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**CHAPTER 10**

**Holding Conferences with Students**

**CHAPTER OVERVIEW**

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**WHY CONFERENCES ARE IMPORTANT**

One of the most effective ways for students to learn is to work individually with a teacher. However, in most American universities, offering such instruction is difficult: too many students, too few teachers. Yet teachers know that covering material for five minutes with an individual student is often more productive than covering that same material for an hour with the entire class. During those five minutes, the teacher has the student's total attention and can respond to that student's specific questions and concerns. Meeting one-on-one with a student changes the dynamics of instruction—physical barriers between teacher and student are reduced, the pressure of performance on both sides is diminished, interactions are less formal. Holding conferences with your students can help you establish a more comfortable classroom atmosphere, improve discipline, and meet your students' individual needs.

## REASONS TO HOLD CONFERENCES WITH STUDENTS

Teachers meet individually with students for a variety of reasons, and at different times throughout the semester.

### Getting Acquainted

Some like to hold brief meetings with every student in the class early in the semester. These get-acquainted conferences offer you and your students a chance to chat informally and get to know each other and can pay large dividends later in the course. First, having visited your office once, your students are more likely to return later when they need help. Second, meeting one-on-one helps you form personal relationships with your students. Third, after conferences, students often feel more comfortable speaking up and participating in your class and you feel more comfortable working with them individually.

### Discussing Papers

During the term, many teachers like to meet with students individually to discuss their work on particular papers. They talk about the student's choice of topic, review a preliminary outline, or discuss a completed draft. During these conferences, you can answer specific questions the student has about his work, assure a student that she is on the right track, or steer a student in a more productive direction. Occasionally students may ask you to edit or proofread their papers for them. Avoid the temptation to do this. When you edit or proofread student papers, you are doing work they ought to be doing. Students improve as editors and proofreaders only through practice—when you do the work for them, you deny them vital opportunities to learn and grow. But at the same time, if they need help, you do not want to turn them away. There are some compromises.

For example, you might carefully proofread or edit one paragraph in the paper with the student watching. Explain the reason for every change you make and point out any pattern of errors you see. Then have the student proofread and edit the next paragraph in the paper while you watch and ask her to explain the reason for each change. When the student finishes, you can correct any mistakes she has made, point out errors or problems she has missed, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the student's proofreading practices. The student must then proofread and edit the rest of the paper on her own. Other teachers like to meet with the student, read the entire paper, circle significant errors, and then watch as the student makes the needed corrections.

### Discussing Personal Matters

Sometimes students will want to talk to you privately about matters totally unrelated to class. Yours may be the smallest, most intimate class students take. Consequently, many of your students will come to feel closer to you than

they do to any other instructor they have. If you are young, there may be an even greater identification. It is not unusual, then, for first-year students to turn to you when they need help or advice. Often they will want to discuss academic matters—they may need a recommendation letter for a scholarship, for example, or want advice on choosing a major. Help the students as much as you can and, if necessary, steer them toward people on campus who can offer additional advice and guidance.

The same advice holds true for students who want help with personal matters. Students may want to talk with you about problems they are having adjusting to college life, difficulties they are having with a roommate, or confrontations they have had with another teacher. Mature judgment and discretion are called for in these cases. Sometimes students just need to vent and will feel better after talking to someone. Other times, though, students may need more help than you can provide. If a student is facing severe emotional problems, refer him to the appropriate campus office or administrator for help. If necessary, help the student set up the appointment. Do not assume responsibility for your students' psychological or emotional well-being. That is not your job. Every college has staff and administrators who are trained to help students work through problems like these. Be supportive and get your students the help they need.

## ARRANGING CONFERENCES

Students will sometimes drop in to see you during your posted office hours. The students usually set the agenda for these meetings—they have something specific to discuss with you. Other times you may require your students to schedule conferences with you—some teachers want every student to meet with them outside of class at least once during the term; other teachers establish more specific expectations, requiring every student to see them once during the first month of class, once around midterm, and once during finals.

Occasionally, you may need to ask specific students to see you in your office. Sometimes these students need individualized tutoring to improve as writers; other times you need to discuss their behavior in class. When you want to hold an individual conference with a student, ask the student to stop by during your office hours. If the student cannot meet you then, set up an appointment at a mutually convenient time.

## WHERE TO MEET WITH STUDENTS

One of the reasons conferences work well as a teaching tool is because they are so flexible: where you meet with students can change as the need demands. You can hold conferences in class or outside of class, in your office or elsewhere on campus. Each location has its own benefits and limitations.

### Meeting with Students in Class

Although most conferences take place outside the classroom, some teachers like to hold “mini conferences” with students during class. Here is how it typically works. On a day when students are writing in class, each student meets individually with the teacher for a brief, highly focused conference. Sometimes the students bring their work up to the teacher’s desk for the conference; other times the teacher circulates around the room, talking to each student individually.

