2 Shapes and Purposes of the Conference

When asked to describe a typical conference, writing lab tutors and teachers who spend most of their time working one-to-one with students can't offer easy answers. Instead, it's likely that they will describe typical characteristics of conferences: they are exhausting, the level of concentration is high, the intensity of the give-and-take can fry one's brain. Sometimes a conference ambles down several paths before finding a direction; at other times, it's difficult to define what *was* accomplished in all that talk. But whatever the direction, degree of clarity, or level of concentration, conferences are not repetitious—and it's hard to decide what might be "typical." Exact similarity isn't possible because writers are not alike. Even the same writer at different times, with different assignments, has different concerns. This doesn't imply that chaos reigns when two people meet to talk about writing. What gives shape and structure to these conversations are the goals that drive the conference forward and the strategies used to get there.

This chapter, then, is an overview, offering different perspectives on the goals, types, elements, and formats of conferences. In later chapters we will look at general plans (see chapter 3) and specific strategies (see chapter 5) to help students learn composing, revising, and editing skills, but here we are concerned neither with strategies nor with specific content but with a broader view of the goals of conferences and how to achieve them. Keeping such goals in mind is necessary because without a larger frame of reference, a conference can dissolve into a series of somewhat random responses to a student's paper. Instructors without goals in mind are especially prone to discussing whatever is most observably wrong with a paper simply because it swims into view so quickly. For undergraduates being trained as tutors, too, it is all too easy at first to plunge into the correction of spelling errors, even with a first draft.

One way to determine goals is to consider the following questions: What is the teacher's purpose—or role? What moves the conference forward, and where is it headed? What type of conference is it that the teacher and student are involved in? Is it diagnostic? Evaluative? And, because a conference proceeds through stages, what happens during

the beginning, middle, and end of a conference? Such a lengthy list of considerations indicates how much is going on in a conference in addition to what is being said.

Goals of a Conference

Helping Writers Become Independent

The primary goal of a writing conference, like any other instructional method, is to make the student a skilled, knowledgeable practitioner of the field. The teacher's goal here is to work him- or herself out of a job, that is, to make the student independent. Jerome Bruner explains: "Instruction is a provisional state that has as its object to make the learner or problem solver self-sufficient. . . . The tutor must correct the learner in a fashion that eventually makes it possible for the learner to take over the corrective function himself. Otherwise, the result of instruction is to create a form of mastery that is contingent upon the perpetual presence of a teacher."[1]

We all know how passive students can be, waiting for us to tell them not just what to write about, how many pages to fill, and "what is wrong" with a paper, but also what to do to improve it. To make writers self-sufficient, able to function on their own, we have to shift the burden to them, not an easy task for students conditioned to wait for a higher authority to pass judgment on what they should do. Typically, such a student is bereft of suggestions when asked a standard opening question in a writing lab tutorial, "How can I help you?" "My teacher doesn't like my paper" is the usual reply before the student lapses into silence, waiting for the tutor to specify what must be done about this. To break the potentially unending loop of writing and waiting for directions from a teacher or tutor, such students need to learn that it is their job to ask and answer their own questions. Leading students to self-sufficiency is a difficult task that can be handled in several ways. Some teachers shift immediate and total control to the student; others choose to proceed with a stronger guiding hand, controlling the conference until students learn how to acquire independence.

At one end of this spectrum, where students are completely in charge of their own writing, is the approach described by Archibald MacLeish for "creative writing" courses devoted to the art of writing:

> The student writes. The teacher reads. And the object of the teacher's reading is to learn if he can how closely the knowing of the words approximates the knowing of their writer. It may be less. It may be far, far more, for such is the nature of the struggle

between a writer and the obdurate material of words in which he works. But whether less or more, the only question the man who undertakes to teach can ask is the question of the adequacy of the writing to its own intent. As a writer himself he may call it "good" or "bad." As a man he may have his human opinion of the mind which conceived it. But as a teacher of writing it is not his task to tell his students what they should try to write or to judge their work by the standards he would apply to his own or his betters'.[2]

Still leaving the ball in the student's court, Donald Murray describes his role as a teacher of writing in somewhat similar terms: "I'm really teaching my students to react to their own work in such a way that they write increasingly effective drafts. They write; they read what they've written; they talk to me about what they've read and what the reading has told them they should do."[3] Murray's approach to helping students become independent writers (illustrated in an excerpt from one of his conferences included in appendix A at the back of this book) is achieved in part by means of a set of questions to use at the beginning of a writing conference, questions designed to place the responsibility for analyzing and evaluating writing in the student's lap:

What did you learn from this piece of writing?

What do you intend to do in the next draft?

What surprised you in the draft?

Where is the piece of writing taking you?

What do you like best in the piece of writing?

What questions do you have of me?

In such a conference the writer leads and the teacher follows. "Action in conferences is redefined as intelligent *reaction*," says Donald Graves.[4] Graves lists symptoms of teachers who act rather than react: they talk more than the writer does, they ignore where the writer is in a draft, they meddle with the writer's topic, they teach skills too early in a conference, they ask questions they know the writer can't answer, and they supply words and phrases for the writer to use.

The last symptom on Graves's list is particularly evident in a conference where the teacher has forgotten the goal of helping the writer become independent. In such a conference, when the writer and teacher are concerned with a particular piece of writing, it is dangerously easy for the instructor to wade in and begin revising. The paper is there on the table while options are being discussed. If the writer

falters and cannot see how to use the teacher's suggestions, possibilities will occur to the teacher for ways to rewrite a sentence or restructure a paragraph. It is tempting to share the solution the instructor has in mind, composing specific sentences for the writer or offering specific solutions that encroach on the writer's independence. Such a conversation can sound like excerpt 4 in appendix A, in which Tim proceeds to tell the student what must be done and allows the student only minimal opportunities to enter the conversation.

