable resource for helping kids retain and grow thinking as we progress through a writing unit, but why can't the students retain the writing strategies they learn in a unit once the chart comes down? In conferences, my suggestions seem more to do with whatever genre kids are writing about that day. Should I instead have clear, comprehensive goals that apply to all genres?
- If I don't feel like I am a good writer myself, how can I be sure about what I should teach the writers in my classroom?
- What should conversations with my kids about their writing sound like?

As we talked over the course of that year, we realized that maybe we weren't the only teachers with a lot of unanswered questions. When the two of us were in school, the message was that either you are a good writer or you are not, and we both felt like we fell into the "not" category. Sure, we had written our share of five-paragraph essays, book reviews, and outlines, but we had never felt like we were *writers*. We hadn't learned much about the qualities of good writing, such as elaboration, voice, and structure. Our teachers hadn't taught us how to look at a great piece of writing and break it down into the qualities and craft that could show us why we loved the writing. We hadn't been taught to ask questions like these:

"What kind of lead did the author use to get me so engaged right from the beginning?"

"What strategies of elaboration does this writer use to make me feel like I am right in the story?"

"How do writers come up with ideas for things to write about?"

The qualities of writing are many and can vary (Routman 2005; Culham 2005; Graves and Kittle 2005; Calkins 2013), but we have found that what matters most for us in crafting writing are structure, conventions, focus, voice, and elaboration.

These qualities of good writing are used in any genre of writing and provide clear goals for instruction.

Our college teaching courses taught us about the pedagogy of teaching, reading theory, and how to teach children to read, but not much was included about how to teach young children to be writers. It was not until people like Georgia Heard and Lucy Calkins entered our lives to say, “You can be a writer and here is how” that we realized good writing is simply a matter of exposure and learning how writers go about crafting writing. Anyone can be a good writer with the proper training.

When we looked at the work going on in our classrooms and the questions we had, we also realized that many of our concerns were focused on what to teach writers to help them grow. This got us thinking that the biggest and most powerful change we could make could be in our *conferring time* with writers. This is the time when we get kids alone or in strategy groups and delve into their writing. We take the words of Lucy Calkins to heart when she says,

To an outside observer, I suspect that conferring with young writers looks like No Big Deal. But in the classrooms of some teachers, children grow in leaps and bounds, while in the classrooms of other teachers, children make only modest gains. I am utterly convinced that the difference has everything to do with the teacher’s abilities to confer. If a teacher can listen to a writer talk about her writing, and then can skim what the child has done so far and intervene in ways that lift the level of not only the piece of writing but of the child’s work on future pieces, that teacher’s conferences are a Very Big Deal. That teacher’s children will learn to write in powerful ways. (Calkins, Hartman, and White 2005, 3–4)

Conferring is a time to differentiate our instruction to meet a child’s particular needs. Instead of relying on the child to actually listen during a whole-group lesson and understand it, we can say to that child, “Here is what is working for you. Let me show you something that will make it even better.” There is less room for confusion or error while conferring; there are no worries that the child might think we are teaching to the friend sitting next to him on the rug. The child gets that the work to be done, the lesson to be learned, is his and his alone. This is

where specific and powerful teaching and learning occur. So we decided that if we could change the way we confer with young writers, we could answer a lot of our questions and help our writers grow.

As we taught our students and continued to talk with each other between classes, these questions and concerns swirled and grew in our minds. So, we decided to begin a journey. A journey toward answering our questions and quelling our concerns. A journey to figure out what the heck to do. A journey to take the writing process and qualities of good writing and make them transparent so that every teacher, both novice and expert, can feel successful when teaching writing, especially when it comes to conferring. Our goal was to make these strategies transparent and attainable for our students as well, so that young writers would be able to articulate the writing strategies that helped them grow and become better writers. We intentionally use the term *strategies* because it means “a plan, method, or series of maneuvers or stratagems for obtaining a specific goal or result,” which is what we are trying to do. To put a focus on the writing skills that really matter. To ensure that our conferring is less random and more thoughtful and purposeful as we help young writers move forward. We want our teaching to be less caught up in genre and show teachers and kids how most writing strategies can be used, just like most reading strategies can be, no matter what genre you are writing or reading. We want to take away the belief that you are either good at writing or you are not. We want to help teachers develop “writers” in their classrooms and not just “kids who can write.” There is a difference.

As you read, you will also see three core beliefs about writing embedded in everything we do:

1. All children can learn.
2. Children develop differently.
3. We have a responsibility as educators to constantly grow, both professionally and personally.

These core beliefs ultimately drive every decision we make when it comes to writing in our classrooms. The ideas we share in this book will all wrap themselves around those beliefs.

