

# VIEWING GUIDE

JoAnn Portalupi and Ralph Fletcher

# TALKING ABOUT WRITING



Videotape 1:  
The Essentials of Conferencing

Videotape 2:  
Refining Your Conference Skills



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*Craft Lessons* (Fletcher and Portalupi 1998),  
*Nonfiction Craft Lessons* (Portalupi and Fletcher  
2001), and *When Students Write* videotapes  
(Fletcher and Portalupi 2002) are available at  
www.stenhouse.com

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## INTRODUCTION

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Welcome to *Talking About Writing*. This two-tape series explores the important topic of how to confer with student writers. We (JoAnn and Ralph) believe that the one-on-one writing conference gives us a rare opportunity to help a particular student become a stronger writer. But the writing conference seems to contain certain contradictions. On one hand, it is a time to listen to and enjoy student writing. On the other hand, it asks us to do some of our most skillful teaching. It requires us to play the roles of reader and teacher, to be both “host” (accepting) and “bouncer” (challenging) to the students with whom we work.

Have you ever really watched a couple making dinner together in the kitchen? Some couples work together so beautifully it almost seems choreographed, like ballet. Other times they keep bumping into each other, getting in each other’s way. Still other times, one person does all the work while the other sits watching.

In an odd way, the writing conference is similar. Sometimes it’s almost magical the way the teacher-student dialogue can help a student to assess and revise his or her writing. At other times you can feel the tension between teacher and student. They seem to be at cross-purposes, with differing agendas, and are unable to connect in the writing conference. And there are times when the teacher does all the work in a conference while the student sits passively listening.

Conferring with students is an art and, with practice, we can become better at it. Typically there are two components to a writing conference. First, we begin by trying to understand the writer. Then, based on this understanding, we try to teach one thing in the conference. This series addresses these two components. Tape 1: *The Essentials of Conferring* largely focuses on understanding the writer. It includes sections on appreciation, knowing your writers, management, predictable problems, and peer conferences. Tape 2: *Refining Your Conference Skills* delves into ways to teach students during a writing conference, and includes sections on helping students build a writer’s toolbox, connecting writing conferences to other parts of a workshop, raising the bar, and learning how to confer by working with your colleagues.

## HOW TO USE TALKING ABOUT WRITING

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We have been involved in teacher education for over twenty years. Our work often includes demonstration teaching where we conduct a reading or writing workshop and invite teachers to observe and take notes. Afterwards, we ask everyone to talk about what they observed. It's common for different viewers to see different things in any classroom dynamic that unfolds before them. One viewer might notice a teacher's tone, another, the amount of student talk. We have found that when we provide enough time for teachers to share their observations, it broadens everyone's perspective.

Our belief in the power of professional dialogue lies at the heart of this viewing guide. We hope to invite viewers to participate in the ongoing exploration of the writing conference. In this spirit, it's important to give viewers time to talk. As you share these tapes with teachers, administrators, or parents, we hope you'll ask, "What do you notice?"

We recognize that these tapes will be used in many different settings and that facilitators will adjust the viewing to the needs of the group. This viewing guide provides two overarching questions for viewers to keep in mind as they watch each tape. We also provide detailed talking points for each segment to spark discussion. These are good places to stop the tape and give time for viewers to react, muse, reflect, or synthesize what they are watching. We also add our own commentary with points we think are important to consider.

In this guide we suggest various activities you can do after viewing a segment. In a few places we also suggest extensions—activities that teachers could try in their own classrooms. These activities are designed to help teachers get their feet wet by putting specific ideas into practice. Ideally, after trying the extension activity they could return to the group to reflect on the results. Feel free to use these extensions (or not) as appropriate.

### **A Few Words About Where These Tapes Were Filmed**

Bailey's Elementary School for the Arts and Sciences is located in eastern Falls Church, Virginia. It has a student body of approximately 900, 70 percent of whom are second language learners. Over 40 nations and 20 languages are represented, with the predominant languages being Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and English. Bailey's is both enriched and challenged by the needs that come with second language learners and a student mobility rate of around 30 percent.

To read more about Bailey’s Elementary visit their Web site at: [www.fcps.edu/DEA/schoolprof/elementary/BaileysES.html](http://www.fcps.edu/DEA/schoolprof/elementary/BaileysES.html).