What is forgotten in conferences where instructors do little beyond issuing marching orders (do this, do that) is the advice offered by Lester Fisher and Donald Murray: "The teacher must remember his role and not over-teach. It is not his responsibility to correct a paper line by line, to rewrite it until it is his own writing. It is the student's responsibility to improve the paper and the teacher's responsibility to make a few suggestions which may help the student improve."[5] Important advice, but difficult to follow. Writing teachers are inclined to be service-oriented, that is, people who find it rewarding to offer help in active ways, and they also enjoy tinkering with prose. Given both propensities, the dangers of robbing students of the initiative are great. Says one teacher of her work with young children, "I find the most difficult part is resisting the adult temptation to tell a child what to do or at least make leading suggestions. With practice I now feel more confident about when to question and when to leave a problem with the child."[6] A teacher who regularly confers with young children about their writing records such a session in which she does battle with her urge to provide answers:

Steven Learns to Insert Sentences

Steven handed me his story. "For publishing," he said.

"Have you read it to a friend?" I asked.

"Yes, but he's dopey. He says it's muddled up."

"Read it to me," I said . . . It confused me too. In fact I only realised it was about a car race when he announced that "Number 10 won." So I asked him to tell me the story without looking at the words.

"Well, they were all lined up at the edge of the road—"

"Wait," I said. "Where is that part in the story?"

Irritated, he looked, then said, "I haven't wrote that yet."

"Well, where would you write it so the reader knows your story is about a car race?"

He picked up his pencil and wrote the sentence—at the end! Into my impatient mind flashed the uncharitable thought, "No, dimwit, write it at the beginning." But I managed to stay silent . . . When he finished, I asked him to read it back.

When he did so he said, "That's not right." Then reluctantly, "That sentence doesn't make sense there."

"Do you know what you can do about it?"
"I could write it up there"—pointing to the top of the page.
"M-m-m, but I don't have enough room."
"What else could you do?" I asked, dying to tell him.
After what seemed an age, "I could draw a line to there."
He drew a line from the sentence to the top of the page and for good measure wrote, "PUT HERE."[7]

While the goal of all writing teachers is to help writers become self-sufficient, not all advocates of the conference approach see themselves as "reactors" rather than "actors." In Roger Garrison's method of teaching writing by means of conferences (illustrated in an excerpt from one of his conferences in appendix A), teachers initially serve as editors, offering their experience and skills to writers somewhat like the master in a master-apprentice relationship. Teachers using Garrison's method usually meet in brief (three- to five-minute) conferences where the focus is on a single problem that the teacher and student have identified as important. Garrison's hierarchy of operational skills or concerns begins with content, checking for adequate ideas and information. If there is no problem here, the teacher moves down to the second category, tone. Here the teacher-as-editor looks for purpose, persona, and audience. If the tone displays no need of immediate attention, the teacher moves on to check organization, then style (including diction and syntax), and finally mechanics (grammar and punctuation). Having read the paper and talked with the student, the teacher first diagnoses the major problem that needs attention and then offers suggestions for what can be done to solve it. The teacher's guidance is more overt here than in conferences such as Murray's, which proceed by questions for students to answer.

Using Garrison's approach as his framework, Thomas Carnicelli defines six tasks of the conference teacher:[8]

to read the paper carefully

to offer encouragement

to ask the right questions that get the student actively involved

to evaluate the paper

to make specific suggestions for revision

to listen to the student

While the teacher acts as an editor, evaluating and suggesting revisions, the student still has an active role in this type of conference. Thomas Reigstad and Donald McAndrew, who also use Garrison's structure for the conference, remind us that the writer, not the tutor or teacher, still does the actual revising. The instructor is viewed

here as a trained assistant who suggests strategies for the writer to experiment with, but the writer is the one who applies those strategies to the writing. The teacher's job is to monitor and guide. Reigstad and McAndrew follow Garrison's hierarchy, structuring the conference so that "higher order concerns" of thesis or focus, appropriate voice or tone, organization, and development take precedence over "lower order concerns" of sentence structure, punctuation, usage, and spelling.[9]

Instructors who choose to lead students toward self-sufficiency by serving as editors need not follow Garrison's hierarchy. They can begin with the rhetorical components of subject, purpose, and audience, helping students identify and formulate topics they are working on, the purpose for which the paper is being written, and the audience to whom it is addressed. Once these are clearly articulated in the writer's mind, in notes, or in the draft of the paper under consideration, the instructor can move on to other rhetorical matters such as organization, clarity, and coherence. When these do not need to be discussed, the instructor and student can move on to stylistic concerns such as conciseness and word choice, and finally to editing concerns such as grammatical correctness and spelling.

Instructors who work from any of these sets of priorities have as their goal helping the writer achieve competence in specific skills, skills observable in the written product. Instructors can also focus their attention on processes writers are using as they write. Goals are then defined from a slightly different vantage point, to help the student become a competent planner, transcriber, and reviser, and discussion in the conference is more likely to be concerned with planning or inventing strategies, methods for revising, and so on. This doesn't eliminate or bypass attention to the particular paper the writer is concerned with, but writing or revising that paper is not the focus of discussion. As Stephen North says, in defining the role of the writing center, "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing."[10] When a student appears in a writing lab after having gotten a graded paper back, the instructor's purpose is to help that student prepare for further writing.

Motivating Writers

While guiding writers toward independence, instructors can also pursue another goal, helping their students want to become good writers who care about their own writing. Students who come to realize that writing is important will—we fervently hope—strive for their own improvement rather than for mere grade satisfaction. In the classroom,

teachers can create a climate where writing is seen as important and where good writing can be illustrated and discussed. But this process becomes personalized for students only in the conference, where their own strengths are discussed and where they can get immediate feedback on their improvement. Reinforcement and positive comments offered in the conference are also effective because they are delivered in person and offered in greater detail. Including some emphasis on the good points of a paper keeps students from focusing only on its negative qualities, a habit conditioned by years of getting papers back with what Judith Kollman calls "gotchas" running down the margins of their papers.[11] Even when weaknesses are pointed out in a conference, comments tend to be less harsh, more humanized, when extended in a conversation between people rather than transmitted in red on paper.

