Conferring

Individual conferences offer the opportunity for a teacher to sit with a student to learn about him, establish and follow-up on goals, hold him accountable for prior work, and offer guided practice with current work.

Within a reading workshop, students are reading different self-selected books at different reading levels. During writing workshop, students are writing their own pieces on different topics. Conferring allows me to see each student as an individual learner and teach each child strategies that best match her. The strategies I choose to teach are aligned to the goal I’ve chosen, and the level of support I provide during the conference matches where the child is in her own progress toward independent practice of the goal.

Most conferences follow a predictable structure that allows me as the teacher to make effective use of my time—both within the single conference, and across my entire class. If I spend too long with one student, offering a high level of support, not only have I spent time working on something the student will need me to be present for to continue
practice, but the other students in the class have been robbed of instructional time. Without being too strict, I try to keep my eye on the clock and aim for a conference to last no more than about five minutes. Some will be a little shorter, some a little longer, but on average five minutes is what I'm aiming for.

The structure I find that I use most with students by the end of first, beginning of second grade is known as the "research-decide-teach" conference (Calkins 2000; Anderson 2000; Calkins, Hartman, and White 2005; Serravallo and Goldberg 2007). Using this structure, I'll first attempt to learn about what strategies the student is currently using and needs to learn and I'll choose a compliment and teaching point. Next, I'll articulate a clear compliment to reinforce a strength. Then, I'll state a strategy and support the student in practicing the strategy. Finally, I'll wrap up by reminding the student of my expectations for his continued work.

STRUCTURE OF A RESEARCH-DECIDE-TEACH CONFERENCE:

Research: Ask questions, observe, listen to the child read, investigate artifacts (such as sticky notes or reading logs). Keeping in mind the goal you've established and all you already know about the reader, notice how the student's current work reflects your prior assessments and the goal you established. Plan to spend about one minute of the five researching.

Decide: Decide on a compliment and teaching point. Ideally the compliment will segue to the teaching point. This will ensure that you're teaching to strengthen a strength as opposed to responding to a perceived deficit.

Compliment: Offer the student a clear, explicit compliment. Being as specific as possible, tell the student what he has done well and why it's important and offer an example of what he did that shows evidence of the strength. Being specific and elaborate with your compliment will ensure that the student can replicate the skill or behavior—which is sometimes something he didn't even realize he was doing.

Teach: Offer the student a specific strategy that he can practice to take the next step beyond what he is already doing. Say the strategy in clear, specific language. Depending on how much support the student needs, you may choose to give an example or offer a brief demonstration. Give the student a chance to practice with your support, as needed. Offer
coaching prompts and questions. This is the longest part of the conference, lasting about two to three minutes.

**Link:** Repeat your teaching from today's conference, referring to how the work of today relates to the overarching goal you've established. At this point in the conference, I often find it helpful to establish a clear expectation for follow-up. I clarify what I expect the student to do before our next meeting and often give the student a tangible reminder of the strategy. Often I'll record the teaching point on a sticky note, a bookmark, or on a page of the student's reading or writing notebook. This will be quick—less than a minute.

Another common conferring structure for students in the primary grades is the coaching conference. Unlike a research, decide, teach conference where I begin with a minute or two of research, in a coaching conference I often know what I want to teach and I begin the conference by establishing the focus. This way, almost all of the four to five minutes can be used giving feedback to the student as he reads.

One reason coaching conferences are more common for primary-grade readers than upper-grade readers is that goals around print work and fluency are more common in grades K–2. I will get the most mileage coaching a student as she reads aloud. In a coaching conference, the student reads and I offer feedback while she is in the midst of the reading.

**STRUCTURE OF A COACHING CONFERENCE:**

**Establish a focus/state a teaching point:** Based on your prior conferences, or small groups, remind the student what she's been working on. Repeat the strategy or offer a new one aligned to the same goal.

**Coach as the student reads:** Ask the student to begin reading. Offer feedback as the student is reading. Try to catch the student both in times of success (in which case offer clear, explicit compliments) as well as in times of struggle (in which case offer support in the form of prompts, questions, and/or redirections).

**Link:** Repeat in clear language the work that you did together today and encourage the child to continue practicing. Leave a tangible reminder—such as a bookmark or sticky note—to support his ongoing independent practice.