A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

READING Conferences

GRADES K–8

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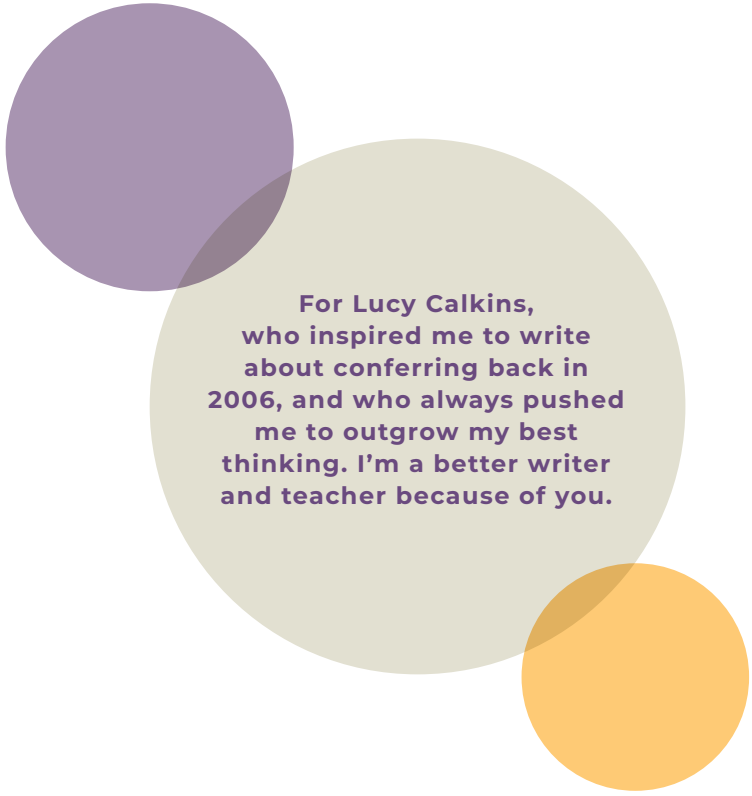

Credits continued from page iv:

Book MAP

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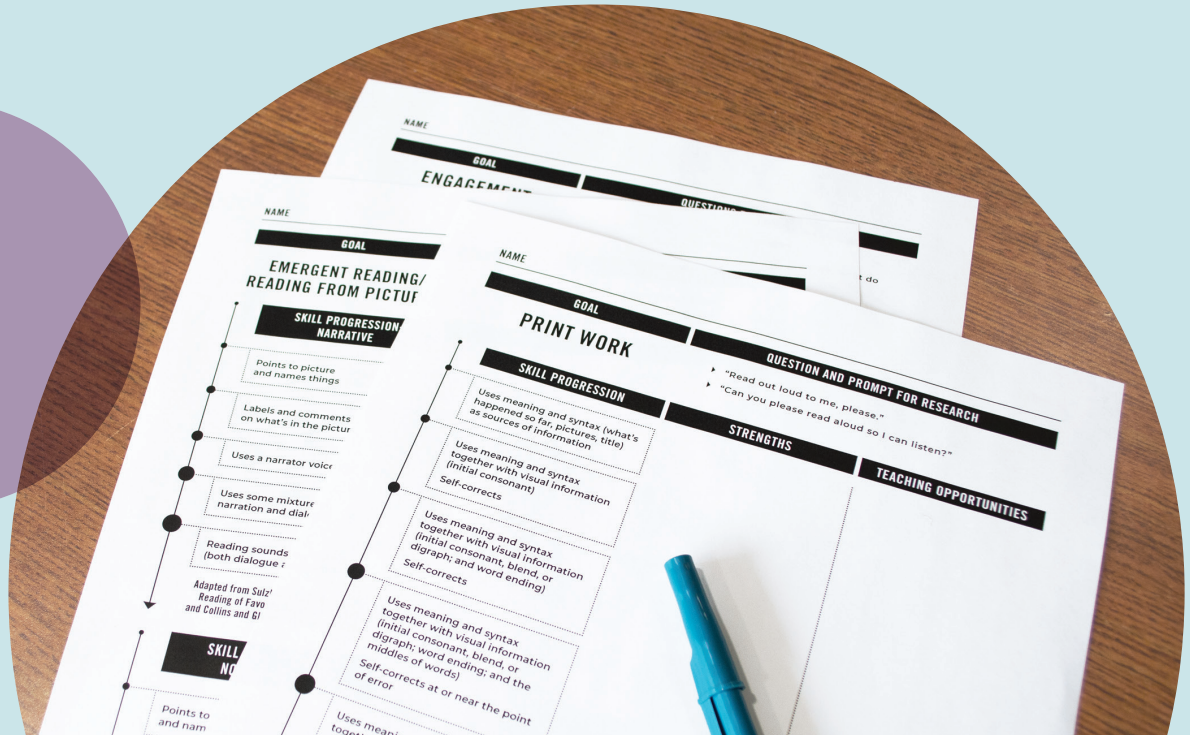
ABOUT THE ONLINE RESOURCES IN THIS BOOK