When a writer can meet in conferences with an instructor who demonstrates that he or she cares about the student's writing, the student is likely to agonize a bit longer over the next draft before bringing it to the reader. Instructors who recognize this sometimes have to put aside attempts to make progress with specific writing skills so that they can concentrate on providing the student with some motivation to continue.

Attending to the Writer's Concerns

Whether we invite the student to answer our questions (e.g., What problems did you have? Where are you going next?) or to attend to our hierarchy of concerns (e.g., subject, purpose, audience), we have to realize that writers also come to sessions seeking help, feedback, answers to questions, or even reassurance—matters that are on their mental agenda and therefore require attention. We cannot proceed in one direction when the student is only waiting for a lull in order to turn the conversation down a different path. Our success in achieving our goals is likely to increase in direct proportion to our ability to recognize the student's goals. (See chapter 3 for a discussion of how to listen actively to what students try to tell us.) The problem is that teachers who steep themselves in all the current discussion of what constitutes good writing and what defines a good writer will come to the conference primed and ready to discuss composing strategies, cohesion, audience awareness, or whatever else teachers value. Yet nowhere in our literature have we polled student writers about what they value, what constitutes—in their terms—"good writing." Some students come to conferences seeking ways to get a better match between the sentences on the page and the not yet clearly articulated

thoughts in their minds; they are unhappy because "it doesn't say what I wanted it to say." Other goals among student writers are producing a piece of prose that is "different" or "interesting" or producing a paper that "flows." If we deal only with what's available on the page, we won't realize these problems exist in the student's mind. Qualities such as "being different" or "interesting" might not rank as high on our priority list as clarity, coherence, or adequate development, but when students desperately want such qualities in their writing (and the intensity of their desires is sometimes surprising), their concerns must be attended to. If they are not, students grow ever more cynical and more likely to view "good writing" as merely a matter of giving teachers what they want.

We should also confront the reality that another major goal for students is completing the writing assignment. From our perspective we see that writing skills must be developed over a semester or through a series of exposures to writing exercises, but students tend to be a bit more shortsighted, to see a specific assignment as a unique event, a hurdle to get over. At some point or other, if the conference discussion does not seem applicable to the paper due next Wednesday, students are likely to feel frustrated, confused, or uneasy, and to tune us out. When this happens, they stop participating in the conversation, waiting for an opportunity to ask, "But how should I write the conclusion for the paper?" or "How many pages should it be?" For a teacher dedicated to weaning students to independence, it will seem like total defeat to capitulate to such requests. But such questions can also be an invitation to broach the subject of the writer's need to make such decisions. A somewhat different approach to this, used particularly by writing lab tutors, is known as "doing a quick and dirty" in order to secure the writer's willingness to return to more important problems. That is, if the highest priority on the student's agenda is "Does this paper have any comma splices? My teacher takes off a letter grade for comma splices," the tutor may choose first to focus only on comma splices in the hope that the student, having cleared that concern from the list and having seen that he or she is in the company of someone who can really help, will be ready to move on to more important problems.

Meshing teacher goals with student goals is indeed delicate, especially when the student may be working from a storehouse of advice and instruction from previous teachers. Too many students' heads are a welter of rigid rules and confused or misperceived notions, beguiling their attention away from more important matters and toward rules they think they remember: "Don't use 'I'"; "Don't start sen-

tences with 'but' or 'because' ''; "Write with a lot of adjectives," and so on.[12] It is difficult indeed to accomplish our purposes when students are too tightly focused on inappropriate ones. But we have achieved a great deal when we finally mesh our goals with those of our students.

The Roles of the Teacher

As Coach

When we ask what hat a teacher wears in a conference, we soon discover that teachers and tutors have a whole wardrobe of hats to put on, and that they may need to change hats every few minutes. From one viewpoint, the teacher or tutor is a coach helping writers develop their own skills. The crucial distinction here is that the teacher is *not* the player but the person who stands at the sidelines watching and helping—not stepping in to make the field goal or sink the putt when the player is in trouble. Thus, typical comments of a teacher-as-coach might be:

> "You've done a good job of using specific details in this first paragraph. Can you do the same thing again in your second and third paragraphs?"

> "That sentence is hard for me to read because it's so long. I need some pause markers to help me see the different parts. Punctuation would help. Where could you add some punctuation?"

> "Last time we talked about the need for connecting words between sentences. Try to use the same techniques with this paragraph."

> "I agree. Writing a conclusion to a description can be very difficult. What possibilities have you thought of so far? Even if they aren't the greatest, let's use what you've got as starters."

Like coaches in other fields, instructors use these comments to help writers identify what they have to watch out for, what they have to work harder on, what has been working well for them, and what to build on. Beginning teachers and student tutors have perhaps the greatest difficulty with this role because it is so easy for them to forget that they are not wearing the writer's hat.

As Commentator

Elsewhere I have also described other roles of the conference teacher as commentator and counselor.[13] The commentator's role, like that of

the "background" person in sportscasting, is to give a larger perspective on what's going on. In the seemingly amorphous setting of the conference, where all the student may be aware of is that there are two people talking, students can all too easily lose perspective. The teacher-as-commentator needs to help the student see how and when the discussion is moving forward and, in connecting to larger perspectives, how all of it is related to the student's growth or improvement in writing skills. At some point in a conference, a teacher-as-commentator might say to the student, "Now you've found the subject you really wanted to write about. Good job! The first draft was a great help in accomplishing that because now you are ready to move forward. You've learned something important about what first drafts can accomplish."

From another perspective, the teacher-as-commentator can help a student see what is really happening. For example, a student who has finally discovered the focus or topic of a paper can all too easily sink into feelings of defeat and announce, "But I don't know how I'd organize that kind of paper." What this student doesn't see is that he or she is not mired in quicksand but instead progressing to the next level of concern, organization. The teacher-as-commentator also draws on past experience and current knowledge to offer the kind of commentary that assures students that they are not oddballs, misfits, or inadequate writers when they experience problems. When students confess that they "just can't get it right the first time," we can assure them that they are merely experiencing the usual messiness of drafting and revising.

