

Student Conferences

Role Play

Discussion

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Types of Conferences

Pre-draft drop in

- *benefits for students

- *benefits for teachers: use to ferret out common problems and notify all students

- *policies e.g., when to close door

Pre-draft formal

- *“feed-forward” v. feedback

- *Require student preparation

Interim draft formal

Post-mortem

- *Often devolve into “why did I get this grade?”

- *Less learning because no revision

Optional v. mandatory

- *Costs and benefits

Timing Considerations

Length of Conference

- *Perhaps offer short time slots, but multiple options
- *Be realistic re: your available time/number of students

Return paper in advance

- *Discuss conference protocols with students in advance
- *The more tasks you require before the conference, the farther in advance you should return the papers.

Keep an eye on the next due date

- *Decide on optimal/bare minimum for time between conference and subsequent due date.
- *Can stagger next draft due dates and tie to conference dates; gives all students equal time before conference and equal time after conference.

Teacher preparation for the conference

Effective critique

- *Strive to write comments so that some comments will not need to be discussed at the conference

- *Use “TTMA” (“Talk To Me About . . .”) or other method to note items worth talking about

Final comment provides agenda

- *Limit to two or three major items

- *Discuss strengths as well as weaknesses

On-the-spot review

- *Write final comment with yourself in mind

- *Review paper at start of conference

- *Ideally, student and teacher each have copy (hard or digital)

Other

- *Have “ideal” and “reasonable” response in mind

- *Review law as needed to prepare for conference

- *Have outline(s), lists of authorities as “cheat sheet” during conference as needed.

Student preparation for the conference

Review of critique

Self-critique

- *Can assign before or after conferences
- *Clear standards
- *Praise recognition of strengths & weaknesses

Other assigned preparation

- *Research
- *Targeted revision
- *Outline completed draft
- *Outline gaps in draft

The Conference Itself

Establish an appropriate environment

- * Usually seat student next to (not across from) teacher
- * Work spaces: writing, research

Phases of the conference

- * Build rapport: make OT conversation
- * Overview/roadmap of conference
- * Work toward resolving the problems
- * Provide closure

Communicate effectively

- * Ask questions
- * Check for understanding

Encourage student participation and note-taking

- * Ask student questions *other* than yes or no questions
- * Recommend that student write certain things down
- * Ask for student's questions for you

Follow an agenda as needed

- * Have an agenda, and keep things moving as needed
- * Be flexible if new problems are revealed

Strategies for Addressing Problems

Reader-based reactions

- *Social perspective
- *Use law practice experience as appropriate

Quasi-Socratic

- *Show, don't tell, whenever possible
- *Sometimes you have to tell

“Link Back” to what student knows

- *Socratic method: start with easy questions
- *You may reveal where the misunderstanding occurred

Work on a section to illustrate a point

- *Can write in the conference as needed
- *Consider doing research in the conference

Validate what the student has done well

- *Praise whenever possible
- *Don't presume student understands what was right or why it was right

Ending the conference

Staying on schedule

- *Keep clock where you can see it
- *Keep moving on agenda

Addressing the future

*Ask student to list major tasks to complete before next due date

*If you offer to review more work, establish one or more limits, e.g.:

- *Deadline by which work must be submitted
- *Will give live review during Office Hours
- *Will only answer private memo questions
- *Will review a limited amount of text (e.g., headings, one paragraph, one page, one section)

Challenges

Guiding substance without telling too much

- *Sliding scale, depending on timing of conference and student needs

- *Consider fairness issues, but don't let them overwhelm good pedagogy

Not just a river in Egypt: Students who deny there is a problem

- *Use face-saving techniques

- *Use humor

- *Talk about the problem even in face of denial

ESL Students with writing problems

- *Get outside help when needed (for you and/or for student)

- *Pick small sections to focus on grammar issues

Challenges (cont'd)

Learning disabilities or other academic issues

- *Use syllabus to encourage notice, but have Associate Dean vet the syllabus language
- *Follow University and law school policies: have official diagnosis, but you do not get to decide if a diagnosed disability is “real”
- *Concentrate on present reality, not hypothetical future: Don't ask, “How will you ever practice law?”
- *Seek outside help, and/or encourage student to do so

Students with personal problems

- *Know school policies
- *Centralized notice system: Dean of Students should hear about all troubled students and may have good advice
- *Be willing to suspend course rules when appropriate: what would happen in practice in this situation?

Dealing with students who are unhappy about grades

- *Articulate standards (e.g., criteria sheets) that you distribute in advance
- *Tie comments on graded draft to standards
- *Offer letter of recommendation, if appropriate
- *Do not tolerate attempts at intimidation or bullying: demand professionalism
- *Resist desire to change grade to “make problem go away”
- *Articulate high standard for changing grades, and stick to it

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