In the online resources connected to this book, you will find a variety of note-taking forms and other documents that will help you get started implementing—or refining—reading conferences right away in your classroom. For example, if you'd like extra support remembering the structure of different types of conferences, I've included handy table tents you can print out and keep with you to remind you of the steps of each one (see photo at top right).

If you want to be reminded of questions to ask and skill progressions to keep in mind within reading goals, you'll find separate note-taking forms for each goal that include this information and provide space to record notes about student strengths and next steps (pictured at bottom).



I selected each online resource to specifically support the conferring work you'll be reading about in this book. You'll see references to them across the chapters.

The online resources also include nine video clips showing each conference type in action with students in grades K–8. In the "Watch and Read" section of each chapter, you'll be invited to watch a conference and then consider the important teaching moves captured in the video example. You'll also find a complete annotated transcript online that you can use to study the language of each conference more closely and learn more about the thinking that informed my teaching moves. As a preview, here's a list of the nine conferences you'll find:

GRADE	STUDENT	CONFERENCE TYPE
1	Ian	Assessment
5	Gavin	Goal Setting
8	Justin	Compliment
2	Lucas	Research-Compliment-Teach
K	Ana	Coaching
K	Group of students	Strategy Lesson
8	Group of students	Strategy Lesson
K	Gabbie and Ashley	Partnership
4	Group of students	Book Club

To access the online resources, visit

http://hein.pub/ClassroomEssentials-login

Enter your email address and password (or click "Create New Account" to set up an account).

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chapter one

GETTING YOUR CLASSROOM *Conferring-Ready*

What Is Conferring? Why Confer?

When you confer, you tailor your instruction to each student's strengths and needs. But you do so much more than that.

Conferring is where the magic happens. It's the heartbeat of the literacy block.