As Counselor

Like other counselors, teachers in writing conferences also look at the whole person, not merely the perpetrator of fragments or rambling paragraphs. To move beyond the observable errors on the page, it's necessary to inquire into the writer's previous experience, prior learning, motivation, outside problems, attitudes, and composing processes in order to form an adequate picture of how to proceed. We can see the teacher-as-counselor at work even in the following brief exchange, recorded by David Taylor, between tutor and student in a writing lab:[14]

> *Student:* I'm gonna flunk English 100. The teacher gives me an F on a paper and tells me to write it again. I write it again and get another F.
>
> *Teacher:* You really seem frustrated. You turn in a paper and you are simply told to write it again.
>
> *Student:* I don't mind writing it again. It's not knowing what he wants.

In this interchange, the tutor, using the counseling technique Taylor calls "paraphrasing" or restating what the student has just said (14), encourages the student to probe a bit deeper into what is causing the problem. Sometimes it takes a bit more "reflecting" or restating before the problem emerges so that the teacher or tutor can deal with it. In another writing lab conversation the student reveals a difficulty that might have continued to plague her if she hadn't finally aired her problem to me:

Instructor: You don't seem to have gotten very far on your paper yet. What kind of problems are you having with it?

Student: Well, I . . . you see . . . It's a difficult assignment. I spent some time with it yesterday . . .

Instructor: Have you gotten anything on paper yet that we can start with?

Student: No, I tossed everything.

Instructor: You didn't like any part of what you had written?

Student: No, it just didn't work.

Instructor: Could you tell me what you didn't like or what caused you to throw everything out?

Student: I didn't throw much out because I couldn't get going. That's the problem. It's that first introductory part. I'll be all right as soon as I get past that. I need help with an introduction.

Instructor: Why was the introduction so difficult? Your last paper started with that great story about how you got lost driving through New Mexico.

Student: Sure, I finally came up with that, and I was OK. I know you have to start with something that will catch the reader's interest. I had an English teacher a couple of years ago who said the opening sentences are the most important part of your paper. Without a knockout beginning, you lose the reader. It's so hard, but once I get past that first paragraph . . .

Instructor: Have you ever thought about writing your first paragraph later, after you've gotten the rest of the paper in shape? For some people, that's a big help. I usually just get anything down, just to get myself going, and I rework the opening later.

Student: Really? That sure would be a whole lot easier . . .

As counselors, we have to remember that we don't know until we ask—or spend some time in listening for—what might be derailing the student's efforts to write. Motivational problems ("I'm going to repair computers when I'm done with school, so why do I need to worry about spelling?"), difficulties with other school subjects, learning or physical disabilities that may have gone unheeded, or any of a number of other causes can stifle a writer's progress. Only in a conference can we consider the writer as a whole person.

As Listener

Equally important is the role of the listener. In "The Listening Eye: Reflections on the Writing Conference," Donald Murray describes the changes in what is being listened to as a paper progresses.[15] At first, in prewriting conferences, the teacher asks about students' lives and what they know. The teacher here is a friendly listener, interested in each student as an individual, a person who may have something to say. As student drafts develop, the teacher becomes a fellow writer who shares writing problems as the need occurs to focus, to shape, and to form a piece of writing. Finally, as meaning is found, the teacher becomes a reader more interested in the language of the paper. The teacher at this stage is listening closely to what the paper says. Throughout this sequence, Murray cautions, we must listen closely to hear what the student needs to know.

The changing roles of the teacher are described somewhat differently by Dan Kirby and Tom Liner in *Inside Out: Developmental Strategies for Teaching Writing,*[16] though they too stress the need to cast off certain roles as the writer develops. At the fluency stage, say Kirby and Liner, the writer needs attention, encouragement, and support. Responding at this stage means seeing potential, drawing the writer out, spotting future topics, learning more about the writer, and pointing to things that work in the writing. As the student gains confidence and gains a sense of personal voice, worrying less about getting words on paper, the teacher's role changes gradually to that of a supportive editor, one whose goal is to help writers express as powerfully and effectively as possible what they have to say. Advice is offered on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. With confident writers, the teacher's role is that of the critic, arguing fine points of diction, asking for a more consistent point of view, and challenging the writer to rework the piece.

As Diagnostician

Another role of the teacher, that of diagnostician, is particularly important in Garrison's approach, in which the teacher's role of editor is a defining characteristic in the conference Thomas Reigstad describes as "teacher-centered." This type of conference is characterized by the teacher's doing most of the talking and much of the work, reading drafts and issuing directives for specific revisions. The teacher's role is as expert, rule-giver, initiator, evaluator, interested reader, and partner in writing. In the following conference, recorded by David Taylor, the teacher begins with the student's concern and then does the work of diagnosing and defining the problem:

> *Instructor:* Ummm, this is quite pretty in places. I mean in a good way. Very gentle. How do you like it?
>
> *Michelle:* I don't know. I had a problem. At times it, well, it just doesn't, I don't know, didn't flow.
>
> *Instructor:* So you didn't think the sentences went together very well?
>
> *Michelle:* No, it's not that. It's hard to explain, but the words just weren't the right ones.
>
> *Instructor:* I see. Can you point to a spot where you had that problem? It's hard to, I know, but if—
>
> *Michelle:* (interrupting) Here where I say "happy, secure." (turns pages) "Aura of serenity." Those words just don't . . . I don't know (shakes her head).
>
> *Instructor:* I think I know what you mean. And we even have a phrase for it: "Show, don't tell." All those adjectives were trying to talk but just can't very well. Remember when we did the ladder of abstraction in class? A beautiful place—a hideaway—a hideaway in the Bahamas—a palm tree beach of white sands in the Bahamas? You just need to pick a "for instance" that will bring you down that ladder.[17]

In contrast to this kind of conference, in which the teacher leads, Reigstad offers two other models, the collaborative conference and the student-centered conference. In the collaborative conference the teacher moves in and out of the teacher-student relationship, drawing the student out, probing, asking questions, engaging in exploratory conversation, and leaving final decisions to the student. In the student-centered conference, as typified by Donald Murray's sessions, the student does most of the talking and most of the work. The student even

determines the direction of the conference, while the teacher listens and asks questions.

