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Types of Conferences and the Composing Process

H. Eric Branscomb

A writer comes to you in the writing center vulnerable: words exposed, soul and ideas bared. What do you, as a teacher or staff member or tutor, say? How do you react to those ideas, that writer, those marks on the paper? An effective response depends on what the writer wants to say (content), how the writer is approaching the writing (process), and which conventions should be observed in preparing the final manuscript (skills).

This breakdown of what can be said in conference suggests three types of conferences: the process conference, the content conference, and the skills conference. A process conference examines the writer's internalized process, focusing on how he or she approaches a particular step. A content conference focuses on the content—the details, generalizations, and organization—of the writing. A skills conference focuses on the final appearance of the manuscript, its style and mechanical accuracy.

For this paper (and for my teaching in general) it seems most useful to me to conceptualize a model of the composing process as consisting of five subprocesses—prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading—swirling about like ingredients in a soup. I use the metaphor “ingredient” to emphasize the model's recursiveness. Prewriting, for example, can occur at any time in the production of a piece of writing, not just “pre” the “writing” of the first draft. With certain exceptions, each of the three types of conferences can be used during any of the five subprocesses of the composing process.

Graphically, this interaction of conference type with process stage can be represented by a 3 x 5 grid (Figure 1). In each cell of the grid is a brief

Types of Conferences and the Composing Process

| | Prewriting | Drafting | Revising | Editing | Proofreading |
|----------|--|--|---|---|--|
| P | Does writer understand and accept prewriting? What strategies are used? Is a concern with correctness hindering generation of content? | Does the writer draft quickly? Does the writer understand how to turn a prewrite into a draft? Was the prewrite explicitly used in drafting? | Concept of revision as addition, deletion, rearrangement. Awareness of techniques of adding in margins and between lines, crossing out. | Listen for the sound of sentences. What is the writer's attitude toward inflated diction? | Oral reading; analysis of miscues and discrepancies. Does writer proofread at all? |
| R | Abundance of detail? Are code words or saturated words developed? Absence of empty abstractions such as "beautiful?" | Has the prewrite been exhausted? What new content has appeared that the writer may follow in revision? Begin thinking about the needs of the reader. | Is the content being shaped more for a reader's needs? Is it organized logically? What should be cut? What should be added? | N/A | N/A |
| O | N/A | N/A | N/A | Sentence combining and uncombining. Adjust diction to appropriate level. | Patterns of error. Non-technical explanation of grammar. Punctuation taught in context when needed. Use of dictionary; personal spelling list. |
| C | | | | | |
| E | | | | | |
| S | | | | | |
| S | | | | | |
| C | | | | | |
| O | | | | | |
| N | | | | | |
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| K | | | | | |
| I | | | | | |
| L | | | | | |
| L | | | | | |
| S | | | | | |

Figure 1

explanation of the areas of concern for that stage and type of conference. For example, during revision a writer may need help in understanding how to revise or with the actual content that he's revising. Or a student's process of proofreading may be the problem rather than her skill at correcting mistakes. The grid thus suggests new perspectives for viewing and responding to a piece of writing.

The Content Conference

To set up the trusting and open atmosphere in which writing flourishes, it's important that in conference a tutor's first response to a piece of writing be always to the content. Much poor writing we see is the result of a succession of teachers who primarily responded to surface errors. Once a child has written with feeling about, say, his grandmother's death and had his teacher respond only by pointing out spelling errors, he's not likely to risk writing about anything important again. Multiply that hesitancy by twelve (years), and you have the kind of writing we see: stifled, cramped, tortured. Therefore, until the paper is ready for editing and proofreading after enough drafts, the tutor's opening question or remark should concern the content. Often a simple "Wow!" or "That must have been fun" or an honest tear or chuckle is enough. A student writer must believe the teacher cares.

Teachers who are familiar with the conference method of writing instruction have learned to respond to what the writer has written. In a content conference, the tutor looks at what is actually on the page, the raw material of the piece of writing—details, statistics, quotes, generalizations and abstractions. This type of conference is useful at those points in the writing process in which content is important: prewriting, revising, and, to a lesser extent, drafting.