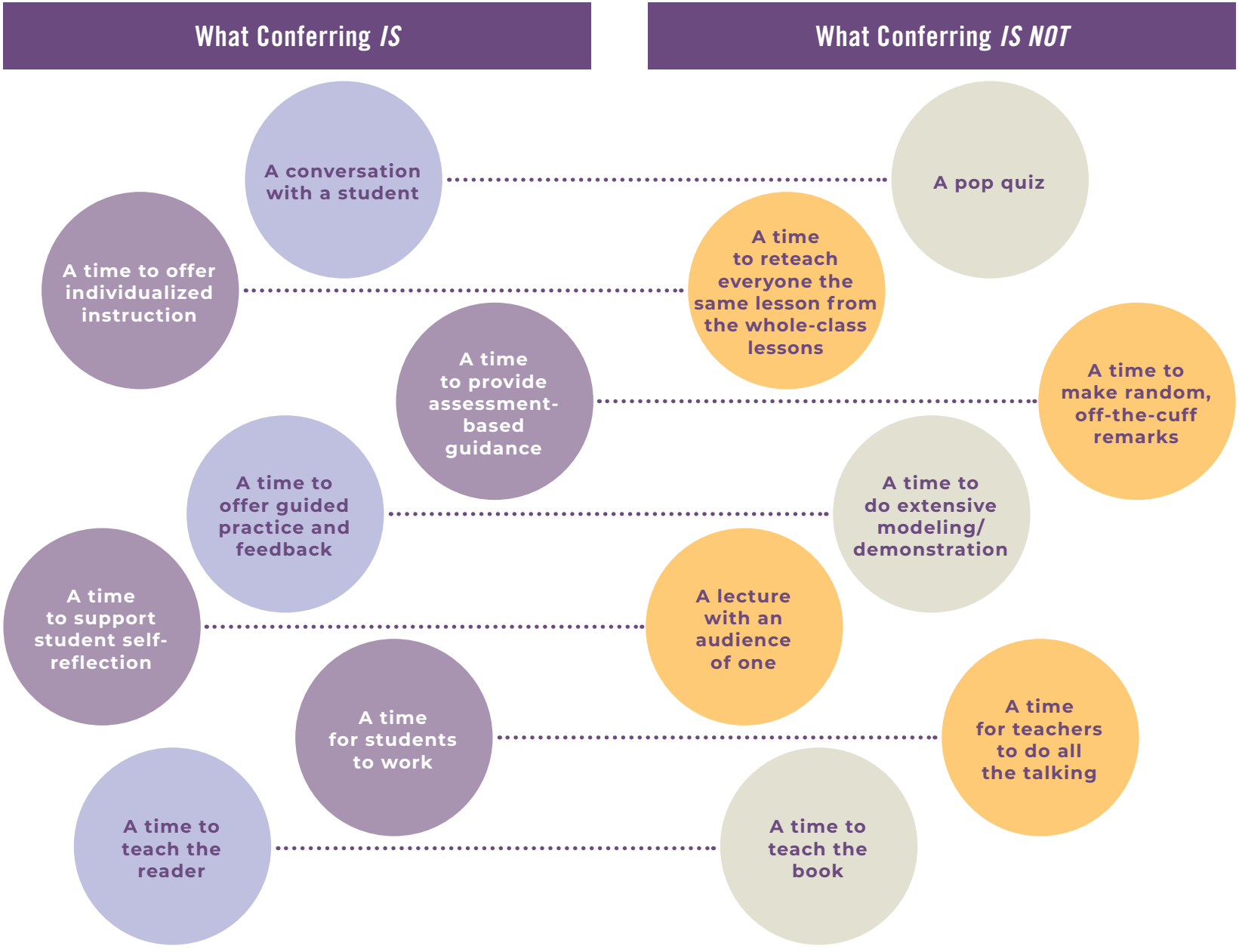
Conferring helps teachers do the important work of seeing the rich and beautiful variety of individual students in the classroom, and to honor and cherish where each student is with their learning (Paley 2000). When you work one-on-one or in small groups with students, it allows you to value each child's language and literacy practices, and their own literacy development, and to treat each child as a competent learner (Ladson-Billings 2009; Souto-Manning and Martell 2016). Conferring blurs the lines between teacher and student; you become a researcher as you learn about your students, and they learn from you (Morrell 2012; Freire 1998).

Routman (2003) has written that one of the strongest predictors of reading achievement is the quality of the teacher-student relationship. In reading conferences, you give a student or group of students your undivided attention, and develop strong relationships with them.

There are a variety of types of individual and small-group conferences, each with a unique structure and purpose and consistent student and teacher roles.

During conferences:

- **Students** are expected to self-reflect, show what they've learned, ask for support, and practice strategies.
- **Teachers** offer new strategies or support for ones still being practiced, give feedback, and guide readers.



But . . . What Is the *Rest* of the Class Doing?

