

Writing, Grades 4-6

Writing Seminar

Purpose

The purpose of Writing Seminar (Levels K-6) is for students to discuss their works in progress and to share ideas for improving it.

Writing Seminar is one of the activities in which students may choose to participate during Workshop, or you may conduct Writing Seminar during a writing lesson. In Seminar, students meet in small groups to read and discuss each other's writing. One student reads a piece in progress. Other students comment on the writing and ask questions about the ideas behind the writing. The student whose work is being critiqued writes down the comments made by his or her classmates and decides how to use these comments to make the writing better.

Procedure

- To begin Seminar, have one student writer read his or her work as other students listen carefully. The student's work can be a plan, draft, revision, and so on, since Seminar can be conducted at any point in the writing process. When the student has finished, invite other students to retell the story in their own words. If they have trouble retelling the story, the writer knows that he or she must make some ideas clearer.
- Then have listeners who wish to comment raise their hands. The writer calls on each in turn. The listeners ask questions or make comments about the writing, telling, for example, what they like or what they might change to make the writing better. After several comments have been made, the writer notes any useful information. For students in grades K-2, it will be necessary for you to model how to take notes about problems until the students are able to do this themselves. Then have another student read his or her piece.

Modeling Seminar Behavior

You may need to model how to contribute meaningful comments and questions. Examples of questions and sentence starters follow:

- What was your favorite part?
- I like the part where (or when) . . .
- I like the way you describe . . .
- What happened after . . . ?
- I'd like to know more about . . .
- Why did _____ happen?
- What do you think is the most important part?

Guidelines for Peer Conferencing

With the whole class, model Seminar with students to establish guidelines for peer conferencing. You might suggest rules such as the following:

- Listen quietly while someone else is speaking.
- Think carefully before you comment on another person's work.
- Make comments specific.

- Comment on something that you like about the piece before you comment on something that needs to be improved.
- Discuss your work quietly so as not to disturb the rest of the class.

Teacher Conferencing

During Writing Seminar, you should schedule individual conferences with students to help them recognize problems in their writing and find ways to solve them. Teacher conferences are useful during all phases of the writing process. Writing conferences give you an opportunity to observe students as they develop their plans or evaluate their writing, solve problems, make decisions about their work, and take responsibility for the development and completion of their work. The basic procedure for teacher conferences is as follows:

- Have your students read their work aloud.
- Review any feedback they have received so far.
- Identify positive elements of the work.
- Use one or more of these strategies to help students improve their work:
 - -Have students explain how they got their ideas.
 - -Have them think aloud how they will address the feedback they have received. For younger students, review the notes you helped them take during Seminar or review any verbal comments you or other students have provided during conferences.
 - -Ask students to help you understand any confusion you may have about their writing.
 - -Have them add, delete, or rearrange something in the work and ask how it affects the whole piece.
 - -Think aloud while you model part of what the students were asked to do. Then ask them to compare what you did to what they did.
 - -Have them describe how to revise the work as if they were speaking to a younger student.
- Ask two or three questions to guide students through revising their plans or their drafts. (See possible questions below.)
- Conclude the conference by having students state their plans for continuing to work on the piece.

Writing Conference Questions

The following are possible questions you could ask your students during writing conferences. Choose questions that are appropriate for your students.

Ideas

- Who is your audience?
- What is your purpose for writing?
- How does the reader know what your purpose is?
- Do you have enough information about the topic?
- Do you like one part of your work more than the rest? If so, why?
- Is your main idea clear?
- Is there a better way to express this idea?
- Is this a good topic sentence?
- Is your introduction engaging?
- Are any important details left out?
- Are any not-so-important details left in?

- Do you use specific vivid details and examples to support your ideas?
- Are your ideas accurate and, if necessary, supported by research?
- Does your conclusion sum up or restate your purpose for writing?
- What might be another way to end the piece?

Organization

- Have you organized your writing in a way that makes the most sense based on your main idea?
- Is your structure clear so that your reader can follow it? Is there a clear beginning, middle, and conclusion?
- Are there smooth transitions from one part to the next?
- Are supporting details ordered in the most logical way?
- Do you include strong transitions to move the reader smoothly from one paragraph to the next?
- Can you combine any smaller paragraphs or separate larger ones?

Voice

- Do you sound confident and knowledgeable?
- Does the voice you use reflect the purpose of your writing? Does your writing sound funny or serious when you want it to be?
- Is your voice appropriate for your audience?
- Do you sound interested in the subject or topic?
- Have you confidently stated your opinion if necessary? Have you used the pronoun "I" when appropriate?
- Does your writing sound like you? Change any overly complex words to simple words whenever possible.
- Is your voice too formal or informal?
- Will this writing get a strong response from the reader?
- Does your writing make the reader care about your topic?

Word Choice

- Do you use the same word or phrase over and over?
- If so, how could you say the same thing in different words?
- Have you defined words your audience may not understand?
- Have you used precise words to describe or explain?
- Is there a better word to express an idea?
- Have you used your own words and phrases when summarizing information from another text?
- Do you use time-order words, such as *first*, *next*, *then*, and *last*, to help the reader understand when events take place?
- Have you used original and memorable words in some places?

Sentence Fluency

- Are your sentences clear and to the point?
- Have you used different kinds and lengths of sentences to effectively present your ideas?
- Would any of your sentences be better if they were shorter?
- Could any of your sentences be combined?
- Is there a rhythm to your sentences?
- Does each sentence introduce a new idea or a new piece of information?
- Do some sentences repeat what has already been stated? If so, cut or change them.
- Have you used transitional phrases such as *in contrast*, *however*, and *on the other hand* to move smoothly from one subject to the other?
- Have you used transitional phrases, such as *according to*, *in addition to*, or *at the same time* to link sentences?
- Have you used conjunctions, such as *and*, *but*, and *or*, to combine short, choppy sentences?

Tips

- Completed pieces as well as works in progress can be shared during Writing Seminar.
- Concentrate on one phase of the writing process at a time. You might pay particular attention to revising content, proofreading content, or publishing.
- Remember to keep conferences brief and to the point. If you are calling the conference, prepare your comments in advance. Usually, a student will request a conference with you, but be sure that you confer regularly with every student if only to check that each one is continuing to write, revise, and publish.
- During teacher conferences, you might use the following questions about and responses to student writing.
 - -To open communication with the writer:
 - -How is the writing going?
 - -Tell me about your piece.
 - -How did you get your ideas?
 - -To validate the writer's work and give encouragement:
 - -I like the part where . . .
 - -I like the way you open your piece by . . .
 - -I like your description of . . .
 - -To get the writer to think about clarity of meaning:
 - -I wonder about . . .
 - -What happened after . . . ?
 - -Why did . . . ?
 - -To get the writer to think about direction and about writing strategies:
 - -What do you plan to do with your piece?
 - -How will you go about doing that?
 - -What could I do to help you?
- As you confer with students, also recognize growth by looking for evidence in the text that a student has applied what he or she learned in earlier conferences to another piece of writing.
- Some cues to look for when evaluating a student's growth as a writer include the following:
 - -The writer identifies problems.
 - -The writer thinks of solutions to a problem and understands why some solutions will work and some will not.
 - -The writer recognizes when and how the text needs to be reorganized.
 - -The writer identifies ideas in the text that need elaboration. In kindergarten this might be adding details to a picture.
 - -The writer makes thoughtful changes and pays attention to detail.

- -The writer takes advantage of peer and teacher conferences, books, and other resources to improve his or her writing.