

SMALL-GROUP WRITING CONFERENCES, K–5

How to Use Your Instructional
Time More Efficiently

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Why Is Small-Group Work Necessary?

In my third-grade classroom, I felt a sense of satisfaction when I was able to hold four or five individual conferences a day. That was a lot. But it still wasn't enough. I wanted to meet with all my students at least once a week. And I wanted to meet with my students who struggled more often than that. With no more time to give, I fell short of that goal every day, every week, every month.

After studying conferring in small groups and rethinking instructional approaches during the write-and-confer portion of the writing workshop, I now think we can plan the time we spend conferring in much more ambitious ways. Instead of meeting with four or five students a day, why not with ten or fifteen? I know what you're thinking: *I'm going to need more time*. But the number of conferences can remain the same. We'll just expand our *definition* of conferring to include partnerships and small groups of three or four children.

A Classroom Snapshot

Laura Roe, a second-grade teacher, has just wrapped up her minilesson. Today she launched a brand new unit of study, poetry. She taught her delighted poets how to see the world through the poet's eye: how to take ordinary objects and look at those objects as a poet would, finding beauty and unexpected qualities. Children tiptoe to their table groups. Their poetry folders, writing paper, and freshly sharpened pencils rest momentarily on desks, at the ready. The students begin to write.

Laura pushes a button on the CD player. Soft music fills the room. Then she pulls a chair up to a table group. She has her own poetry folder (just like the ones her students are using), her own poetry paper (just like the paper her students are using), and her own freshly sharpened pencil. She, too, begins to write a poem. After a minute or two, Laura stands up and begins circulating among the students, reading over their shoulders, jotting quick notes on her clipboard.

She pauses next to Raul, who is sitting quietly, a puzzled look on his face, his paper blank. She bends down so that she is on Raul's level. "Raul, how's it going?" Raul says he doesn't know what to write about. Laura smiles and pats him on the shoulder. She reminds him that writers have strategies they use when they face the blank page and that poetry is no different. She has a *one-to-one conference*, reminding Raul of strategies he already knows as a writer. Raul begins to write the first line of his poem. . . .

Laura continues her "research." She reads over shoulders. She smiles warmly. She nods when she passes children who excitedly hold up their poems for her admiration. She gives a thumbs-up to several students and jots a few names on her clipboard.

Quietly, she taps Giovany. "Grab your poem and meet me on the rug," she whispers. She asks Britany to do the same. Jermaine, too. The three children and Laura sit together in a small circle. Laura begins, "I called you all over to the rug because as I was reading over your shoulders, I noticed all of you were working really hard writing poems. I was amazed how much you all have written already. Will each of you hold up your poems so we can admire your work?" Giovany, Britany, and Jermaine proudly do so. "Britany, you've worked really hard on your beach poem. Jermaine, you must be so proud of your backyard poem. Giovany, I see you are writing a poem about your brother. He's the topic of so much of your writing, isn't he?"

Next, Laura asks the students to place their poems and pencils behind them for a moment and takes her own poem out of her folder. "I wrote this poem today. Then I reread it, and I noticed it doesn't look like a poem or sound like a poem. It looks and sounds just like the stories we were writing last week in our narrative unit. Whenever I write a poem that looks and sounds like a story, I reread it and try to cross out any words that sound like story words—

one time, then, after that—and dull words like *the*, *and*, or *are*. I try to leave in words that show action, describe feeling, and evoke image. And because I know that poets often work hard to make meaning with fewer words, I try to rewrite my poem in less space, like this.” Laura takes a fresh piece of paper out of her folder, folds it in half lengthwise, and demonstrates the work she’s described. Then she sums up her teaching point: “You can try this strategy whenever you write poetry. If your poem is starting to look or sound more like a story, you could try eliminating words you don’t need and rewriting your poem in shorter lines so that it looks and sounds more like a poem. Let’s try this work right here on the rug, shall we?”

As the students in this *skill group conference* try out the strategy on their poems, Laura offers specific suggestions and praise, pointing to places in their writing. Britany uses the strategy independently, while Giovany needs some additional coaching. Once each child is applying the strategy on his or her own, Laura encourages the children to continue working on the rug and tells them she’ll be back in a few moments to admire their progress. As she walks away, Giovany, Britany, and Jermaine continue to reread their poems and cross out words.