An inherent danger in the teacher-centered conference, as already mentioned, is the possibility that the teacher can unwittingly assume total control, wresting from the student all responsibility for what happens and closing off all avenues for student participation. (The ratio of teacher talk to student talk in such a conference is inordinately high.) When this happens, chances for students to improve their writing decrease dramatically. In a study of the relationship between the nature of teacher-student interactions in a selected group of conferences and the kinds of writing which resulted from the conferences, Suzanne Jacobs and Adela Karliner found that students need to have equal responsibility in selecting topics for discussion if any progress is to result. If students do some of the topic selection, explain Jacobs and Karliner, they are forced to generate their own thoughts on the subject, resulting in a significant change in the cognitive level of the revision as opposed to the mere patching of a rough draft.[18] The conclusion here is that students who sit passively in a conference are not likely to do a turnabout and actively engage in any substantive revision. Forced to sit still, they will continue to engage in the least possible motion or effort. But students new to the conference setting or students conditioned to surrender total control to teachers in the classroom may be hesitant to leap in and make judgments, introduce topics, and so on. Another role for the teacher then is that of an activator, helping these students back into the driver's seat—and back on the road to self-sufficiency.

Conference Tasks

On the way to improving students' writing, teachers have several different kinds of tasks to accomplish in conferences. They need to get to know their students, to do some diagnostic work, and to offer some instruction. Unlike writing lab tutors, classroom teachers may also have to do some evaluation. Some conferences are taken up with only one task, perhaps a long "getting-to-know-you" session; other conferences can include some diagnostic work and some instruction. Like the back and forth of writing, conference talk can also move forward with some instruction and then pause to go back to some additional diagnostic work. Later in the semester or year, evaluation can loom large, while getting-acquainted talk is limited to a few brief exchanges to reestablish friendly lines of communication.

Getting-Acquainted Time

Early conferences need to focus on getting acquainted, on breaking the ice so that future interaction is informal and comfortable. This is also a good time for learning students' interests and skills, information useful in helping students locate potential subjects for writing. During this time it is also important for teachers to establish their receptiveness to what students say, for, as Lester Fisher and Donald Murray remind us, most students don't believe that they have anything worth saying or, if they did, that anyone would listen.[19]

This getting-acquainted time is a time to talk as people interested in each other. Judith Kollman particularly values this because, as she explains, "Above all, the conference exists to communicate my interest in, and respect for, the individual human being with whom I am talking."[20] At the ends of conferences, as part of this interchange, Kollman often asks for criticism of the class and finds that she hears the most constructive criticism she has ever received. And an added benefit she notices is that her classroom is more relaxed and the students are less apprehensive about the teacher and more confident about the value of their own ideas.

Getting-to-know-you time includes some diagnostic work as well, because as teachers learn more about their students useful and important information can emerge. Is the student generally apprehensive about writing? Is the student's seemingly bland writing smoothing over some personal trauma? Could spelling errors be the result of reading problems? In some writing labs, other personal information is routinely gathered in questionnaires, on composing profiles, or in conversation.[21] In any conference, sympathetic listening is needed— and so is a light touch or bit of humor, which dissolves the invisible wall between teacher and student. Because this getting-acquainted time can be so enjoyable, some teachers and tutors cut it short with a guilty start, as if enjoyment and instruction were mutually exclusive. But it is hard to proceed with a successful conference without making human connections and without establishing the individuality of the person with whom we are sitting.

Diagnostic Time

When we first meet a student, we cannot proceed until we assess that student's needs or problems. In *The Writing Laboratory*, Joyce Steward and Mary Croft explain that for some students this diagnostic work in itself may be enough to direct the writer to appropriate self-improvement simply by revealing problems and clarifying acceptable

ways to deal with them.[22] For example, a student who thinks he or she is unable to write a particular paper may need to realize that the real problem is a failure to understand the assignment. All such a student needs is a clearer sense of what the task is. More usually, though, diagnostic work is not the solution, but merely preparation for moving forward, and at any moment in the conversation, given some new understanding of a writer's problem, either the writer or the teacher (or both) may need to stop and reconsider the initial diagnosis. What seemed, at first, to be a student's inability to generate more arguments for a paper may really be confusion about who its audience is. Or what appears to be a punctuation problem may be an inability to recognize sentence parts. In chapter 4 we will look more closely at such intricacies of diagnosis, but the zigzagging progress of the conference is particularly evident when either writer or reader realizes that one problem may be masking another, more basic one. And, as a writer progresses through a paper or a semester, new problems become evident and more diagnosis is needed. Though diagnosis comes up again and again, however, it is particularly appropriate near the beginning of a conference or series of conferences, to set the agenda.

Instructional Time

The major portion of any conference, of course, is devoted to some kind of instruction, though this is not always obvious to students. Writers working out answers to questions such as those posed by Donald Murray earlier in this chapter may be unaware of the instructional value of what they are doing. And some instructional time is spent, as Steward and Croft point out, in problem-solving tasks such as understanding the assignment, finding ideas, selecting information, narrowing a topic, finding methods of organizing, and so on (48).

Other instructional tasks focus on skills to be acquired. Spelling, sentence structure, punctuation, usage, coherence devices, paragraphing, and other topics are writing skills to be mastered in conferences either because the writer has not succeeded in learning these matters in class or from textbooks or because the teacher thinks it's better to learn such skills in the context of the paper being written. When teachers choose the conference as the place to work on such skills, their task is twofold. First, they have to help the student recognize the problem, and then they have to help the student acquire the particular skill needed to solve it. The first task may seem at odds with paper grading, for much of what is noted in the margins of a paper eliminates the student's need to recognize errors. The underlying

assumption of paper grading is that after students are shown their errors, they can check their handbooks, learn the rules, and cease forever to commit those errors. Future writing will show whether they have indeed mastered the skills. In conferences, however, we can proceed differently. We can help students learn to identify an error and then watch as they move through the rest of the text, checking for similar problems.