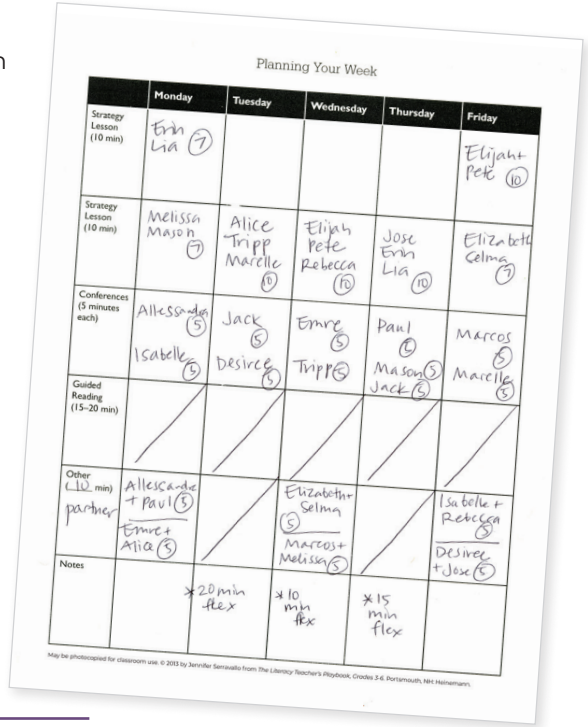
The short answer? Reading. Sure, you could keep the rest of the class busy with other literacy-related activities while you confer, but the most meaningful (and enjoyable!) thing students can be doing is engaging with texts of their own choosing. Since the 1980s, compelling research has shown that what helps children get better at reading is reading (Allington 2011; Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding 1988; Krashen 2004; Cunningham and Allington 1999; Miller 2009). Shocking, I know! Even as teachers have made time for independent reading, reading-related activities that are holdovers from the past—decodable readers, reading centers and stations, basal readers, comprehension question worksheets, phonics activities, memorizing sight words, and more—still take up too much time in the reading block in many classrooms.

Instead of spending time at the Xerox machine running off worksheets or spending countless hours creating materials for centers, get books in students' hands and *let them read*. Once students are set up with books, comfortable reading spots, and uninterrupted time, you can be free to pull small groups and/or to work with students one-on-one. And once you've started conferring and teaching students the strategies they need most, independent reading time becomes purposeful, highly accountable, and even more powerful (Miller and Moss 2013; Moss and Young 2010).

HOW MUCH TIME, HOW MANY BOOKS, HOW MANY KIDS A DAY?

I recommend you try to check in with each of your students and support their individual reading goals twice a week, *somehow*. It could be a small group and a conference, two small groups, or two conferences. For a class of twenty-five students, that means you'll try to meet with ten students a day (25 kids × 2 times a week = 50 kids a week ÷ 5 days in a week = 10 students a day).

With the ten-a-day aim in mind, it's important to build students' stamina and set them up to read and practice their strategies independently for a sustained block of time. You'll need to set aside enough minutes in your schedule and also have enough books available to keep children reading for the whole time.


Planning Your Week

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Strategy Lesson (10 min)	Erin Lia (7)				Elijah+ Pete (10)
Strategy Lesson (10 min)	Melissa Mason (7)	Alice Tripp Marelle (9)	Elijah Pete Rebecca (10)	Jose Erin Lia (10)	Elizabeth Celma (7)
Conferences (5 minutes each)	Allessandra (5) Isabelle (5)	Jack (5) Desiree (5)	Emre (5) Tripp (5)	Paul (5) Mason (5) Jack (5)	Marcos (5) Marelle (5)
Guided Reading (15–20 min)					
Other (10 min) partner	Allessandra + Paul (5) Emre + Alia (5)		Elizabeth+ Selma (5) Marcos+ Melissa (5)		Isabelle + Rebecca (5) Desiree + Jose (5)
Notes		*20 min flex	*10 min flex	*15 min flex	

May be photocopied for classroom use. © 2013 by Jennifer Serravallo from *The Literacy Teacher's Playbook, Grades 3-6*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

At the end of this book, you'll learn about how to plan your conferring time using a simple schedule. A blank of this form is available in the online resources.

