



icap

introductory
composition
at purdue

Conferencing Guide

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INTRODUCTION

The ICaP Conferencing Guide is a collection of strategies and activities for individual and group conferences. It was created in collaboration with the Syllabus Approach Leaders, ICaP Mentors, and both new and veteran English 106 instructors. Please keep it where you can reference it easily during your time at Purdue, but also note that a digital version will be available as a .pdf file on the ICaP website.

An integral part of the English 106 experience, conferences are a unique opportunity for you to engage students individually and in small groups. Through conferences, you will be able to gain insights into the challenges each student faces and where in the writing process these are emerging. Students can also receive individualized instruction through your office hours and the Purdue Writing Lab. However, there are some important differences between conferences, office hours, and tutorials, distinctions that are described below:

What a Conference Can Accomplish

The instructor is able to work with each writing student within scheduled class time.

Group members, including the instructor, are a familiar audience for each student.

The instructor can explain how the student's work is fitting into assignment and course objectives.

The instructor can structure conferences to complement class work as well as individual student development.

The conferencing rooms provide a formal, focused learning environment.

Formal conference times are consistent, but fixed and limited in duration.

Students are required to attend conferences, which maintains the importance and structure of conferencing as a component of English 106.

The instructor can develop good working relationships with the students, getting to know them individually.

Conferences facilitate mutual collaboration between the teacher and the student. They demonstrate that revision is a collaborative effort, a mutual process, in which the students and I are partners. Although this process obviously maintains my supervising role as a teacher, the students are no longer the mere receivers of my instructions, directions, or guidelines, but they actively participate by reflecting, analyzing, asking, and revising. – Lena Shvidko

What Office Hours Can Accomplish

The instructor is able to talk about grades and other personal issues not appropriate for the conference room.

Office hours are consistent, but give students some flexibility in scheduling a time to meet and determining the length of the meeting.

Students are not required to attend office hours.

Office hours are an important opportunity for one-to-one discussion, especially if conferences are held in groups.

What the Writing Lab Can Accomplish

The tutor can work with a student for 30 minutes, twice a week, extending work done with the instructor.

The tutor as knowledgeable peer can listen and respond to how the student sees his or her work meeting assignment and course criteria.

The Writing Lab has a flexible schedule, open all day for appointments and at evening satellite locations.

If the student requests the same tutor and comes in consistently, a good working relationship can develop.

NOTE: Writing Lab tutors are ready to help students learn how to proofread or to help them see what categories of error to proofread for, but they will not go over a paper and correct the errors for the student. The core of a tutorial is talk—

conversations about ideas the student might have for a paper, dialogue that leads a student to answer his own questions, and talk that helps the student refine her ideas and ask the questions she has about a draft of a paper or an assignment. Students are advised to consult their instructors about course-specific issues.

Some students come to the Writing Lab on their own, but most do not. Students may need extra encouragement to visit. However, requiring students to attend often sets up an adversarial relationship in which students start out very unhappy at having attendance forced on them. Even offering extra credit can be problematic because students may only be interested in obtaining points rather than advice. The Writing Lab does not allow instructors to require entire classes to schedule tutorials, but the directors are available to discuss instructors' needs for working with particular classes.

INSTRUCTOR ETHOS IN THE CONFERENCE SETTING

Conferences tend to be personal, attentive, and conversational, and as such should come out of an inquisitive but non-judgmental attitude from the instructor.

Strategies used in writing center tutorials can be helpful in English 106 conferences, as well. For example:

- Encourage reading and listening aloud.
- Leave the solving of writing problems with the student; that is, do not give them the answer but help them figure it out on their own.
- Ask the student to summarize next steps, either verbally or in writing.

One way to create a non-directive atmosphere is to ask guiding questions, which can prevent students from resorting to "I Don't Know" while providing a more conversational environment:

- What is your goal for the topic?
- Who will encounter this text and how?
- How could you find out more about this?
- Why are you personally invested in this project?
- What does the public/another audience know or need to know about this topic?
- How are you going to make others care?
- Who has said what about your subject and how do you respond?
- How do you define your terms?
- Who would disagree and why?
- What possibilities is this topic excluding?
- *If in a group, bounce questions back ("What does everyone else think?")*

Disappear (responsibly) — Let students answer each other's questions. This takes some skill at first because I naturally want to just give a clear cut answer up front. If students are leading each other astray, step in. When a student answers another student's question, I usually motion (verbally and nonverbally) that s/he should be directing the answer to the person who asked the question. Afterwards, I also try to get students to be more engaged by asking them "What do you think?" before I respond. — Fernando Sánchez.

