

The four parts of a writing conference **(from *The writing workshop* by Katie Wood Ray)**

Conferences are short, focused sessions with individual students and we get as many of them in as we can each day.

Research: First, find out **how the student's writing is going**. This is the assessment that happens at the beginning. It involves trying to get a handle on how things are going for this writer, and a feeling for what the writer is doing and trying at this point. Open this part of the conference with a general inquiry, like, "Tell me about how your writing is going" or as specific as, "Tell me about what kinds of crafting techniques you are trying in your writing." The goal is to get the students talking. Saying "Tell me about..." encourages students to give more than a one word answer. Eventually, you won't even have to ask, students will just launch into how it's going. One of the best ways to help students develop a writing process that works for them is to help them become articulate about their processes.

Decide: Based on how it's going, **decide what to teach**. The teacher has to get the student talking about his or her writing, has to listen very closely to what the student is saying and alongside that, has to think, "*What do I know about writing* that I could say in response to *this* that would teach *this writer* something?" This is a curriculum decision: "what-does-this-student-need-to-know" decision. There are two keys parts to that decision making question. A writer's conference is a meeting of a teacher's knowledge base about writing with a student's work as a writer. Those two have to come together to help us make our decision about what we will teach. We should help that student either think about something or do something that he or she could not do if we weren't sitting there. When we sit down with a student writer, we bring with us a "fistful" of knowledge about writing that we draw on to teach this writer. We have to decide what things about writing we want to teach a student from the fistful of things we know. Some questions to help decide what to teach:

- What would help most at this time?
- What would bring quick success?
- What would be a stretch, a risk or a challenge?
- What is not likely to come up in whole-class instruction?
- Is there something I need to reteach or extend?
- What is the balance of curriculum I have offered this student?
- What kind of teaching would this student like me to offer?

Teach: Teach the student. Once we decide what we want to say to a child in a conference, we fall into our mini-lesson or direct-instruction mode. Either we explain to the student how to do something or we help him or her understand something better. We try to show and tell in conferences as much as possible. We are extending the student's fistful of knowledge about writing. Sometimes we confirm something rather than extending, if we realize that the student is doing something smart that he or she doesn't know it's a smart thing to do. A good way to finish the conference is to ask a student,

"Say back to me what I just talked to you about". This is better than, "do you have any questions?". You can get a better handle on what the student understood by listening to the "say back" and the student gets a chance to articulate what he or she heard.

Record: Make a record of the conference. At the end of the conference, say, "OK, so what I'm going to write down is..." and tell the student the summary of the conference that you will write in your notes. "I'm going to write that we talked about using interior monologues of characters as a lead". It make take an extra minute to record what happened in the conference, but it is worth it.