For some students, one conference is not enough to learn how to overcome errors resistant to quick instruction, errors such as fragments or verb tense endings. Therefore some conferences are devoted to ongoing instruction, a program or list of skills to work on that forms the agenda for as many meetings as the student needs. Writing labs, which offer a convenient facility for this kind of ongoing tutorial help, often provide it as a supplement to classroom instruction.

Evaluation Time

While evaluation in the classroom is primarily concerned with paper grading, Sarah W. Freedman's studies of the conference have led her to conclude that several types of evaluation occur during the conference: (1) teachers guide students to evaluate their own writing, (2) teachers and students evaluate the student's writing process as well as the written product, and (3) teachers give substantive, formative evaluation throughout the writing process as well as summative evaluation or grades once the product is complete.[23] Whether evaluation is offered during the course of the writing or when the paper is finished, there is a choice to make concerning whether to read the paper before meeting the student in the conference. Some teachers find great merit—and benefit—in doing the evaluation with the student present because the student gets a more immediate, fresh reader response: enjoyment, puzzled rereadings, and spontaneous comments. Whatever happens in this unrehearsed setting, writers have the opportunity to witness readers reading their prose. On the other hand, some teachers choose to read the paper beforehand so that they can offer the student the results of their reading as a prepared and considered response.

But whether or not comments are prepared in advance, the evaluation that replaces paper grading is not just an oral version of what would have been written on the page. As Nancy Sommers has observed, when we grade papers at home, it is harder to shift our focus from the paper in front of us (the product) to the process. Talking about strategies is easier in person. The result is different evaluative feedback, for as Sommers says, "What one has to say about the process is different from what one has to say about the product."[24] Product

evaluation, concludes Sommers, tends to focus on mechanical issues. In Winifred Harris's study of the grading habits of thirty-six high school English teachers, she found that 66 percent of the corrections and annotations made on themes were devoted to mechanics and usage. Teachers looked at sentence structure primarily in terms of technical correctness rather than looking for the rhetorical effectiveness of variety in structural elements or kinds of sentence patterns.[25] Oral comments can also slide into mere correcting of mechanics, but with writers sitting next to us it is easier to remember to respond to the whole piece of writing rather than to two comma splices.

Oral comments not only tend to move beyond matters of mechanical correctness, they also tend to be fuller, simply because we can say more than we can write in a given amount of time. The added time and the needs of a possibly perplexed student next to us also make us more likely to speak English (instead of reverting to the mystifying written code of "awk," "ww," or "punct") and to explain difficult rhetorical concepts in a human—and humane—way.

In "The Red Pen Revisited" Barbara Fassler points out that oral comments also let the student in on the evaluation process.[26] As we read aloud and comment, the secret of how teachers assess papers becomes knowable and the reader's response to a paper becomes more vivid. If a teacher has a question, the student is there to answer or explain. When the teacher bogs down in a rambling sentence or unclear construction, the student can see that confusion really does result from such problems. Still more advantages of the evaluation conference, as pointed out by Michael Blenski, Jr., are that the student can see the close attention the teacher gives to details of the writing and that the student can also listen to the paper if the teacher reads it aloud, hearing such matters as repetitious sentence patterns or abrupt jumps between paragraphs. For those teachers who worry that students will forget their comments, Blenski suggests that they provide a written summary of a paper's strengths and weaknesses at the end of the conference.[27]

The underlying rationale of the evaluation conference, that students profit from evaluative responses, is not, however, a self-evident statement that all teachers agree with. In "Teaching the Other Self," for example, Donald Murray maintains that the effective conference teacher does not deal in praise or criticism, because all texts can be improved. Instead, the instructor discusses with students what is working in their papers and what can be made to work better, as well as what isn't working and how it might be made to work.[28] An added benefit, one familiar to writing lab tutors, is that when the tension of

being judged is removed students see the teacher as a true helper or coach and therefore engage more actively in thinking about, arguing with, and revising what the teacher or tutor has suggested. In a conference where the teacher evaluates the paper, however, students are likely to adopt the "give-'em-what-they-want" approach and accept whatever statements or suggestions are made.

An alternative is to shift the burden of instruction to the student, as Donald Murray often does when he asks students what they like best about the paper and what they think needs changing. It then becomes the writer's job to be the editor and to view the paper critically. Even teachers who see themselves as the ones to offer the major editorial suggestions can begin by asking students for their own comments or by suggesting that the student read the paper aloud so that both teacher and writer can hear it. As some writers read aloud, they tend to editorialize ("That sentence was too long," "That's not exactly what I meant there," and so on), to note grammatical errors or usage problems ("I guess I need a comma there" or "That verb should be 'was caught,' not 'catches,' because I've been writing in the past"), and sometimes to note possibilities for revision ("This paragraph wasn't too clear. I should add something more about why I was so unhappy").

Elements of a Conference

One way to analyze a conference is to identify possible stages—how a conference proceeds through time from beginning to end. Even a brief glance at the conference excerpts at the end of this book will illustrate that reality is much muddier, that actual conferences do not progress neatly from one stage to the next. But if we tease out the various strands that are often intertwined, we can see a general progression from initial contact to wrapping up what has been accomplished.

At the beginning of a conference, getting acquainted or reestablishing contact takes priority as student and teacher settle in. The next stage is to do some stocktaking, to consider what is to be done. This may mean some diagnostic work to assess what the student needs: reading the paper the student has brought in, asking questions to locate difficulties, or requesting that the student identify what concerns are to be dealt with. When the particular goals for that session have been formulated, the teacher's next task is to decide on a teaching strategy. Will they discuss the topic in order to help the student formulate it more clearly? Will they do some exercises together to help the student learn how to combine sentences? Will they plunge into a

brainstorming session to help the student try a strategy for developing more material? Will the forward motion be determined by the student's questions?