Laura then approaches the table where Mackenzie is sitting. All five children there are writing poems. Mackenzie is drawing a picture in the box at the top of the paper Laura provided. Once again Laura bends down to eye level. “How’s it going, Mackenzie?” Mackenzie looks up at her teacher wide-eyed and explains that she is drawing a part of her poem in the box. Laura replies, “That’s really smart work, Mackenzie. You are using a strategy we learned as writers earlier in the year, that if you want to add detail to your writing, something you can do is to sketch.”

Laura then begins a *table conference* with all the students sitting at this table. “Poets. May I have your attention? I can see you know what to do when a teacher says, ‘May I have your attention?’ because your pencils are down and all of your eyes are on me. I want to show you Mackenzie’s poem. Do you notice how Mackenzie is using her sketch box? She remembered we learned how writers often make a drawing when they want to add details to their piece. She knows that these strategies we’re learning as writers are for anytime we write. We could all try Mackenzie’s strategy right now. If you want to

add details to your poem, the way Mackenzie did, draw a sketch in your box or add to the one you've already drawn. Then try adding those details to your poem."

The students pick up their pencils and begin sketching. Laura moves around the table, coaching and scaffolding. "I noticed you added polka dots to your beach umbrella in your sketch, Anna. Are you planning on adding that detail to your beach poem? Where do you think it might fit best?"

Leaving the table, Laura decides to check the progress of the skill group on the carpet. As she approaches, Giovany is reading his poem to Britany and Jermaine, who are nodding and smiling. Laura joins them. "I see all of you have rewritten your poem so that it looks and sounds more like a poem. Continue what you were doing, I just want to listen in." Britany reads her poem out loud to the group. Jermaine responds, "I like your poem because it sounds poetic." Britany turns to Laura and smiles.

It's time to wrap up. Laura asks her poets to put their pencils down. Sighs, whines, and clicks of the tongue are heard from every corner of the classroom. As Laura asks everyone to meet on the rug for a share session, she assures them that tomorrow they will write again.

Behind the Snapshot

While the children were writing, Laura met with one student in a one-to-one conference, three students in a skill conference, and five children in a table conference—a total of nine students—without increasing the time she spent on conferences. She was able to meet the needs of more students by changing the *way* she conferred with them. When a change in approach means teachers can have effective and meaningful conferences with ten or fifteen children instead of four or five, that change becomes *necessary*. Small-group instruction:

- contributes to "two-fisted teaching"
- allows us to widen our approach to assessment
- helps us focus on strategy-based instruction
- enriches cooperative learning and provides social benefits

Two-Fisted Teaching

We can think about Katie Wood Ray’s apt “fistful” of knowledge not just in terms of one fist but two. In one fist, we hold what we know about writing *content*: genre, topics, structure, focus, elaboration, voice, syntax, conventions, and the like. In the other fist, we hold what we know about our *teaching practices*: ways to engage children, types of instruction, methods of teaching, teaching tools, management techniques, organization and planning, and so forth.

What energized me most about studying and conferring with small groups of children was the growth I experienced as a writing teacher. Exponential growth. When we confer with one child, we usually have their eyes and their attention because of the one-to-one nature. When working with three or four children, we learn to be a little more savvy, engaging all the children in the group at once and holding their attention for a short stretch of time.

With children in a small group, you also receive immediate feedback about the effectiveness of your teaching: *Yippee! They got it. It worked!* Or, *Uh-oh. They’re staring at me with blank faces. They are not getting it.* Yes, we receive immediate feedback in a one-to-one conference. But let’s face it, the feedback can be a little difficult to parse. Was my teaching strategy brilliant and explicit or was the child simply having a moment of brilliance? It’s hard to tell. If I teach Manuel that writers use punctuation to bring voice to their writing and Manuel is successful, I’ll probably walk away from that conference feeling pretty good about my teaching. If Manuel is not successful, I might think, *That Manuel! If only he would pay careful attention to my teaching!* However, if I teach a small group of students that writers use punctuation to bring voice to their writing and the majority of the students try doing that work and do it successfully—or not—the odds are that the result can be attributed to my explicit teaching method.

Conferring with small groups of children helps us deepen our content knowledge as well. When we teach writing to small groups of children, we tend to think through possibilities as we plan our unit and minilessons: If I teach a minilesson to the whole class (that writers use punctuation to bring voice to their writing, for example), what are the possible responses in this class? And how will I respond to those possibilities? (This is described more fully in Chapter 3.)