

# Introduction

Although we tell students that writers must clearly define for themselves a unified audience and purpose, I've had to toss overboard that good advice in writing this book because it is intended for several rather different audiences and different purposes. For one group, classroom teachers who have not used conferences very extensively but who are willing to browse through a short book on the subject, I've attempted a sales pitch to get them to try more one-to-one teaching. Since conference teaching is so obviously effective and worthwhile that the one-to-one approach sells itself, my job has been to lure these people into some elbow-to-elbow contact with students. Though in doing so I've probably glossed too lightly over the problems, difficulties, and confusions that abound when we really *meet* our students, which teachers who plunge in will discover quickly enough, by that time they'll be willing to deal with what are, in the larger perspective, minor matters.

A second audience I've kept in mind are teachers who already spend some or most of their time with their students in some form of one-to-one teaching. These people don't need any of my attempts at persuasion. That would be preaching to the converted. But these readers will be looking for tips and suggestions to widen their repertoire of conference skills. For them, I've tried to include a lot of shop talk from a lot of teachers, a sort of swapping of methods, approaches, and strategies. And I've dipped into the writing of teachers from every level, from the earliest elementary grades to the college composition level, to share a wide variety of approaches.

Yet another audience I've envisioned are tutors working or preparing to work in the tutorial setting of a writing lab. Since the degree of prior experience in teaching writing varies among tutors, I've perhaps backtracked too far for some and begun with suggestions that will seem elementary to them, but other new tutors need such help, especially since their confidence in themselves is usually much lower than it ought to be. Having worked with new tutors and heard their expressions of self-doubt ("Will I really be able to help other students?" "What if I mess up?" "What if I don't know the answer?"), I know

such feelings exist. I also know how unwarranted these fears are, for new tutors have been selected because they have already indicated their potential. To help them forward into seeing themselves as professionals rather than as apprentices (a connotation that hovers over the word “tutor”), I’ve tended throughout this book to avoid the use of the word “tutor” except in matters which might only pertain to the tutorial setting of a writing lab. Instead, I’ve preferred to use “teacher” or “instructor” when I mean *all* teachers and *all* tutors.

For a variety of readers of this book, then, there should be some matters of use and interest: a rationale for conference teaching, some discussion of the goals and tasks of a conference and the teacher’s role in the one-to-one setting, a description of all the activities that go on when a teacher and a student talk about writing together, suggestions for the kind of diagnostic work appropriate for individualized instruction, and, finally, strategies for teaching one-to-one. To round out my discussions of these topics I’ve borrowed from a number of fields that can offer us help. From the literature of counselors and therapists I’ve included suggestions to guide us in conference strategies and goals; from the psychologists’ domain of cognitive style there are insights to help us diagnose differences in writing processes and sources of writing process problems; and from cultural anthropologists and teachers of English as a second language there are analyses and discussions of cultural and language differences to help us understand the writing difficulties of the increasingly large number of non-native speakers who are appearing in our classrooms and writing labs.

Included also at the back of this book are some practice activities for tutor-training classes, though these exercises should be an interesting challenge for any teacher to consider. Some of the papers there—and suggestions and methods included in this book—have been provided by some excellent teachers willing to share both their students’ writing and their own insights into conference teaching. Included in this group are Robert Child, Emily Palfrey, Sharon Powley, and Paula Wilson, fellow teachers whose help I deeply appreciate. I also owe a debt of gratitude and thanks to all the instructors and peer tutors in our Writing Lab, on whom I regularly eavesdrop. They are a never-ending source of good conference-teaching skills. And there are also the hundreds and hundreds of students whom I have worked with in our writing lab and who have managed to survive all my attempts to improve my conference abilities. Finally, my constant appreciation and thanks go to Sam, Becky, and David, my favorite individuals to confer with.

Muriel Harris