Grade Level	Approximate Number of Minutes of In-Class Reading, Daily
Kindergarten	▸ 7–20 minutes: independent reading and conferring ▸ 5–10 minutes: partner reading and conferring
First	▸ 15–25 minutes: independent reading and conferring ▸ 5–10 minutes: partner reading and conferring
Second	▸ 20–35 minutes: independent reading and conferring ▸ 5–10 minutes: partner reading and conferring
Third through fifth	▸ 40–45 minutes: independent reading and conferring ▸ 10+ minutes: twice weekly, subtract some time from independent reading to allow for partnership or club time and conferring
Middle school	Bell schedules and reading periods vary. Take the number of minutes for the entire reading period and subtract 15–20 minutes for whole-class instruction. What's not being used for whole-class instruction can be used for independent reading with conferring.

My recommendations for the number of minutes children should be reading *in school each day*.

Notice there is a range of recommended times for each grade level. At the beginning of the year, before building stamina and routines, you may find you need to go with the lower end of the range. By the end of the first or second month of school, many children can read toward the upper end of the range. An important word of caution: Don't just set the clock and expect students to read for forty minutes; talk with kids about strategies for building up to that time while staying engaged (see Chapter 2 in *The Reading Strategies Book* [Serravallo 2015] for more ideas to support reading engagement).

As you look at the recommendations for independent reading minutes by grade level, notice that for the primary grades I'm recommending daily independent and partner reading. This helps extend children's stamina because the transition from independent to partner reading is a change in activity.

While children read independently, the teacher confers with individuals and small groups. While children work with partners and discuss books with peers, the teacher is also conferring.

Children are also ideally reading at home and on the weekends. All of this reading time means children will need access to many books. Based on word-per-minute–rate research (Harris and Sipay 1990) and the recommended number of minutes students should read each week, the chart at the right offers a suggested quantity of books children should choose each week from the school and/or classroom library. Depending on their out-of-school reading habits, they may need even more books than I recommend in the chart.

Throughout this book I have chosen to use the term *emergent bilingual* to refer to children who are in the continual process of learning language (García et al. 2008; Ascenzi-Moreno 2018). Speaking two or more languages is a strength which should be respected and valued in the classroom and is an important part of students' identities as learners. It is also an additional consideration for reading teachers, which is why special spotlights are included in every chapter of this book, with numerous citations to learn more. You'll see the first of these spotlights on the opposite page.

*The letters refer to a leveling system used throughout this book, the F&P Text Level Gradient™. If you use another leveling system, you can find Fountas and Pinnell's correlation chart at www.fountasandpinnell.com/textlevelgradient/.

SETTING UP A CLASSROOM LIBRARY

Ideally, you will have a well-stocked, well-organized classroom library filled with an inclusive collection of fiction and nonfiction that helps students both see themselves in the books they read and learn about the world (Bishop 1990). A crucial component to student engagement is matching readers with high-quality texts by authors they want to read and about topics they are interested in exploring (Miller 2009; Miller and Moss 2013).

For students to find what they are looking for quickly, the library will need to be open and inviting, with labeled bins so children can easily match their own interests with books. While you may choose to mark each of the books with the text's level in a discreet place (such as the inside front cover), libraries organized by author, genre, topic, and themes will help students think about their own reading identities as the primary driver of their choices (Serravallo 2018). For more advice on filling and funding book rooms and classroom libraries, and organizing your collection, I recommend *It's All About the Books* (Mulligan and Landrigan 2018).

