

Language That Builds Agency

Part of the Workshop

A Phrase You Can Try

Why It Matters

Conferring

What are you planning to do next and how do you plan for that to go?

Asking this question helps students imagine possibilities for what's next. The research part of a writing conference should include a couple of lines of inquiry before delivering a compliment and deciding upon a teaching point. One of the questions we can ask a child is their plan for the piece they're working on. Many students are in a workshop where they write multiple pieces during a unit. Some pieces may not make it to publication, while others may be written with a different audience in mind. It's essential to provide students with an opportunity to think about this.

Conferring

Who is your intended audience?

Students need to envision an audience beyond the people (i.e., classmates, teacher) they encounter within the confines of the classroom. We write differently depending on whom we perceive as our audience. We should ask students to think about our readers before and while writing. If we can have students consider their audience before the end of a unit, then they might revise in ways they never expected if they hadn't spent time thinking about the audience throughout the writing process.

Conferring

What are you feeling confident about? What are you feeling unsure about?

Students will ask if a character sounds believable, if their word choice is clear, if a word is spelled correctly, etc. "Is this good?" or "Is this right?" they might ask. (I always turn those questions back to a child and say, "Do you think it's good? Or "Does it look/sound right to you?") Asking a question back to the child helps them think through what's working and what isn't. They're forced to remind themselves of their success and then be directed toward improvement.

Conferring

I see.../I notice... I'm wondering if (this) is something you might try.

By suggesting instead of telling, teachers put the ultimate decision about what will happen next in the writer's hands. Typically, students know their job in a writing conference is to have a go with the presented strategy. Once the student has had a go with what we've taught, we can explain what we've observed the child do and then inquire about whether or not this is something the child might use independently after the conference.

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Small Group Work

If you were to fix up this piece of writing to make it better, what would you do?

I like asking this question after presenting students with a strategy or studying a mentor text. Once the teaching portion of a small group lesson is over, asking this question encourages students to look at their writing, consider what they were taught, and find a place to employ the strategy taught to them to strengthen their writing. I'll often have students turn and talk with an elbow partner in the small group so they can process the question aloud with a peer. Naturally, the teacher listens to the conversations and takes notes since children often have additional ideas to make their writing stronger.

Small Group Work

How did you figure that out?

We give students a few minutes to try out any strategy we demonstrate to the group. Many times students will be successful with the writing strategy. Even though it takes a little more time, it's important to debrief with the students so they can understand the process or strategy better, which will help them use that strategy again in other writing pieces. Explaining their thinking creates stronger pathways toward mastery, and the other students in the group benefit from hearing classmates' perspectives.

Reflection / Share

What problems did you encounter today?

Students must understand that everyone struggles. By inviting students to talk about why something was tricky, we communicate that encountering problems is part of being a writer. Asking this question at the end of a workshop not only helps students articulate what was problematic but can also help identify possible teaching points for future minilessons, small groups, or writing conferences.

Reflection / Share

What did you figure out as a writer today?

Teaching the writer, not the writing, means that it's crucial to focus on each writer's growth. By asking this question, we invite students to process a challenge they overcame or allow them to celebrate something they figured out.