These short conferences can be surprisingly effective teaching tools. Five minutes or less may not seem like much time to spend with a student, but when the conferences are focused on a specific task or question, you can accomplish a lot. Meeting during class helps you address the needs of students who cannot meet with you during office hours and gives you a good sense of the progress your students are making on particular assignments.

### Meeting with Students in Your Office

Like most teachers, you will frequently talk with students in your office, which can be problematic for TAs. At many schools, TAs lack adequate office space—they either have no offices or must share space with several TAs in a central “bull pen.” When completing my master’s degree, for example, I shared a room with around twenty other TAs. Holding private conferences with students there was difficult and at times impossible. If this is the case at your school, some commonly accepted rules of etiquette apply. First, you need to talk with your officemates about which activities take precedence in the office: Should TAs holding conferences leave the room if other TAs are working quietly, or vice versa? Second, if another TA is working in the office while you are holding a conference, try to keep your voice down; if you have something private to discuss with the student, find a more private place to talk. Finally, coordinate your office hours with the other TAs. Try not to let them overlap: if you want to hold office hours early on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, see if your officemate can come in later on those days or on Tuesday and Thursday. Making decisions like this early in the semester will help you avoid problems later.

Because this is a litigious age, you need to take some commonsense precautions when you meet with students in your office. Some of these recommendations may strike you as silly or extreme, but recent experiences of teachers around the country make them necessary. For example, except under extraordinary circumstances, keep your office door open during conferences. You can still hold private conversations with your students if you keep your voices down. Second, during a conference, if a student says anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, tell your teaching supervisor right away. If a student makes a sexist, racist, homophobic, or other offensive remark, tell the student that such speech is not acceptable and immediately let your teaching supervisor know this has occurred. Likewise, if a student flirts with you or

makes sexual advances, discourage the behavior and tell your teaching supervisor. If you feel uncomfortable talking to your supervisor about this sort of student behavior, tell your officemate and write up a report of the incident that you both sign and date. If it happens a second time, see your teaching supervisor immediately. During a conference, do not become too familiar with your students—standards of professional conduct apply inside your office just as they do in your classroom. Sexual harassment charges can easily arise if you talk to or touch students inappropriately during conferences. Always remain professional in your demeanor and in your interaction with students.

Finally, arrange the furniture in your office to facilitate student conferences. Make sure you and your student can sit next to each other as you look over a paper and that you can speak to each other in a normal tone of voice. If you have a computer in your office, place it where you and your student can both see the screen. If your school puts you in a TA bull pen, decide with your officemates where students should wait for their appointments and set aside space for their coats and book bags.

### Meeting with Students Outside Your Office

Sometimes you may find it better to have conferences with students outside your office. For example, you might want to hold some office hours in dorm lounges or meeting rooms so that it is easier for students to meet with you. Getting together in dorm lounges also helps you understand the life your students lead—you get a better sense of your students’ experiences outside the classroom. You could occasionally meet with your students in the school’s cafeteria, sharing a cup of coffee as you talk about class. The campus library is also a good place, especially if your students are working on a research project; you can help your students conduct searches, locate material, or write their papers.

Meeting outside the office has some strengths, but it also has a couple of drawbacks. First, meeting outside the office means you may not have access to some needed resources, such as dictionaries, sample texts, old handouts, or computers. Second, holding these conferences can be demanding on your time. Unless you meet with students around campus during your regular office hours, you will need to set aside extra time for these conferences. In my experience, though, students truly appreciate your willingness to move outside the office. Because these meetings usually take place during off hours—in the evening or on weekends—which the students may find more convenient than your office hours, the students know you are setting aside special time for them and make a concerted effort to see you.

A word of warning: always make sure you hold these conferences in a public place. As a TA, do not meet with students privately in your home or in their dorm rooms. Though your interactions with these students might be totally professional and innocent, meeting with students privately outside the office is not wise.

## MEETING WITH GROUPS OF STUDENTS

For several reasons, you may want to hold conferences with more than one student at a time. If your students are working on group projects, for example, you may want to meet with each group of students to answer their questions and check on their progress. When you do, make sure every group member understands the meeting time and place and choose a location that can accommodate the entire group comfortably. You may need to meet in a dorm meeting room or in an empty classroom. During the conference, solicit comments from each group member—this is the group's best opportunity to get your advice and your best opportunity to gauge how well the group members work together as a team.

