

Conducting One-on-one Writing Consultations

One-on-one writing consultations must strike a delicate balance between working closely with a student to improve a paper and ensuring that you don't help too much by taking over their writing process.

The first step is deciding what the student most needs to work on. Many students have insight into their writing concerns, so the easiest way to start is to simply ask what they want help with. Often, they will let you know exactly where they are struggling. Others, however, will not know, or they will assume that their problems are merely mechanical and will not consider higher-order concerns. The best strategy for diagnosis in this case is reflective questioning.

Reflective questions to help diagnose writing problems

1. Did you have any problems understanding the assignment? Its content? Its structure?
2. What is your thesis/main point?
3. How did you argue for this? What evidence or theory did you draw on?
4. Did you consider [X's theory, this assumption, another important perspective]?

If the student is clear about the key concepts, the assignment, and the genre (e.g. lab report, research essay, critical review), and has developed a thoughtful argument, then the issues may be more related to organization of ideas or structuring of the argument.

Three key strategies for working on organization and structure:

1. Have the student describe the structure in general terms. Did he/she lead up to their main point or start off with it? How are the arguments ordered? From strongest to weakest? Another way? Why did the student choose that structure?
2. Ask the student to walk you through the main points of the argument. Whenever you are unclear on the logic, or wondering about the order of ideas, ask the student to explain further. (Caution: Be careful not to get too caught up in details!)
3. Go through the paper paragraph by paragraph with the student and ask him/her to write down the main point of each paragraph on a separate sheet of paper. Examine the resulting outline together.

If the higher-order concerns are well in hand and you still have time, the next step is to look at paragraphing. Do paragraphs seem well-structured? Do they begin with a clear topic sentence and develop one point? If there seems to be a number of tangents or the connections between ideas are unclear, the student likely needs to work on improving paragraph structure.

Strategies for helping students improve paragraphs

1. Let students know the conventions of paragraphing within your discipline and type of assignment. Often students have limited experience with different forms of writing, or they have been taught to meet quite different expectations; consequently, they may have trouble adapting previous writing experience to the current context.
2. Read a paragraph aloud and articulate your thinking as you are reading. Does a particular idea confuse you? Why? Demonstrating to students how their writing might be understood by another person helps them to see how clearly (or not!) their ideas are communicated.

Some students have most higher-order concerns under control, but truly need help with improving mechanics and sentence structure.

Helping with grammar and syntax

1. If you notice a pattern of error (i.e. in article usage or sentence structure), draw the student's attention to this pattern. Practice locating and correcting this error throughout the document together.
2. Ask the student to read a problematic section of the paper aloud – slowly. Often students will notice awkward sentence structure, missing words and other problems when doing this.
3. If you don't know grammar, don't pretend you do, as you could end up confusing the student even more.

Tips for ensuring an effective session:

1. Don't assume that you must read the whole paper in detail before beginning the conversation. Much can be diagnosed from simply discussing the assignment with students and asking good questions about their thinking and approach.
2. Don't try to correct all errors in one consultation. Focus on the most pressing concerns and make sure the student leaves with a clear plan of action to improve the draft. If there are just too many issues to address, encourage the student to book a Writing Centre appointment.