A content conference in the prewriting stage is simple (once you get the hang of it) and quick. In fact, prewrite conferences are what make conference teaching in the classroom possible. My staff and I have taken to calling them "Garrison" conferences because they are often of the thirty-second variety that Roger Garrison describes. With a little practice, a conference teacher can easily and quickly scan a brainstormed list (an almost tabular form of prewriting) looking for one thing: quantity of specific detail. Look for sensory words—colors, sizes, shapes, names, dates, sounds. Words like *cute*, *fantastic*, *beautiful*, or *awesome* really stand out like flashing red lights. A quick question such as "What do you mean by cute?" is usually enough to convince the writer to postpone the drafting until all those generalizations and abstractions are examined and pinned down with an overabundance of specific information. Intervening at this point prevents many problems of insufficient content before those problems are realized in the draft.

There should be no conferences on rough drafts while the drafting is occurring. If the prewrite is adequate, the writer should be allowed to draft undisturbed. When the draft is finished, the tutor should respond to content, checking to see that the writer has included all the information from the list. (It's possible, even at this early stage, to have consciously selected out some information, but the student should be asked to justify any omissions.) Often a thin draft which follows a full prewrite can be attributed to the physical difficulty of writing—it's easy just not to write those "minor" details when drafting.

Also in the heat of drafting, of shaping at the point of utterance, two phenomena begin to occur: first, details multiply, images clarify, content expands and deepens, "saturated" or "code" words develop more fully; and second, the writer begins to make a few of those unconscious connections—those interpretations, evaluations, and explanations that give writing its real purpose. In drafting, moving from recording and reporting to abstracting and theorizing, the writer first begins to speculate about what all this raw material might mean. Often this only happens in bits and pieces. Two items from a list are joined with *because* or *however*, and an abstract connection—representing a higher form of cognitive activity—is formed. The conference teacher needs to look for and encourage these rudimentary attempts at going beyond raw data, and suggest ways of following up in the next draft.

A content conference during the revising of an early working draft occurs between drafts. At these points in the process, a writer needs to have her attention directed to matters of content. In my model of the process, the word *revision* always refers to changes in content or substance. In conference an instructor should check for changes in content. I often begin a content conference on a draft with the question, "What did you change?" An answer of "nothing" initiates a radically different conference—usually a process conference. Since in revising, the writer is moving to a successively greater emphasis on audience needs and less on egocentric needs (Linda Flower calls this moving from writer-based prose to reader-based prose), the instructor must increasingly invoke the image of "the reader," either personally ("I don't understand this") or more abstractly ("Would another person understand this?"). With each successive draft, the content conference becomes more and more reader-based in its areas of concerns.

Since by my definition, changes in style (editing) and grammatical corrections (proofreading) involve no changes in content, attention to those changes is reserved for the process and skills conferences.

The Process Conference

The process conference is probably less familiar to writing teachers than are the content and skills conferences. It doesn't have the glamor of the content

conference, which has been popularized by Roger Garrison and Don Murray, and it doesn't have the traditional legitimacy of the skills conference, which is really just concerned with traditional grammar and punctuation. The rationale for the process conference is to discover the assumptions the writer is operating under during the writing process, for as Thomas Newkirk, Nancy Sommers, Sondra Perl, and Mina Shaughnessy have observed, unskilled writers occasionally approach the task of writing with counterproductive strategies. A writer who misinterprets revision as a process of correcting errors, for example, will not make substantive modifications in a text.

For unskilled writers, prewriting is an alien and troublesome concept, though as Don Graves has demonstrated, young children do "rehearse" their writing. Somewhere between third and eighth grade, it seems, appears "the myth of the perfect first draft," perfectly thought out ahead of time and copied onto paper as if dictated by the gods. This myth reduces the writing process—sans prewriting—to drafting and proofreading, and writers, deprived of the benefits of the full and natural process, become stilted and blocked, overwhelmed by the task of getting it perfect the first time.