When the direction has been determined, the next step may be to focus the session for the student, to explain (if needed) how it will proceed. If a student is feeling bewildered, not knowing where the conference is headed or what is getting done, he or she can feel lost in what is perceived to be an amorphous or directionless conversation. "We just talked, I guess, I don't know. Whenever I said something that seemed to interest him, we talked about that some more," is one student's description of a brainstorming session she had in our writing lab. With no explanation, no attempt to help her see that the instructor had decided that this approach would help her get started, the student had no framework for understanding what had happened. Even worse, it is unlikely that she could articulate for herself the value of brainstorming as an invention strategy.

The conference can next progress through its instructional goal—practicing sentences, finding better details, suggesting revisions, and so on—and then end with some closure that explains to the student what has been accomplished and what's left to do. Even the briefest exchange as the teacher walks around a classroom may need some conclusion identifying for the student what to do next. Without that, one teacher explained to me, her junior high students were prone to calling her back to their desks as they constructed each new sentence.

Because the conference is also the primary setting in which other professionals like counselors, social workers, and therapists work, there is an extensive literature on conferences which writing teachers are beginning to tap—with some caveats. Therapists are more likely to see their clients as "disabled," a condition that need not apply to writers. The writing conference may establish a helping relationship, but there is not, as in the therapist's meeting, the need to help all clients back on their feet. Some we merely keep company with as they march along. The goal of the writing teacher is instructional, not therapeutic.

Nevertheless, teachers can borrow techniques and insights from therapists' literature, as does David Taylor in "A Counseling Approach to Writing Conferences."[29] Taylor suggests that we borrow from the counselor's world the conditions for helping relationships in conferences:

1. *The creation of an atmosphere of acceptance and trust:* The client should feel that he or she can express feelings and attitudes freely without threat of condemnation.

2. *An openness about goals:* It is necessary to make clear what the roles of the teacher and student are and what responsibility the student is to take on. This can take the form of stating, "Today we'll do X, but not Y." This helps the student focus on what the conference is meant to accomplish. This also involves being open about the purpose of a question. Instead of "What's the meaning of this paragraph?" the teacher or tutor ought to explain, "I'm confused about the point of this paragraph, about how all the information ties together as it should. What is the paragraph's main idea?" Such an explanation reveals the purpose of the question and reduces its threat.

3. *"I" language:* When we use "I" to express value statements about writing, students should then be able to see that what is said is not an unalterable axiom but one particular teacher's own ideals and reactions. "I" is also a way to react to writing in a non-threatening way. *"You* are inconsistent in your use of tenses" implies a negative judgment of the writer as well as the writing. "I" language, however, allows the teacher to reflect the reality of the situation. "I read this sentence but I don't feel I understand exactly what it is saying," or "When the tenses of the verbs in this paragraph change, I get confused" are statements that reduce the threat to the student.

Rosemary Arbur, in "The Student-Teacher Conference," also borrows from an analysis of social workers' interviews to offer seven elements of a conference:[30]

1. *Engagement:* the initial act of putting the student at ease, conveying an acceptance of the student, and identifying the purpose of the meeting

2. *Problem Exploration:* the act of leading the student from a sense that "everything" is "wrong" with the paper to a focus on what specific problems should be worked on

3. *Problem Identification:* the process of isolating as specifically as possible the most serious problem at hand

4. *Agreement to Work on a Problem Together:* the acknowledgment of a shared commitment to cooperate and to work together

5. *Task Assignment:* an articulation of what the student must do to satisfy the terms of the agreement

6. *Solution:* the stage reached when the problem is eliminated

7. *Termination:* the end of the meeting

Arbur's linear progression of elements recognizes the need for mutual consent in a conference, but it seems to relegate the instructional focus to the interval between task assignment and solution. When emphasis is given to instructional content in analyzing the conference, different elements surface. Such an analysis was done on tutorial dialogues to see how they might guide the construction of programmed tutorials on computers,[31] and the elements that emerged were as follows:

1. *Topic Selection:* Tutors appear to select topics mostly in order of importance within a framework of topic and subtopic. When a subtopic is exhausted, the tutor then pops back up to the previous topic.

2. *Questioning:* Rather than the expected sequence of presenting information and then asking about it, the tutors whose dialogues were studied exhibited an intricate interweaving of question and presentation tied to the structure of the topic selected.

3. *Review:* Tutors accomplish this through reiteration, systematic passes through the same material, and review questions about material covered earlier.

4. *Response to Error:* When tutors confronted errors made by students, the tutors exhibited several different strategies. If the student confused similar things, tutors typically pointed out the confusion and provided distinguishing characteristics that would help the student sort things out. Another procedure was to ask a question about the wrong answer that would help the student remember the right one. Finally, tutors also gave the student the right answer.

These elements, which formed the basis for the tutorial structure of the computer program SCHOLAR, are those which can be programmed. In a teacher-student conference the range is much broader, as we shall see in the discussion of conference strategies in chapter 3.

Conference Formats

Incorporating conferences into the teaching of writing is, as Charles Cooper reminds us, a radical curriculum change that costs nothing.[32] Conferences require no new facilities, equipment, or schedule changes, because they can be included in a conventional classroom, conventionally equipped. Students need only pencil and paper and a place to write, while teachers need a place to sit and talk to students about

their writing. Suggestions for classroom formats are offered in the instructor's manual for Charles Dawe and Edward Dornan's *One-to-One: Resources for Conference-Centered Writing*,[33] a useful textbook for the conference-centered classroom. The format Dan Kirby and Tom Liner prefer is the writing workshop, getting groups together whenever it is helpful and holding numerous thirty-second conferences with working writers as the teacher walks around the room. Roger Garrison, whose work has been particularly influential in shifting teachers' interest toward the conference-centered classroom, specifically recommends short conferences. After the first week or so, he suggests that class meetings be abolished as the classroom becomes a writing workshop where the teacher holds conferences in one corner of the room while the students sit and write.

Another format, used in several high schools in Buffalo and described by Nina Luban, Ann Matsuhashi, and Tom Reigstad,[34] is a separate facility, a Writing Place, which is an adjunct to a writing program. These writing places offer drop-in tutorial help outside the regular classroom. In the Australian project with first and second graders described in Turbill's *No Better Way to Write*, the teacher walks around the room while the children write, conferring briefly here and there.

