

One to One
*The Art of Conferring
with Young Writers*



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Sample pages

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CHAPTER 3

Efficient Record-Keeping Systems

The mere mention of record keeping makes most of us feel guilty.

We already know a dozen kinds of records we aren't keeping and a dozen more we should be keeping. Maybe we begin the school year with a new record-keeping notebook, neatly cordoned into sections, one for each child's progress in writing throughout the year. Maybe we carry a clipboard and portable record-keeping forms with us as we confer during the writing workshop. "I'm writing about my mom," one child says, and we diligently record the subject of that child's writing. "I'm done," the child adds, and we record that bit of information as well.

But then comes the trouble. Even as we are scrawling, "Brian writing about Mom. Done." we wonder what good these notes will do anyone, and have an anxious feeling about the answer. Or, we forget



to transfer our carefully completed daily record sheets into the binder where they are meant to accumulate, and soon they're lost in a sea of papers. Perhaps we misplace the clipboard with the forms from last week, or forget to carry the clipboard with us as we confer.

Before long it's November, and our records are often so scanty that they make it appear we've conferred with almost no one and taught almost nothing at all. In dismay, we think "I can't salvage this now. I'll get a fresh start next year, and I'll be much more diligent!" and throw the misleading stack of forms away, leaving ourselves empty-handed.

Admitting this happens year after year is not a way of excusing it. We need to create a new ending to the story of our record keeping. This process often takes several steps.

Welcome Trouble

My first suggestion is this: We need to recognize signs of trouble, and stop feeling paralyzed by guilt when we find them. It is inevitable that when we set out on a mission, a journey, we will encounter trouble. In stories, characters always set out on a journey and encounter difficulty. The presence of difficulty doesn't mean that the journey (or the plot) is doomed; on the contrary, when the character faces a challenge, the story often grows more interesting, as does the character.

I find that I'm drawn to trouble the way others are attracted to a campfire. "Ah, yes!" I say with pleasure, pinpointing a source of difficulty. "This seems to be a problem for many of us!" I like finding that the problem is bigger, more complicated, more worthy than I first realized, and so I often search for far-reaching ramifications of the problem; I dig for deeper issues and implications. "Yup," I say with glee, "This is *definitely* a big problem!"

Peter Elbow, author of *Writing with Power*, once said, "The mark of a person who can sit down at 9:00 A.M. with one set of ideas and stand up at 11:00 A.M. with another set of ideas is a willingness to lift up the rug and to deal with all the troublesome loose ends—the tangles and problems that have been swept there." I couldn't agree more. I seek problems. Engaging in the process of unpacking trouble, of naming and understanding it, of developing new ways of working because of it, is one of the ways that my colleagues and I ensure that we



continue to learn. Once I've spotted a worthy problem, I'm guaranteed a challenging and thought-provoking course of study.

This chapter, then, begins with the recognition that keeping track of our assessment is a problem for many teachers of writing. When we lift up our rugs, most of us will uncover the troublesome issue of record keeping. This problem need not make any of us feel guilty, however, as long as we do something about it once we've seen it. A problem like this one can be an invitation to make our teaching more effective.

Expand the Trouble

Before we go forward, we need to make this problem, like any problem worthy of study, bigger. If we expect that the answer will change our thinking from the foundations, we allow ourselves to look for answers in that wider realm. What are the grander, underlying issues? Dig deeper. We lose the record forms . . . why? We forget to carry them with us . . . why? It's not simply because we are thinking about buying holiday gifts or because our students are so demanding this time of year. It isn't that the form needs copying too often or that the shelf for the binder is too high. It's a big problem, not a little one. We don't lose our cell phones or forget to carry *them* with us. We don't lose our car keys or our lunches (well, not all that often). Why is it, truly, that we forget or let go of our record-keeping systems?

I think we forget to keep records of our conferences because so often we don't find them useful. We haven't figured out how the records can fit into the big picture of our teaching. If our notes aren't useful to us, why take them? Are we doing it simply because we are told to? If this is the case, then the record keeping is merely a tedious recording of what has passed, a hoop to jump through at the crack of someone else's whip. And then it's no surprise that in the flurry of all our urgent work, we end up forgetting to maintain them.

Check for Cover-Ups

If teachers aren't sure what to write down or why they're writing it down, and if they don't use the writing for planning, and yet they continue to keep records, I worry. Are we hiding behind record

keeping? Does writing during a conference give us the illusion of productivity even when we aren't sure if we've taught anything worth recording? The teacher who records what Brian is writing about and records that he believes his writing is finished might even record the absence of something or other on Brian's paper . . . and then she might thank Brian and, without having taught him anything at all, move on, feeling pleased with having accomplished so much—after all, look at all her notes!