Along with asking nondirective questions, giving a reader response is also a useful strategy. When responding as a reader, make clear when you're giving instructions in your role as instructor-evaluator and when you're making a suggestion they can take or leave. Sometimes, the two go together (e.g., the conclusion isn't working and needs to be revised, and here's one or two options to consider when you do).

PLANNING A CONFERENCE CONFIGURATION

Instructors should not meet with more than 5 students in the conference room at one time. Within these restrictions, you can schedule the following configurations based on group size and time per group:

Larger Group Conferences

25 minutes per group: 5 + 5 students

Benefits: Larger groups allow for livelier discussions and brainstorming sessions. Students form connections with one another not possible in class. Students may supplement or challenge one another's ideas.

Challenges: Groups of 5 students are often too large and noisy for the small space of the conferencing center. It can also be more difficult to look closely at individuals' texts in groups of five.

Small-Medium Sized Group Conferences

20 minutes per group: 3 + 3 + 4 students

12 minutes per group: 3 + 3 + 4 students – even smaller groups

10 minutes per group (or 20 minutes every other week): 2 (x 5) students

Benefits: Students can interact with each other in manageable groups. Often, this is an ideal size for peer review. Students working on similar projects can meet together.

Challenges: Working in groups often makes it harder to go in-depth with individual writing or student needs.

Individual Conferences

5 minutes per student (or 10 minutes every other week): 1 (x 10) students

Benefits: Instructors come to know students individually. Students are given more responsibility for

I find one-on-one conferences to be especially useful for establishing a classroom environment and an instructor-student dynamic in which students feel encouraged to ask questions about the material we are covering in class as well as other composition-related things in their lives. Because there are no other students to hide behind in one-on-one conferences, I find that my students come to such conferences more prepared to talk about their work in detail and to ask questions than they do for

conferences. Personalized meetings allow in-depth focus on writing and revision.

Challenges: Students cannot get feedback from others. Peer editing and discussion are not possible. Five minute meetings might be too short to get much done. Ten minutes is better, but means that meetings are less frequent

INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCING: ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES

One-to-One conferencing is an opportunity to provide the individualized feedback that isn't always possible in a full class atmosphere. Students will be able to ask questions that they might not feel comfortable asking during class time and work with their instructor on specific writing concerns. One-to-One conferencing can be used at all points of the semester to provide personalized feedback. Ideal activities for individual conferences include:

Beginning of semester:

- Set goals for the semester. Ask student to describe his or her strengths and areas for growth as a writer. Discuss how you, the course material, and classmates can help him or her build upon these strengths and address areas for growth.

If you will be putting students into groups in class or for conferences, use one-to-one conferences as an opportunity to learn more about each student and how you can effectively group them together. You might even ask students fill out a skills and strengths inventory that includes technological proficiencies (e.g., filmmaking, web design).

- Use the first one-to-one conference to build rapport and learn more your students' lives outside of English 106. Ask about their other classes and their extracurricular activities. You might also ask them about the kinds of writing they'll be assigned in their other classes.
- Questions you might ask in a beginning-of-the-semester questionnaire, or verbally during your first conference, include:
 - What do you hope to get out of ENGL 106/106I/108 by the end of the term?
 - What are your academic interests and career goals?
 - What other courses are you taking this term?
 - What other writing courses have you taken?
 - What kinds of writing and reading do you prefer?
 - Are there particular difficulties with writing you hope to overcome?
 - What experience do you have with languages other than English?
 - Is there anything you would like me to know that will help me, as your instructor?(see Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 79)

Invention Stage

- Brainstorm ideas for the paper. Use the conference as a way to teach invention strategies. Offer a variety of invention strategies (e.g., mind mapping, outlining, and free-writing) and discuss which of these fits students' learning and writing styles.
- Review assignment expectations. Read the assignment sheet together and ask if the student has questions. Many students are more comfortable asking questions in a one-to-one conference than in class.
- If the assignment involves research, use the conferencing center or the students' laptop to show them research tools. Activities might include: have them practice search strategies using their preliminary paper topic; show them the Purdue library guides.