Even if your students are not working together on a project, you may want to schedule group conferences. During these sessions, in addition to talking with you, the students have an opportunity to talk with and help each other. The students may hesitate to play this role during a conference, but with your encouragement, they will. TAs who have used this conferencing technique in the past report more and better class participation afterward: during the conferences their students learned how to listen and respond to each other, lessons they carried into the classroom. On a more practical level, while group conferences last longer than one-on-one meetings, you have to hold fewer of them to meet with every student in class. At certain points in the term, group conferences may best fit your schedule—holding fewer conferences frees up time for your own research and course work.

## HOLDING CONFERENCES WITH STUDENTS: A SURVIVAL GUIDE

Regardless of when or where you meet with your students, here are some tips that can make your conferences more productive and manageable.

### 1. *Keep the conferences short and focused.*

Generally, individual conferences should run ten to twenty minutes, not longer. If a student needs more help than you can offer in twenty minutes, set up another appointment when you can start fresh. Conferences function best when you and your students can work intently on a few specific tasks.

### 2. *Let the student talk and work.*

Guard against monopolizing the conversation during a conference or doing work the student should be doing. Encourage your students to ask questions during a conference and to talk about their writing strategies. Noted composition teacher and researcher Donald Murray has written extensively about students' ability to teach themselves during a conference—as they explain a problem they are facing, they frequently find their own solution. At that point, you only need to confirm their plans if you agree with them.

Also, avoid the temptation to write or rewrite your student's paper during a conference. For example, if you and a student are trying to find the best wording for a thesis statement, talk it out with your student, but have the student write it. The same holds true for editing a text—in most cases, have the student do the work. You may correct a sentence or two as you model the right procedures to follow, but then insist that the student edit the rest of the paper. Your students will learn more by doing the work themselves than they will by watching you do the work.

### 3. *Schedule appointments.*

During open office hours, meet with students on a first-come, first-serve basis, but when you plan to meet with a number of students on any given day, use a sign-up sheet. Schedule conferences to start at fifteen- to twenty-minute intervals and have the students sign up for a slot. Keep one copy of the schedule with you in your office and post another copy outside your office door. Keep to this schedule; if a student comes late for the appointment, do not extend the time scheduled for her conference. Ask that student to sign up for another appointment.

### 4. *Treat appointments like class meetings—expect attendance.*

As a TA, few things are more frustrating than students skipping appointments. This behavior is especially frustrating if you have made a special trip into the office to meet with them. To avoid these problems, let your students know that this sort of behavior is not acceptable in college, that they must keep the appointments they make. If they have to miss an appointment, tell them to let you know so you can change your plans. To reinforce this policy, some TAs like to treat scheduled appointments like class meetings: missing an appointment is like missing a class and counts against the student if a course attendance policy is in effect. If a student makes a habit of missing scheduled appointments, stop arranging them. Tell the student to come see you during your regular, posted office hours.

### 5. *Schedule breaks.*

When new TAs schedule conferences with a large number of students, many forget to set aside time for breaks. They quickly discover that they have no time to take notes, head to the restroom, or eat lunch. A TA will only make this mistake once, but it can be a miserable lesson to learn. You might as well avoid the problem all together by scheduling breaks when you put together your conference sign-up sheet and spreading the conferences out over two or three days.

### 6. *Change venue every once in a while.*

To avoid falling into a rut when you hold conferences, try meeting with students in a variety of locations—your office, a dorm meeting room, an empty classroom, the cafeteria, the library. Changing where you meet often changes the dynamic of the conference. Certain students may respond more positively than usual in certain venues—they may feel more comfortable talking to you in a dorm commons or school cafeteria. Plus, a change of venue helps you stay fresh.

## 7. Record the results of conferences.

Find some way to keep track of what you and your students discuss in these conferences. Such record keeping is standard practice for writing center tutors today; learn from their experience. After a conference has ended, briefly summarize the session in a teaching or conference log (many TAs like to keep these records on computer disks for easy storage). You might also require your students to submit a summary of every meeting they have with you. Writing these summaries will help your students remember what the two of you discussed during the conference and help you maintain a complete record of each meeting.

These conference survival tips are summarized in Figure 10.1 below.

**FIGURE 10.1 Conference Survival Tips**

1. Keep the conferences short and focused.
2. Give the student a chance to talk and work.
3. Schedule appointments.
4. Treat appointments like class meetings.
5. Schedule breaks.
6. Change venues every once in a while.
7. Record the results of your conferences.

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## CHAPTER 11

# Teaching Literature

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### INTRODUCTION

Many TAs eagerly look forward to teaching literature. After all, this is why they entered the profession. Other TAs are less enthusiastic about the prospect; though they have taken many literature classes, these TAs question their ability to be good literature teachers themselves. Although teaching literature successfully does require instructors to employ a unique set of skills, TAs usually improve quickly with practice, drawing on their knowledge and experience as readers. This chapter should help you get started.