Spotlight on EMERGENT BILINGUALS

Tips for Book Selections

- Don't limit students' choices, as their cognitive abilities, background knowledge, and interests may far exceed what they are able to read with complete accuracy, fluency, and comprehension in English (Moses 2015).
- Because readers can match pictures with words, highly visual texts (picture books, wordless books, concept books, graphic novels) offer students added support, and (because they are universal) images also facilitate talk across languages.
- Consider also the power of text sets—multiple texts around a common topic where students will see the same or similar vocabulary used over and over.
- If students are able to read in their first languages, you might search for books written in those languages, as literacy development in one language supports development in another (Wallace 2013).
- Depending on the age of your students, a dual-language dictionary, perhaps one with pictures, can help students translate unfamiliar words as they read independently.

Preparing an Environment for Conferring

Perhaps you looked at the recommendations in the last section and thought "that's a lot of minutes" or "that's a lot of books." Yes, it is. But it is absolutely possible for students to accomplish that level of independence and engagement with careful instruction, clear expectations, engaging books, and a well-thought-out environment (Hertz and Mraz 2018). Additionally, classrooms that are inclusive, and reflect the diversities of the students in your room, will help all students feel comfortable and empowered (Earick 2009). Reflect on the following questions to see if there are ways you might modify the physical space or how it's used to offer more support for your readers:

- Do students choose where to sit for independent reading? If you can offer choice, students may be able to create their best reading conditions (dim/bright lighting; soft seat/hard chair; seated/lying down; quiet/noisy; and so on).
- Do students have access to materials they may need? Think about why students interrupt you for help and create a materials center that includes sticky notes, sharpened pencils, etc.
- Are there charts in the room that offer students reminders of strategies? Are they current and targeted to what students need? Can any clutter or visual "noise" be eliminated to simplify and quiet the environment?
- Are all students' identities reflected in the classroom and do they feel a part of the classroom community?
- Are there systems in place for children to transition quickly between whole-class lessons, independent reading, partner, or book club reading? Is the room open enough to allow those transitions to happen smoothly?

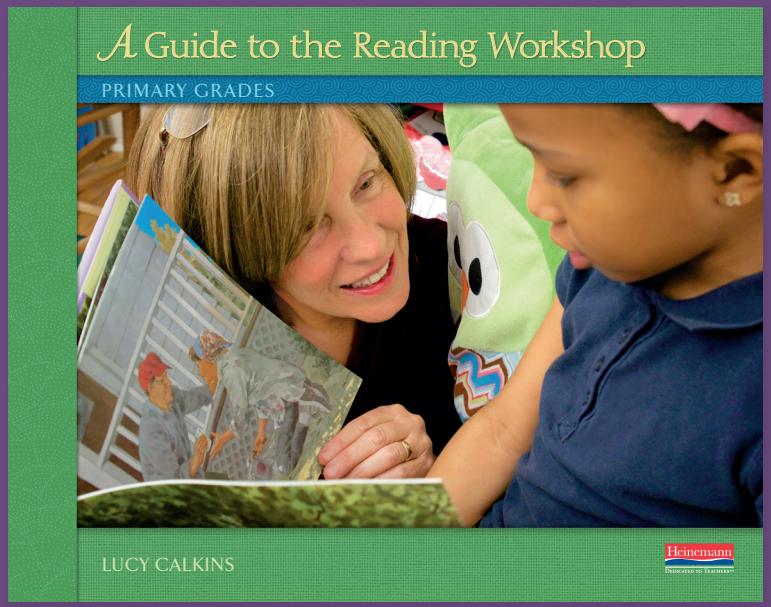
What Are the Types of Conferences I'll Read About in This Book?

In the chapters ahead, you'll read about the different types of conferences you see on the book map on pages vii–ix. The book is organized in the order you're most likely to use the conference types as you get started. Assessment conferences will help you get to know your readers, and then once you do, meeting with them in Goal-Setting Conferences helps you establish goals. As soon as everyone has goals, you can offer positive feedback (Compliment Conferences) and support those goals with strategies (Coaching and Research-Compliment-Teach Conferences). Once you start noticing patterns in what your students need, it makes sense to work efficiently and pull small-group Strategy Lessons. Once that feels solid, you might shift your attention to conferring during the conversation and collaboration time (Partnership and Club Conferences). In the final chapter, I offer advice for how to use each type of conference with purpose and at a time that will be most helpful to you.