Revision Stage

- Have student bring in a “problem section” of assignment—which could be an introduction, conclusion, or body paragraph. Talk with them about their concerns and provide suggestions for improvement.
- If you returned written feedback on a draft prior to the conference, use the one-to-one conference as an opportunity to elaborate on your comments and provide clarification if needed.
- Return your feedback on their drafts during the conference. Provide handwritten comments (or print out track changes) and review them with the student.
- Work on sentence-level writing. If you have already seen a draft prior to the conference, focus on specific grammar errors or stylistic areas for improvement that you observed in this draft.
 - Review the rules or style suggestions that you have discussed in class, and have them independently apply it to a section of their own writing.
 - Encourage them to read their writing aloud so they can both see and hear it. Writers often catch errors or stylistic areas for improvement that they miss when reading silently.
 - Ask students to analyze their own writing styles. Student can do this by choosing one or two paragraphs in their draft and “circling all the subjects or all the verbs, counting the length of each sentence, or examining their use of parallelism, coordination, or subordination” (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 96).
- Ask students how they will apply conference discussions to their revision; what are their next steps? Some instructors also require students to write down their plans, which becomes a sort of informal contract between student and teacher for the revised version. That is, if the student does not follow through on their revisions, you can refer to this when explaining your grade for the final draft (Gottschalk and Hjortshoj 68).

Between assignments:

- Ask students to reflect on their writing process for the last assignment. What challenges did they experience? What did they do well? How can they apply what they learned about their writing process to the next assignment?
- Discuss a topic related to sentence-level writing that you haven't had an opportunity to address in class or in previous conferences.
- Review goals that the student set at the beginning of the semester. How are they reaching those goals? Which areas do they still want to work on?
- Plan one or two conferences during the semester when students can bring in writing from other classes, or materials like resumes, cover letters, and applications. Discuss how they can apply what they've learned in class to these writing situations.

Last semester, I asked my students for feedback during the first few weeks about something they'd like to see incorporated into the course. One of the most common requests was for information on writing resumes and cover letters. I was able to create a "resume workshop" about halfway through the semester. I scheduled it during the middle of a unit, before students had a draft due but after I explained the assignment. The workshop worked really well as a "filler" exercise, and it was a direct result of my students' input into the class. – Katherine Hummel

- Have students complete a mid-term written evaluation. This will give you the opportunity to get students' feedback on how the course is working for them and what you can continue to help them with. These also give students good practice providing specific written comments in advance of submitting their final course evaluations.

End of semester:

- *Reflect on students' initial goals for the semester that were established during one of your earlier conferences. Which of those goals have they met? Which remaining goals do they still want to meet? How can they continue to reach those goals after the semester is over?*
- *Discuss how students can apply what they learned in the course to future writing tasks. Discuss anticipated writing in other classes or longer-term academic and career goals.*

GROUP CONFERENCING: ACTIVITIES AND STRATEGIES

Group conferencing can help you to further establish community in your class and improve students' skills in providing feedback to others. A popular approach to group conferencing involves group work on writing. Some instructors refer to conferencing groups as "writing groups" to help encourage a sense of community and collaboration.

Strategies for organizing groups:

One of the challenges to group conferencing is determining your groups. Below are a few strategies that other instructors have used.