Few writers entering college consciously prewrite, relying instead on inspiration or the pressures of last-minute deadlines; and these, as Linda Flower has shown, are the least effective starting strategies. So one initial problem for a tutor conferencing with a student during the prewriting stage is to discover the student's repertoire of prewriting strategies. Is there tangible evidence of prewriting, such as a list or map or notes? Is the writer even aware that there is such a thing as prewriting? Does the student balk emotionally or psychologically at prewriting, insisting on rushing willy-nilly into a rough draft destined to be superficial?

In conference, a student can be shown the process of prewriting, with examples of professional writers' (or even better, the instructor's own) messy notes, sketches, and lists. Dysfunctional prewriting strategies, such as the formal Roman Numeral outline or looking up spelling words while brainstorming, can be identified, and the student gently guided to more practical processes. A quick look over the shoulder of a student who's brainstorming reveals the process she's going through—too slow and meticulous, for example; or drafting rather than listing (though a free-written draft may also serve as a heuristic and need not automatically be discouraged).

When I have a rough draft conference, it's usually a content conference: more formal than a prewrite conference, requiring a complete reading of the draft. However, if the prewrite is adequate but the first draft inadequate, usually a process conference is in order. apparently the writer doesn't

understand how to draft. The first thing to suspect in a fizzled rough draft is an enervating meticulousness about its production: the myth of the perfect first draft intruding into the process again. A single question reveals if the student has labored for hours and hours, agonizing over each sentence and comma and potential misspelling, presenting in conference a “rough” draft that caused so much stress in its production that revising it is out of the question. Or did the myth of the perfect first draft short-circuit the process of drafting so that the rough draft is embarrassingly short or even non-existent? Or did the writer not even consult the prewrite? (I’ve seen drafts written in spiral notebooks with the prewrite still attached on previous pages, so I know the list was folded out of sight during drafting!)

For a few writers, the mere concept of a rough draft is difficult to grasp. A student knows how to list well but not how to turn the list into a rough draft. Does the writer even understand the term draft? In this age of TV-viewing-non-readers accustomed to fill-in-the-blank tests, has the writer even seen a single piece of extended prose? The conference teacher needs to find out how the writer is approaching the rough draft—as a chance for self-expression, discovery, and working out of ideas, or as a test of spelling and topic-sentence-writing abilities?

In revision, the process conference is crucial, for it is at this stage that most misconceptions about writing turn up. Nancy Sommers has noted that for unskilled writers revision is mostly a process of editing and proofreading. This kind of writer—psychologically unprepared for the necessity of multiple drafts—will never learn the revision practices of experienced writers until she understands the process involved.

Careful dialogue with the writer is essential here, as in all process conferences. Is she aware that the process of revision involves adding, deleting, and rearranging information as new relationships are discovered and the intended audience begins to demand more and more accommodation? Does she know about writing between lines and in the margins? Is she in fact a neatnik who can’t bear to deface her beautiful draft? Is she so proud of her information that she can’t possibly cross out one single word? Does she know how to use arrows to indicate rearrangements of information? Can she draft inserts on separate sheets of paper and label them for later insertion? All of these questions attempt to discover the writer’s process of revision, as separate from the actual content of the revised draft.

In the fourth stage, editing, a process conference will reveal how the writer thinks about sentences. Often you can suggest in conference that students read their own nearly-final drafts aloud to themselves, listening for the ring of sentences, letting the strings of short choppy sentences or the long unreadable ones undergo auditory testing. However, if the writer

actually prefers the inflated diction of academia and politics, advice to use more understandable language will go unheeded or actually be met with resistance. A process conference can isolate this unprofitable editing technique and begin to change the writer's attitude.

During proofreading, the real concern of a process conference is the timing of proofreading—does the writer begin proofreading too soon and thus interfere with the writing process? If so, the writer's attitudes about proofreading need to be altered. The writer must understand that proofreading is the last thing one does. Recursiveness notwithstanding, proofreading must not occur during prewriting, drafting or revising.