In *A Writer Teaches Writing* Donald Murray describes the setting he prefers, a lab where students can work and where the teacher can do his or her work—which is to encourage students individually.[35] The ideal writing lab, for Murray, should have a desk for each student and an office for the teacher, which should be a place with some degree of "acoustical privacy" and a view of the classroom, a place to which the teacher can withdraw with a student and go over a paper and where teacher and student can be candid without being heard by the rest of the class.

Murray's description is an ideal, but most of us don't work in ideal settings, and it's more likely that the teacher and students are all crowded in one classroom with no private retreat area for teacher and writer. While privacy isn't crucial, it is vital to have a setting which is not confrontational, that is, which does not place the student across from the teacher, but in a side-by-side arrangement. Best of all, as Donald Graves recommends,[36] are conferences at round tables where the slight curve enables us to see the writing comfortably. In an advocacy setting, the teacher can sit close to the writer (not opposite), can engage the writer visually (rather than avoiding eye contact), and can keep the paper in front of the writer (instead of appropriating it by holding it).

The writing lab can function as a supplement to a writing pro-
gram or a place where credit courses are offered, either open-ended
and self-paced or scheduled like other courses at particular times. The
diversity of the writing lab setting, as evident in articles in the *Writing
Lab Newsletter* and the *Writing Center Journal* and in descriptions
of writing centers in the *1984 Writing Lab Directory,* includes the
standard conference formats: scheduled appointments, drop-in times,
writing rooms where tutors are available as needed, and small-group
meetings. Privacy in this setting is even rarer than in the classroom.

Conference Scheduling

The question of when to hold conferences has a simple answer—all
through the semester. If conferences are held only occasionally, they
can be offered at any time during the student's progress in writing a
paper. As Thomas Carnicelli reminds us, the conference approach is
most effective when we work with the whole writing process, helping
students as they proceed.[37] Prewriting conferences can help students
search for topics; conferences focusing on early drafts can help those
students who are off-course or have reached a dead end by suggest-
ing questions to consider or new possibilities to explore; and confer-
ences any time before the final draft can help with problems or offer
reader feedback. The only stage Carnicelli does not recommend—and
any seasoned conference teacher will immediately (and vehemently)
concur—is a conference after a final draft. Here the meeting resembles
an autopsy and is all too likely to dwell on past failures. The theory,
supposedly, is that final-draft conferences will help students prepare
for their next paper, but the reality is that nothing is as dead, as
utterly without hope of resurrection, as a finished paper. For those
engaged in evaluation of final products, such a meeting (as has
already been argued in this book) can be better than grading papers,
but creating the give-and-take interaction of a truly effective confer-
ence is inordinately difficult.

A logistical matter for conferences that are an addition to class-
room work is the scheduling problem. For high school teachers, Lois
McCallister suggests posting a list of the periods available for con-
ferences and having students schedule times during their study hall
periods. For teachers whose schedules don't include conference periods,
McCallister suggests using seven or eight days of class time during
every six-week period for individual conferences.[38] This, in turn, raises
another problem. What do the other students do while the teacher is
holding conferences? One solution is to hold conferences at the end of

a unit so that students can begin working on the next unit with packets of materials intended to start them off.[39] When the class is planned so that students are writing continuously, there is no problem: they keep writing. If there is only time for a few conferences, Judith Kollman suggests, the first conference might be with the third paper. Her rationale is that the first paper, traditionally an in-class diagnostic, "is virtually worthless for anything but giving the student some idea of what cryptograms his instructor uses and what kinds of grades he or she dishes out; the second allows the student to pitch into his first well-considered groping toward a semi-literate, half-organized, non-development effort; by the third paper . . . he is beginning to become aware of the realities and, I trust, becoming slightly frustrated. . . . The time is ripe for the first conference."[40]

The length of a conference, depending on the format, can vary from a brief exchange of a few sentences as the teacher strolls around the room to arranged conferences which last longer. Even with scheduled conferences, Lester Fisher and Donald Murray recommend no more than fifteen minutes, at least once a week. Lest that sound like a major drain on one's time, Fisher and Murray offer some figures which should allay any apprehensions that conferences become an all-consuming way of life. As Fisher and Murray calculate their time, with fifteen-minute conferences spread over a three-day period, they can handle thirty students in seven and a half hours a week, plus one hour to scan papers in advance.[41]

Yet another solution to the time problem—and to what some see as the physical strain involved—is described by Dean Memering as simple and workable: the group conference. As used by Memering, these are editorial sessions on work in progress that focus on suggesting ways to improve drafts, eliciting ideas and information from the authors, discussing writing concepts, planning projects, and so on. These small-group sessions become seminars in writing and also steering committees for the classroom. The outcomes noted by Memering are a relaxation of defensiveness, greater rapport with each student, and a sense of participatory unity in the class as a whole. Having tried out a paper in a small-group conference, the writer is less likely to find a host of corrections on the finished paper. In addition to these major advantages, the time saving is also significant. As Memering notes, if the teacher meets with a group of six or seven students for half an hour, he or she can see a class of twenty-five in two hours.[42]

This time problem exists only for conferences tied to classroom instruction. In the writing lab, the teacher or tutor can revel in the fact that part of what labs have to offer is time, in whatever quantities

the student needs. The only problems here are the waiting line of other students and the student's attention span. A perceptive tutor can tell almost immediately when a student's concentration is waning or has been diverted. Sometimes a momentary lull and some chit-chat to relieve the strain or to offer a "breather" is all that is needed before work can be resumed; sometimes momentum can be regained by a move on to some other (and perhaps fresher) topic of discussion; and sometimes the tutor simply has to recognize that some students can't sustain their interest beyond, at best, twenty minutes or half an hour.

In whatever format a teacher chooses to work there are techniques to draw on and problems that are likely to be encountered, and these are the next subjects to consider.

Notes

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14. David Taylor, "A Counseling Approach to Writing Conferences" (Paper delivered at the Writing Centers Association East Central Conference, Erie, Pa., 4 May 1985), 14.

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