When to Use Each Type of Conference

Mentor Spotlight
LUCY CALKINS

Lucy Calkins is the founder and leader of the Reading and Writing Project at Teachers College, Columbia University, where many literacy authors (including me!) went from being classroom teachers to staff developers and authors. I credit much of my knowledge and success in education to Lucy's visionary leadership and unwavering high expectations for everyone who had the good fortune to work at her organization. She is the prolific author of countless professional books and curricular resources about the teaching of reading and writing. At a recent NCTE conference, I watched videos of Lucy masterfully conferring with young writers when she was a graduate student in what must have been the early 1980s. Her deep respect for children, and her awe of how they think and learn, came through in these videos, as it still does in her work today. I recommend getting to Teachers College to hear her speak, and reading her work firsthand. She graciously agreed to lend her voice by answering a few questions about conferring.



My advice: Start your reading here

JEN: Watching you confer with young children is nothing short of magic. What advice can you give about a teacher's tone during a conference?

LUCY CALKINS: We all have people in our lives who listen to us with such a keenness and intensity, listening to the words and the spaces between the words, that we end up saying more than we knew we had to say. When conferring, try to listen to the child as those people have listened to you. Be present with the child. Guard against pretending to listen while your eyes roam the room and your mind races ahead of you. Be present. Be there for the child.

Then, too, remember that in a good conference, the writer's energy for reading and writing goes up, not down. The child leaves you wanting to return to work. Keep an eye on the child's energy and teach in ways that ignite that energy. You'll find that children want concrete specific tips and they want to learn, as long as they sense that you see potential in them.

JEN: One of your greatest influences is Don Graves. What is one tip he taught you (either explicitly or through his modeling) about conferring that you carry with you?

LUCY CALKINS: I remember my first day as a researcher with Don Graves on a big federal study of children as writers. I had been a classroom teacher when Don asked me to leave the classroom and join him. We went into a classroom together. I had my clipboard and was ready to take notes on the kids as they wrote. But nobody was writing; they were just copying math problems out of a textbook. I roamed the aisles for a bit, waiting for some data to appear, and then, frustrated, I went back and sat on the radiator waiting for the kids to do something I could record. Meanwhile, Graves had been scurrying around the classroom, head down, writing. Finally, tired of waiting, I signaled him, saying, "Don, let's go." We went out into the hall. Before I could let out a groan, Don turned to me and said, "Zowee! Wasn't that amazing?"

I said, "Yeah? What'd you see?" And he launched into a detailed account of all he'd seen and wondered and marveled at. "Kids with chairs so low and desks so high," and then he mimicked how they were writing on desks, shoulder high. "And that one kid with an eraser the size of golf ball, and that little kid with the pencil the size of a tiny stub. How could they write?"

I learned something that day, and I think it was one of the greatest lessons that Don taught me. I learned to see significance in the detail, in the grit of life. That matters. As teachers, we see the smallest things: a child balls up the page and throws it on the floor. We're fascinated. We retrieve the discarded page and smooth it out. We ask the child, "What didn't you like about your draft?" and we probe, "If you *were* going to make it better, what would you do?" Those questions lead to theories, and to newly attentive continued watching.

That's teaching. That's writing. That's a big part of what Don taught me.

He would find pleasure and insight in the ordinary, almost mundane details of life. He'd watch a teacher going through her mail, putting stuff in the garbage, and the next day he'd give a keynote, turning that moment into a metaphor as he talked about all the garbage that we have to wade through as teachers.

When I see meaning and beauty in the details of life, I'm drawing on life lessons that Graves taught me.

JEN: How would you advise teachers to build a knowledge base for conferring in reading?

LUCY CALKINS: It's easy to feel empty-handed when you pull a chair alongside a child who is reading a book that you don't know. I find it helps to remember all the sources of meaning you can draw upon in those moments.