This book began with trying to answer the question, “How can we spend our writing time more effectively with kids?” We believe it is through powerful conferring. This book is a culmination of our work and thinking on how to confer effectively and powerfully with young children about their writing.

WE DIDN'T SAY THIS WOULD BE EASY

One day Kristin walked into a colleague's room and found her excited to share a “cute” writing chart she had found on Pinterest. Kristin, sensing her excitement, went right over to read the chart and exclaimed, “Oh, you're trying out Ruth Culham's work around six traits. Great stuff.”

“Wait, who is Ruth Culham?” the teacher questioned. “This is from Pinterest from [so-and-so's] board!” What the teacher did not realize was that “so-and-so” had taken Ruth's work and moved the words around in a different order. Because Kristin's colleague had not read Ruth's books, she did not realize that there was actual research, the part that really matters, behind the chart. As a good friend always reminded us, “Those who do the most work, do the most learning.” Kristin's colleague, unfortunately, hadn't done the work. This story illustrates a trend we see education gravitating toward. In a Pinterest and Teachers Pay Teachers world we don't want to lose sight of what each of us, as educators, brings to the table. Nor do we want to forget the importance of understanding the research behind the instructional decisions we make every day. Don't get us wrong, we love all the online tools that are right at our fingertips. But a cute worksheet with special font is never going to replace the need for a teacher to coach his or her students with research-based instruction that works. We agree with Ann Marie Corgill when she says in her wonderful book *Of Primary Importance*, “I believe so much of what's happening in education today, so much of what's being published, is giving teachers permission not to think anymore. It is my hope and my sincere request that you think of this book as a friend standing by to cheer you on in your classroom. Use it as a resource . . . Be your own teacher of children” (2008, 3).

We are starting to notice this more and more in our society, where information is a click away and the new teaching mentality is, “Why work so hard on it myself when I know someone out there already did it?” We get the sense of being overwhelmed that comes with teaching; we know there is never enough time to do all we want to do. We both work full-time and have young children. No one wants a quick fix more than we do some days. Our concern is that research-based

instruction is being replaced by “quick-click” instruction and is enabling teachers to teach without knowing the what or why behind what they are doing. Teachers need a plan, a direction, and a better way to successfully teach children than blindly copying something that leads to a lack of understanding for the teacher and the students.

So, to the tech-savvy teachers of the world we say, “Way to go.” We are striving to use as many online tools as we can, too, but the cute fonts and worksheets are a tool, *not* a curriculum. Technology and chevron borders cannot drive instruction; quick clicks should not become a curriculum. Teachers need to be creators of the work they do every day with students, and doing it with grit is how they become their very best. No one can become a better tennis player by watching videos on YouTube. You have to get out and play. You have to experience the challenges and mistakes that come with the game. Each game will be different based on the opponent and what they bring. We would argue the same is true for teaching and, specifically, conferring during writing. You have to be in it, really in it, every day, trying to learn from the mistakes and challenges that come with conferring to truly be on your game. There is no Pinterest board or Teacher Pay Teachers account that can take the place of that experience.

As we have struggled through our journey, we have learned a lot through our mistakes and challenges. When we were new teachers we often felt like we were showing our commitment by how late we stayed at school every night or how cute our classrooms looked. As we grew professionally and our thinking shifted, we realized that the important work we do at school happens when we are face-to-face with kids. The organizing and planning outside the classroom allows us to be focused and productive, but the heart of what we do can happen only with kids in the room. We have learned that what we say (or what we are smart enough not to say) in a five-minute conference or during a quick strategy group can have a huge impact on our writers.

We have taught writing with grit over the past few years. We have taken the time and energy to figure out how to do it better than we did the day before. We won't be luring you or your students in with cute fonts but we will share everything that has worked for us. If you have ever avoided teaching writing because you were afraid that you didn't know what you were doing, this book is for you. If you have ever looked at a child's writing and felt totally and utterly lost, this book is for you. If you feel comfortable conferring only when you talk about capitals

INTRODUCTION

and periods, this book is for you. We don't pretend to have it all figured out, but we do know that writers are not born; writing is a learned skill. We believe that it is possible to sit down with writers and confer successfully when we are aware of the bigger goals we want our writers to achieve. We hope that this book will make you feel the same.

We are hoping that by the end of this journey we will have formed a community of educators not only invested in teaching children how to think and work through writing projects, but also writing ourselves, for this is the only way we will *truly* know how to teach writers. In *The Book Whisperer*, Donalyn Miller tells us, "The reality is that you cannot inspire others to do what you are not inspired to do yourself" (2009, 118). So we say to you, just as it was said to us, "Of course you are a writer and teacher of writing—here's how!"

Now, let's begin!