- *Hold individual conferences during the first two weeks and have students fill out a skills inventory or discuss what they perceive as their writing strengths and areas for improvement. Organize groups so that students who are strong in one aspect of writing can help those wanting to strengthen this area.*
- *If you'll be assigning a group project, schedule conferences so that these groups can meet together. Using conferences for discussion and work time can strengthen group dynamics and minimize the amount of outside group meetings that students need to coordinate.*
- *Some instructors have grouped students based on their major. Putting students in groups with similar majors can help them to better apply their learning in English 106 to their writing in their majors.*
- *You can choose to either assign students to the same groups throughout the semester or switch it up. Advantages of the same groups include that students become more willing to talk with each other over the course of the semester and learn more about each other's strengths and areas for growth (and thus provide more helpful feedback on their writing). Benefits of changing groups include that students will be able to get feedback and provide feedback on more students in the class.*

Invention Stage

- *Review the assignment sheet as a group. Have the group paraphrase the goals and requirements of the assignment.*

I encourage conference groups to discuss their agenda and submit a pre-conference form during the class session prior to the conference. This way I can open up conversation by referencing their plan and how they wish to proceed. – Lauren Mallett

- *Collaboratively develop writing topics:*
 - *Have each student share their ideas for a paper topic, after which each group members will give additional ideas or suggestions on how to narrow or expand the student's topic.*
 - *Introduce invention techniques (mind mapping, free writing, outlining, etc.)*
 - *Ask students to free write for a few minutes about their topic ideas. Have them either read their writing out loud or give it to another group member for feedback.*

- *If the assignment involves secondary research, work together on research strategies.*

Revision Stage

- **Peer Review:**
 - *Have students share their writing 24 hours before the conference.*
 - *Set up “email buddies” for feedback on drafts.*
- *Ask students to bring one question or problem with current assignment. Go around the circle and have them share their question/problem.*
- *Work on introductions and conclusions. When working on introductions, especially, you can use the brevity of the conference time to your advantage (i.e., does the student introduce the topic quickly and effectively? Do you want to keep reading?)*

Between Assignments:

- *Ask students to come to conferences with an article related to the theme of the unit. Record these articles on a google doc or other shared space.*

CHALLENGING SCENARIOS

Below are some “problem” scenarios that instructors sometimes encounter, and several suggestions on how to address them.

My students don’t talk.

- *Leave the room on the pretense that you are getting a drink of water. Students may find it easier to talk with each other if you give them some space on their own.*
- *Ask non-directive questions.*

My students don’t show up for their conferences.

- *Make a conference absence count as one absence for the course.*
- *Establish the importance and benefits of conferences during the first week of class.*
- *If students forget when they are scheduled, send reminders at the beginning of the week with everyone’s scheduled time, or post schedule on your course management system.*

Some of my students are showing up late.

- *Make tardiness affect their grade, perhaps by counting two late arrivals as one absence.*

Some of my students come unprepared for the conference, so it ends up being unproductive.

- *Require that students bring materials for the conference. Be clear that not bringing these materials counts as an absence (and stick with it).*

During the first week of conferences, I explain that conferencing is designed to help students receive answers to their questions and feedback about the specific issues in their projects. It both puts the responsibility on students' shoulders to come prepared with questions and assignments and affords them the chance to direct conferencing in ways that cater to their needs. – Adam Hancock

There isn't enough time to address what we need to.

- *If you find that you don't have enough time, adjust your goals for the conference. For example, you may need to have students bring only one question or concern to the conference. Having students identify the concern/question limits the amount of time you spend identifying problems. If you're doing peer review, focus on smaller excerpts of the students' writing.*
- *Encourage student(s) to visit the Writing Lab or your office hours for further help.*

A REMINDER ABOUT CONFERENCING ROOM ETIQUETTE

In order to provide a conducive atmosphere for discussion, please meet with no more than 5 students at a time. Generally, 2-3 instructors are assigned to a conference room during a given class period, and the room cannot hold more than 15 people comfortably. Because of this, and because HEAV 223 and 225 have been provided to ICaP as a space reserved for conferencing, you are also required to hold conferences in the room you were assigned—not in the other conference room, and not in other places like the Union or a coffee shop.

Finally, remind your students to follow usual rules for etiquette and not leave any items—e.g., food wrappers, empty coffee cups, scrap paper—in the conference room. Make sure that you follow this as well.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Gottschalk, Catherine and Keith Hjortshoj. **The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines.** New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2003. Print.*

*Lerner, Neil. "The Student-Teacher Writing Conference and the Desire for Intimacy." **College English** 68.2 (2005): 186-206. Print.*

*Ryan, Leigh and Lisa Zimmerelli. **Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors.** 6th Ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2015. Print.*