

Reading Conferences: Assessment for Teaching and Learning

Written for Western Metropolitan Region by Diane Snowball and Faye Bolton, May 2010

Why confer with students about their reading?

Reading conferences provide the most useful opportunities for formative assessment of students' reading – assessment for teaching and learning. They allow teachers to gather information about their students' reading habits, interests, processes and strategies. Identifying each student's successes and difficulties during the actual act of reading is crucial for teachers who wish to provide the most appropriate teaching and learning experiences for individuals, groups and the whole class.

When do the conferences take place?

Conferring with students is an essential aspect of Independent Reading time, but can also be conducted at any time when students are reading. In fact, observing and conferring with students while they are reading a wide range of texts, including digital texts, in all areas of the curriculum will provide the most in-depth information about students' strengths and needs as readers.

Brief conferences

Conferences may be brief conversations as a teacher moves around the room checking in on how particular students are going with their reading. This type of roving conference is useful when students have been asked to focus on one reading goal, perhaps a strategy that has just been demonstrated while a teacher has read aloud or has been demonstrated and tried collaboratively during the shared reading of a text. A roving conference is also useful when a teacher is knowledgeable about individual student's goals and can quickly check how a student is working at achieving that goal.

In-depth conferences

More in-depth conferences may take 10-12 minutes, especially when a teacher is initially finding out about a student's reading.

All conferences should focus on:

- what students are doing as readers
- provide students with feedback about their strengths and the result of their efforts and suggest the next goal (which may be more about something they have already been working on) – this goal may be suggested by the student
- establish tasks that will help students improve their reading.

Students should always be active participants in the conference by:

- talking about what and how they have been practising
- responding to the text(s) they have been reading
- articulating the processes and strategies they are using
- stating new goals and describing how they will achieve them.

Conferences should always conclude with 'next steps' for the student, even if it is different from what the teacher anticipated. Teachers need to know and keep a record of what they have discovered about the student as a learner – what are their reading strengths, what are their needs, what are they interested in, what is getting in the way of learning? Students need to know what they have achieved and what to do next and this should be recorded in their personal reading notebook or reading journal, perhaps by the teacher or perhaps by the student, in the student's own words as much as possible.

What is being assessed in the conference?

Initial conferences may focus more on students' general hobbies and interests, on their reading interests (topics, genres, authors), when they read, what they think about reading and about themselves as readers, what they like to read at home, what else they like to do at home. It is also a time to develop a relationship with the student that shows you are genuinely concerned about getting to know them and that you are really interested in what they do as readers (and writers perhaps).

This is also a time to find out what they know about the act of reading –

- What strategies do they use to help their reading?
- What do they know about comprehension strategies?
- What do they do when they come to a word they do not recognise?
- How do they clarify the meaning of a word?
- Do they self-correct to ensure meaning?

If students have previously been working with teachers who have up-to-date knowledge about components of reading such as the six main comprehension strategies and about fluency, vocabulary and decoding, and have been taught in ways that empower students to articulate what they are doing as readers, will be able to provide a great deal of information about what they know and what they are working at. This information will be much more helpful than any formal assessment tool.

Other conferences are likely to be more related to specific strategies that are the current class focus or strategies and processes that the particular student has been working on. As students are reading more complex texts any of the components of the 'reading curriculum' may be the focus, such as comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, decoding, response to text and selection of texts for reading.

Components of a Reading Conference

The following experiences should be included for conferences to be most effective:

Planning for the reading conference

The teacher and the student need to be prepared for the conference. Teachers plan who to meet with and perhaps what they may focus on; they have tools for keeping records of the conference. Students bring box/folder/kit with material being read, journal, log, goals.

Learning about the student's personal interests and attitudes towards reading

This component of a Reading Conference needs to occur early in the school year, or with a student new to a class later in the year. However, it would also occur on occasions throughout the year. Developing interests, changing attitudes or expanding the variety of reading may be a focus for some students for several conferences.

Referring to previous goal(s), gathering information about the student's progress and discussing this information with the student

This component consistently occurs. Recorded goals are referred to in student's folder/notebook. Student discusses how practice has occurred and how goal is progressing. Teacher looks for evidence of progress, perhaps asking student to read aloud or demonstrate use of process or strategy. Record of progress is written for teacher and for student.

Hearing the student read

This component is essential when conferring with young students and less-experienced readers. Older, more experienced readers may also be asked to read aloud during a conference. This should also occur when conferring with all students at the beginning of a year, and with students new to a class at different times in the year. It is an essential component of a fluency-focused or decoding-focused reading conference. It is also necessary when checking if the text is just right.

Clarifying the processes or comprehension strategies or other aspects of reading (e.g. fluency, vocabulary, decoding, variety of texts being read) the student is using and ensuring the student is monitoring and reflecting on how these are used to support understanding the text

This component is essential in all conferences. This is when a teacher is finding out a student's reading strengths, areas of difficulty, aspects that require improvement. Always be sure that the text is understood, e.g. 'What is it about?', 'What does it make you think about?'

Providing personalised, specific feedback

This component is essential to all conferences. The feedback must be constructive and specify exactly what the student is doing. It is not OK to only make general comments, e.g. 'good'.

On-the-spot teaching

This component is essential whenever any difficulty occurs in student's reading. Demonstrate how to use the process/strategy, support the student attempting to do this, ask the student to try it independently.

More teaching may be required so record this.

Further teaching may be for the whole class or a group.

Agreeing on goals for further learning and establishing tasks to help achieve goals

This component is essential in all conferences. Discuss a suitable goal, establish what task(s) will need to be done to achieve the goal, be sure student knows how to do this, establish a time for next conference to check on progress.

Recording observations and comments

This component is essential in all conferences. A record is needed for the teacher, to know about the student and to make decisions about class, group and individual teaching. A record is also required for the student to keep, including the goal and tasks, preferably in the student's wording. When able to do so, students may write their own records.

Extending a student's reading interests

Some type of log of the student's reading should be maintained by the student so this can be referred to for extending reading to other authors, genres, topics, etc. The key must be referred to so there is a purpose for keeping it.

Finish positively

This component is essential for all conferences. Conclude with a positive statement about something specific that the student is doing.