I think the first thing to say about record keeping is this: It is crucial that we don't deflect our attention from the issue of how to keep powerful records by engaging in useless, time-consuming note taking. If we do not have a pressing reason to record a note, we shouldn't write it. Records that pull a sampling of words from a conversation and plop them on a form someone has asked us to fill in can actually displace more meaningful interactions and more significant information collection. It is better to say to ourselves and those who ask for our records, "I'm studying record keeping in order to build a system that helps my teaching, so I'm temporarily between systems" rather than to appease our conscience and our supervisors with records that serve only to sap our energy.

Build a Solution

Record keeping matters because when we choose the form we will carry with us as we teach, we are deliberately channeling the mindwork that will surround the split-second, on-our-toes thinking that we do as we move among children. The best way to influence what we attend to as we circulate is to create (and zealously stay committed to) a form that requires us to record whatever it is we want ourselves to notice and to think about as we listen to and watch kids.

To illustrate what I mean, let's take a wild example. Imagine that I decided that during my writing conferences, I wanted my teaching decisions to be influenced by the color of my students' shirts—something I had never before considered as an influence. Cognizant that in the hurry of teaching, I usually don't notice shirt color in the slightest, I can make myself attend to the color of my students' shirts if I create a conferring form that requires me to record the child's name and shirt color. The form might even give me alternatives for what I could subsequently teach depending on the child's shirt color. For



example, after recording that the child's shirt is blue, a fact I usually wouldn't notice, the form could ask me to check off which of three subsequent lessons for children with blue shirts I will teach.

Of course, that is a far-fetched example. But it is very important to realize that record keeping matters because the written forms we carry with us can channel our teaching. This means that deliberately fashioned record-keeping systems can focus the intelligence that surrounds our teaching. Instead of a form that pulls our thinking to our students' shirt colors, we can use a form to direct our thinking to the effect children's literature is having on our students' writing. The form would require us to record what influences from literature are evidenced in the child's pieces, and could list steps we could help children take to make that influence more fruitful. Alternatively, the form could ask us to note what strategies the child has used with independence.

Our records need to embody our teaching priorities. This means that if a group of teachers—perhaps all the second-grade teachers across a school—plan a unit of study together, they may want to translate their goals into a record-keeping form. For example, if a group of teachers decide that in September of the school year it is of primary importance that their children develop the strategies necessary to generate ideas for writing and that they are able to finish one piece and begin the next piece independently, then those teachers would want to create a record-keeping form for September that requires them to look for and record how well children are doing these things.

Using a Record-Keeping Form from Units of Study for Primary Writing

In the classrooms I know best, teachers either adapt the record-keeping forms that my colleagues and I devised for Units of Study for Primary Writing, or they develop their own version of these. Each unit in the series has an Assessment Rubric and an Assessment Checklist. Here we show the Assessment Checklist from the first unit, *Launching the Writing Workshop*. For the other checklists and rubrics specific to each unit, see those unit books.

You'll notice that on this form, the teacher lists all the goals and priorities for the unit. It is important that the goals are written in very specific and observable terms. For example, instead of including an item such as, "The child will be able to write with independence," a

Assessment Checklist for Launching the Writing Workshop

Monitoring Children's Progress
Recording Your Teaching

- T** - taught
- O** - must teach soon
- I** - saw evidence that writer can do
- X** - saw more evidence that writer can do

Names

Goals

Attitude	Writer generates topics without resistance. Writer assumes the identity of "I'm an author!" Writer chooses paper that is appropriate. Writer makes the transition from the no-lesson to writing.
Planning	Writer cycles through the process with independence, starting a new piece when the last is done.
Independence	Writer's text conveys either a story or information.
Genre	Writer knows writing conveys meaning. He creates coherent oral (or written) text to accompany pictures.
Purpose	Writer is socialized into the norms and mores of a writing workshop, carrying on productively for 20-30 minutes.
Productivity	Writer's marks show growing concepts of print (top to bottom, alphabet letters, etc.). Writer writes labels, sentences, or stories using sound-letter correspondence, etc., to do so.
Graphophonics	Writer has strategies for spelling unfamiliar words (at least stretches out a word, then hears and records initial or dominant sound). Writer revises by adding details into pictures/text and by adding more pages to text.
Writing Process	Writer uses resources appropriately to help with spelling. Writer tries to make his marks on the page match his mental image.
Qualities of Good Writing	Writer talks about the value of details. Writer identifies print and understands its function in different texts.
Reading	

Sample pages

This checklist can also be found on the CD-ROM Resources for Primary Writing.

teacher is better served by writing, “The child can go from finishing one piece of writing to initiating another piece without needing guidance.” Across the top of the table, the teacher lists the names of all the children in the class. This means there is a tiny space at the intersection of each goal and each child’s name. Here, the teacher uses a 0 to indicate that this child might profit from instruction on this matter, a T to record that she has delivered some teaching on this point, and a slash (half an X) or a completed X to indicate that the teacher sees evidence of the child using this strategy with independence.

A record-keeping form like this one helps us in many ways.