One disadvantage of the grid model, is that a good skills conference includes an analysis of the writer's proofreading processes, causing the distinction between process conference and skills conference to blur at this point. I will deal more extensively with those question of proofreading processes in the next section.

The Skills Conference

The purpose of a skills conference is to teach students—within the context of their own next-to-last drafts—how to proofread their own papers. This teaching is done without workbook exercises or heavy red-penciling of mistakes with injunctions such as “cs” or “frag.” Skills conferences evolve from the awareness that there's little or no transference into students' own writing from grammar exercises. Often the student knows the correct form but for some seemingly inexplicable reason fails to use it; thus the writer's process rather than knowledge may be responsible for errant forms and a more personalized form of intervention is called for.

It's important that students understand the point of the skills conference, so that mechanical skills be kept in perspective. Most basic writers are already familiar enough with their shortcomings as writers, usually blaming a lack of grammar or “rotten spelling” for their poor writing. They need to be reassured that poor grammar is not the reason their writing is weak, and that emphasizing grammatical correctness too early in their own writing process is one of the reasons their writing is so weak. Basic writers are often at the cognitive stage of desperately seeking rules to follow, hoping for guidance. Hence their preoccupation with “right” and “wrong.” So it's important for instructors to put skills conferences in their place. Poor punctuation skills may offend a reader, but they rarely affect content.

The technique of the skills conference is simple in principle, and in fact not as difficult or impractically time-consuming as it may appear. Essentially the instructor sits down with a student when a paper is finished and goes over it, often having the student read the paper aloud, and notes

through error analysis the single most prevalent skills problem. (“One skill at a time” is crucial in this type of instruction.) Through careful questioning the tutor finds out what the writer knows about the error and what he doesn’t. There’s no value in telling a student a run-on sentence is two independent clauses joined with no punctuation if the student doesn’t know what an independent clause is; and there’s no value in explaining that an independent clause contains a subject and a finite verb and is not subordinated, if the writer is not familiar with those terms.

The tutor then determines the most effective way to explain the error. The explanation may involve a mini grammar lesson, one-to-one, quick and simple; just pointing out the error; or possibly correcting a few errors with the student. The instructor then moves on to the next student, leaving the student with instructions to proofread the rest of the paper for that one particular error before she returns. When the instructor or tutor returns, the writer will have corrected many (but rarely all!) occurrences of the error in question.

Oral reading in writing center conferences is a valuable skills conference technique. David Bartholomae, using parallels from Kenneth Goodman’s miscue analysis in reading, has suggested ways of discovering through oral reading how the student is approaching his proofreading task. In his article, “A Study of Error,” Bartholomae’s illustrates the skills conference in action, as one student reads his writing to the tutor and self-corrects orally, not noticing that what he reads does not correspond exactly with what has been written (261).

Further analyzing oral proofreading episodes, Shelly Samuels, has identified three possible kinds of discrepancy between what the student reads orally and what is actually written: errors unnoticed and uncorrected, errors corrected orally and on the paper, and errors corrected orally but uncorrected in the writing. The first kind of error demands actual instruction (“Let’s talk a little bit about comma splices, Marie...”). The second kind implies that the writer simply needs to proofread more carefully—if she can find and correct her own errors in conference, she can do it alone. She should be guided to read aloud as a proofreading technique. The third kind demands a type of visual training, the ability to objectify the marks on the page, to divorce form from meaning (this is much simpler if proofreading is occurring on a final draft, in which meaning is already essentially fixed) and see that what is written does not correspond exactly with what was meant (2).

One of the chief objections I hear to conference teaching is that it’s a good idea, in theory, but impractical—it won’t work in “the real world.” I agree that it’s difficult to respond in conference quickly, accurately, supportively, and beneficially. But an awareness that conferences should focus on

the writer's skills, content, or composing process can multiply our ways of intervening in our students' writing.

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