First, you draw on your own experience as a reader. You note the work the text requires a reader to do, and you watch and notice what the child is doing in response to the challenges the text poses. You think about what you, as a more proficient reader, would do. For example, if you note that time in the story seems to be jumping around and you find that when you read the text, you need to pause from time to time to ask, "Wait, when is this? Where is this?" then you wonder whether the child is doing that sort of work. You may notice a space between what the child's doing and what you'd do as a reader. You think, "Am I doing something that I can help the child to participate in as well, or that I can reveal to the child?" That's one source for your teaching.

Then, too, even if you do not know the book the child is reading, you know the genre, and your knowledge of the genre becomes a resource you draw on as you teach. If this

is a mystery, you can ask the child whether he is collecting clues. If this is historical fiction, you can ask whether trouble is brewing in the world of the story and press the reader to consider how various characters are responding differently to that trouble.

There are a number of other resources you can draw upon to help you have content to teach in a reading conference. For example, presumably you have been teaching the class some important skills. Perhaps you've been teaching readers to develop theories about characters. You can listen to the child's thinking and look at any writing she has done about the text, thinking, "Of all that I have taught the child to do, what is the child initiating on her own? What might make this work even better?"

There are many other sources that you can draw upon when conferring about a book that you don't know well. The important thing is to remember that you are teaching the reader, not the book.

JEN: What do you think might make reading conferring easier?

LUCY CALKINS: I think it is easier to confer with readers if you have a sense of how reading skills develop over time. If you know what prediction looks like for very young readers, and you know what it looks like as those readers become older and more skilled, and what it looks like for a strong middle school reader, for example, then you can draw on your knowledge of that trajectory when you confer. You watch and listen to the child, thinking, "Where is this child on the trajectory? What's the next important step the child could take?"

For example, if the child is predicting by thinking mostly about what will happen at the end of the book, I might think, "All right. The child is paying attention to the plot and thinking in big sweeping steps. What's next for her?" Maybe I'd teach that child to predict not only *what* will happen next, but also *how* it will happen. I might also coach her to draw on what she knows about the protagonist in order to hypothesize how things will unfold in the text.

It is helpful to remember that if we teach something that is five steps beyond the work that reader is currently doing, it's unlikely that the child will be able to continue to do that work without us. Always, the goal is to nudge and support the reader into doing work that's just bit of a stretch. We need to be able to pull back and let the child do that work on his or her own.

JEN: What do you think makes reading conferring hard for some teachers?

LUCY CALKINS: Conferring is like coaching in a basketball game. You can't really coach unless the players can carry on playing the game. The players have to know how to go up and down the court, making baskets. The players need to know the gist of the game in order for us to be able to coach.

My point is that coaching is important, but it isn't everything. You also need to teach the whole class in such a way that they know how to carry on with some independence. Only then can you confer, can you coach.

Then, too, you'll listen to and watch your kids as they work, and you'll use your observations to plan your teaching. Some of that teaching will occur through your one-to-one coaching, but other parts of that teaching will happen as you read aloud, lead small groups, teach minilessons, and support shared reading. Conferring is just one piece of it all.

My other bit of advice is this: stop beating yourself up. You won't reach every child every week in your conferences, and that has to be okay. After a good conference, go back

to that child a day or two later to see the results. You need that feedback on your teaching, that way to hold yourself accountable for actually lifting the level of what your students do when they aren't with you. Your conferences constitute the course you give yourself so that you learn from your teaching. Aim to be surprised by your children, perplexed by them, and changed by them. Expect your conferences to help you become a more responsive teacher. You need your conferring to be a source of insight, a way for you to be in touch with your kids, and a way to hold yourself accountable for the kind of teaching that yields results. When your conferring doesn't work, try something new.

Conferring is the epitome of teaching. It's the hardest thing you do, because you never step in the same river twice. But ultimately, when you're good at conferring, then that conferring becomes a computer chip that generates all the rest of your teaching.