- **Planning for conferring.** The form invites us to plan for our conferences, imagining—and in this way rehearsing—possible teaching points. This is important because too often we approach a unit of study by planning for minilessons only. Some of our most powerful teaching will happen in conferences and small-group strategy lessons, and it is helpful for us to be required to work together in order to list possible teaching points on a shared Conference Record Sheet.
- **Observing strengths.** The form nudges us to observe children with an eye toward what it is the child can do. Because the form asks us to cross off what we see the child doing on his or her own, we are not stuck thinking only about the child’s deficits. As we notice and record what the child has done well independently, we may well turn this observation into the compliment part of our conference.
- **Noting teaching options.** The form reminds us to think about and to record the many lessons that a child could learn from, even when we can’t address many of them in the conference. The circles in the columns are a reminder for next time. Also, when we see that many children in the class have circles in a particular area, we can respond to their need with a minilesson or small-group strategy lesson rather than with conferences.
- **Widening our repertoire.** The form helps us remember that our conferences don’t always reinforce today’s minilesson. Instead, conferences are meant to remind children to draw from the cumulative list of all the lessons we’ve taught. The form itself lists the lessons from an entire month; it serves to remind us to help children draw upon a very big repertoire of skills and strategies.

Because we have a list of possible teaching points before us as we confer, we're less apt to restrict conferences to only helping kids put today's minilesson into practice.

- **Following up our teaching.** The form helps us to remember that any one day's interactions with an individual need to grow from and extend previous interactions. For example, we may notice that a child could benefit from learning to use quotation marks, and we indicate this with a circle. The next day, we might teach this in a conference and record this with a T. Another day, we notice the child using this independently in her writing, and we mark a slash (half of an X). In this way, the record-keeping form helps us plan teaching to build upon previous days' work.

Of course, it is not essential that every teacher adapt or create some version of this record-keeping sheet. But it is important to capitalize on the fact that record-keeping sheets are a way to channel the mindwork of our teaching.

Creating Your Own Record-Keeping Form

We might decide to create record-keeping forms that help us take on new priorities, different from those inherent in the design of the Units of Study form reprinted here. For example, if we resolved (for a time) to attend to whether our children have readers in mind when they write, then we could create a form that reminds us to ask each child, "Who will read your writing?" and, "What will you do with your writing when it is done?" Next, we would need to devise a plan for dealing with whatever children say in response. For example, we could develop a rubric for differentiating whether kids have a weak, medium, or strong audience awareness by laying out what each looks like, and we might watch and record how their audience awareness does (and does not) change in response to teaching strategies that are meant to support them in learning this facet of writing.

It is easiest to pay attention to some aspect of writing development—audience awareness or our children's use of literary language or their control of high-frequency words—if we are part of a study group that has convened around this issue. In fact, I'd go so far as to suggest that the question, "What will we record as we confer with our kids?" belongs at the center of any study group of teachers. The question is really a two-part one: "What are our goals as a study group of teachers?" and "How will we collect evidence of our children's

progress toward those goals?" Then, too, we need to ask, "How can we, as a study group, set up a structure and a set of forms to help us collect what children show us in this area, so we can learn from it to become smarter as a group of teachers?"

Any form we carry will influence us. For example, if the form we choose is simply a grid of twenty-four (or thirty-six) boxes, each bearing the name of one of our students, then it can still coax us to cover more territory, to get to more kids, if only so that we can fill in more of the boxes. Once we embrace the direction of this particular form, we can maximize its guiding power by deliberately holding constant the length of time we allow ourselves to use one class-sized grid. If we give ourselves a new grid at the start of each week, then we'll be able to look back on any one completed grid to compare the total number of conferences we've held that week to the total number we've held in a different week. Are we improving in our reach from week to week? Once we have decided on the purpose of the form, we can maximize its use by thinking through the ways we fill in, compare, and file each one.

Study Your Past Work with Colleagues

Although I suggest we choose our priorities and then fashion those priorities into record-keeping forms, we can also design the forms from a different starting point. We can examine the record keeping we've already done, realizing that the notes we keep of children are also maps of where our attention has been. Looking at these records can be like watching our own thinking.

For example, if you have always carried with you a grid with a list of names down one axis and the date across the top axis, and if you have always just jotted something—anything—under each child's name, these records can reveal to you what it is you tend to notice (and not notice) about your writers.

It is easier to see what we have been doing—and not doing—when we look at the records of a whole study group of teachers, including people who have made very different choices. Otherwise, we may think, "I am recording the *only* things there are to record. How else could I write it, really?" If we look at each other's record-keeping sheets, we will notice that some teachers will have recorded the children's topics; others, the stage of the writing process in which each

child was engaged. Another teacher will have recorded what he tried to teach—the teaching point—and what the child agreed to do subsequent to the conference.

What about you? Is it time to turn your attention somewhere new? Have you recorded what children don't do rather than what they are beginning to do? Have you focused a lot of attention on the child's level of productivity or the child's control of conventions . . . and might you deliberately want to try to alter your governing gaze so that your teaching takes into account new aspects of the child, writing development, and of your teaching?

*Study Your Past
Work with
Colleagues*



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