### **If You Are Viewing the Videotapes in a Workshop Setting**

Using videotapes in a workshop setting presents special challenges. Most people’s experience with watching television is passive. Instructors need to work extra hard to prepare participants for a more active role in looking at these videotapes. Here are a couple of ways to prepare before watching the tapes:

1. *Check out the equipment and sound in advance.* Make sure the videotape segments are cued to the right spot in each tape. After you begin running any segment, walk to the back of the room and listen to the tape. The goal is to have the sound as low as possible but still loud enough so participants in the back can hear. The most common error instructors make in using videotapes is playing them with the audio too loud.
2. *Ask participants to keep notes as they view the segment.* Double-entry journals work well to help participants focus on what they are viewing. To make a double-entry journal, ask participants to draw a line down the center of a piece of paper and add the column headings “What I See” and “What It Makes Me Think About.” These generic headings can generate all kinds of interesting observations for small-group discussions. Without the written notes to narrow down the focus of viewers, conversation can become fragmented.

## **TAPE 1: THE ESSENTIALS OF CONFERRING**

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### **Overarching Questions**

What does a teacher need to know in order to respond well to student writers?

What are some of the intangibles (our body language, tone of voice, wait time) that create a context for effective teaching in the writing conference?

### **The Importance of Appreciation**

- In the first two conferences, teachers Ashley Giglio and Kathleen Fay, appreciate the writer’s work. Ashley takes delight in her student’s writing

about shells. Kathleen uses very specific language to let the writer know what she is doing well. In both conferences, the students gain from being in the positive gaze of their teacher. Taking time to appreciate can be challenging in the hustle-bustle of writers' workshop. Talk about what gets in the way of appreciating student writing. How can you work around obstacles in order to take time to appreciate your students' writing?

*Extension Activity:* During the next week, gather two or three writing samples of varying strengths from your students. Pick out three things that each writer does well.

### Conferences as Yearlong Conversations

- Emilie Parker confers with a shy boy who is in the middle of his story. Often students resist our revision suggestions because they are committed to what they have already written. Note that Emilie makes a suggestion about part of the story (the ending) that the boy has not yet written. Also, note how this brief conference sets up the next conference that Emilie will have with this student.

### Knowing the Writer

- The more we know about an individual student's strengths, weaknesses, preferences, and habits as writers, the more able we are to offer support and instruction that suits his or her learning needs. What are some strategies you use to gather information about your writers and their histories as writers?
- Christine Paul asks questions that invite Jonathan to teach her about his writing process. Generate a list of questions you might ask your students that will help you learn about them as writers.

### Management

- JoAnn suggests that conferences are most effective when the student initiates them. Reflect on your own classroom. What reasons do students have in your class for initiating writing conferences?

**Extension Activity:** Take a week and do some informal research in your classroom. How often do students initiate conferences? What are the various reasons they initiate conferences? Are there ways to broaden the reasons so that students ask for conferences at various points during the writing process and for a variety of reasons?

- When we think of a writing conference we often think of a one-on-one conversation. But sometimes a group conference is more effective, as we see here with Emilie. Can you think of other times when a group conference might be the best approach?
- There are a number of ways to organize and keep track of your conferences. Strategies might include:
  1. Reading a roll call or “status of the class” at the beginning and asking students to identify their writing plans for the day (Atwell, *In the Middle*, 1998).
  2. Asking students to sign up for a conference (on the blackboard or special easel) when they need one.
  3. Taking notes on the back of student folders.

Which of these strategies sound like they might be useful? Are there others that work well for you?

### Predictable Problems

- Emilie models one way to help a student who doesn’t know what to write. Note the specific language she uses in advising the student how to move from thought to page. What are other strategies you might try?
- We believe strongly in the importance of choice. But choice leads to conflict when a student makes a choice that the teacher feels is counterproductive to his/her learning. Does this conference with Lynn Riggs and Franklin seem familiar? Discuss Lynn’s response to Franklin. What’s working here? What’s not?

Generate a list of the predictable problems you encounter with your students. Brainstorm possible solutions to these problems. For example:

**Problem**

A student writes the same topic over and over again.

**Solution**

Show students how to write about the same topic using a variety of genre.

Show students how to take a general topic and use it to generate a list of smaller, more focused topics.

**Peer Conferences**

- In the first peer conference, we see two boys engaged in a kind of parallel writing. You'll recognize the boy with the red shirt who earlier had a conference with Lynn about his Nintendo story.
- When students begin giving response to each other, they often ask rote questions such as "Where did you get the idea to write that?" This second peer conference begins with one girl asking, "What do you want to change or delete?" Talk about the writer's response to that question in this peer conference. How can we help students be responsive to each other in authentic ways? What got this conference heading in a positive direction? (Though we don't see the rest of the conference, these girls continued to work in a very productive manner.)
- In the same conference, notice how the writer maintains a position of control. How can we teach students to give helpful response without taking away the writer's control?

## TAPE 2: REFINING YOUR CONFERENCE SKILLS

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**Overarching Questions**

What role does the writing conference serve in developing students' skills as writers?

How can we help students expand their repertoire as writers while still respecting their ownership of what they write?

**Conferring: The Heart of Teaching Writing**

- Christine offers a strategy to help the student writing about third grade narrow her topic. Discuss a possible situation with a student in your classroom where this strategy might be helpful.

## Teaching Students to Assess Their Writing

- The teachers at Bailey’s are committed to helping students develop their abilities to assess their writing. In Christine’s conference, she provides a listening audience while Jonathan reflects on what he has written. Why is it critical that students have the opportunity to assess their work? Discuss the relationship between teacher assessment and student assessment.
- In Emilie’s conference with Stephanie, we observe a side-by-side reading where Emilie follows the writer’s lead. There is a collegiality between Emilie and Stephanie, which allows Emilie to state her opinions without diminishing those of the writer. What techniques do you observe, verbal or non-verbal, that help create this collegial atmosphere?
- In the same conference with Stephanie, Emilie listens to Stephanie’s self-assessment and extends it by naming the quality of writing (voice) present in her work. This language gives the student a lens to use when she rereads and assesses future work. In order to extend students’ language, we must be comfortable looking at student writing and identifying what it is that students do well.
- Reflect on both Christine’s and Emilie’s conferences and generate a list of specific techniques they use to encourage students to self-assess (i.e., making time for rereading, actively retelling the writer’s assessment, or asking a simple but direct question such as: What have you done well?).

## Building a Writer’s Toolbox

- Discuss Christine’s conference. Note her long wait time, and her decision to end the conference by giving the writer a range of choices about what to do next.
- In the next conference, Emilie reminds the student that there will be real readers for her writing. Discuss the term audience as Emilie uses it here. What are the ways you allow students to understand and experience the importance of audience to their writing?
- Strong writing teachers emphasize developing the writer, not just fixing the writing. In the same conference, Emilie ends by recording the strategy she just taught on the bottom of the student’s paper. In this way, she signals to the writer that the strategy is not specific to one piece of writing, but one she can use again and again. Brainstorm ways you can make visible

to students the tools/strategies they can carry forward into future writing projects.

### **Raising the Bar**

- Emilie’s conference evolves from the student’s strategy of circling verbs in her writing. Discuss the ways in which Emilie both supports and challenges this writer. Consider the critical role support plays in Emilie’s ability to challenge. Discuss ways you can continue to stretch the strongest writers in your class (setting individual goals, trying new genres, and so on).

*Extension Activity:* Think of a particularly strong writer in your class. Carefully review this student’s writing folder and come up with one or two appropriate goals or challenges.

### **Conferences in Context**

- While the mini-lesson is not necessarily intended to direct the conferences in the following workshop, it does provide a common experience that builds students’ knowledge about the craft of writing. Teachers can draw on these experiences as Kathleen does here in talking with Janetta about her writing. How does Kathleen use her mini-lesson to provide a context for the conference?
- What other classroom structures (i.e., literature circles, read-aloud sessions) could provide rich experiences to support writing conferences? How can you build stronger connections between those experiences and the conversations you have with students about writing?

### **Learning with Colleagues**

- In Kathleen’s conference with Mario, she helps him uncover gaps in his writing and suggests that he invent at those places where his memory fails to help close the gaps. But she doesn’t stop there. She knows he will need additional support if he is to make changes and suggests that he map his story on a storyboard to help him find the places where new information can be added. Conferences often deal only with content. We need to extend our discussion to include how the author will actually make content changes. Brainstorm other strategies you might suggest to a writer to help

them revise their work (i.e., cut and paste, use an asterisk for inserted text, second drafts, and so on).

- During the teacher-teacher discussion, Kathleen talks about a point in the conference where the teacher makes the critical decision of what direction to take. A number of things influence this decision: specific qualities of the writing, the history of the writer, and the teacher's own experience as a reader. Discuss ways you can develop the experience and knowledge necessary to be a wise decision-maker. What steps could you take to strengthen your ability to confer well with student writers?

***Extension Activity:*** Using an audio or video recorder, record a number of conferences. Listen to them on your own or with a colleague. Pay attention to your words, but also note productive silences. How would you define your role in each conference? How would you define the student's role? Identify one goal you want to work on in your conferring.