How to Have a Great Conference

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How to Have a Great Conference, by Joel Atlas & Estelle McKee

Without question, a professor’s own conferencing skills can significantly impact the quality of conferences. But, students’ performance at conference matters too. Indeed, the professor should treat the ability to confer-ence effectively as a lawyer- ing skill to be taught in the course.

Thus, early in the course, we introduce students to the role, goals, and values of conferences and to the impor-tance of conferencing skills to students’ success. We teach that, to conference effectively, students should do the following:

1.) Thoroughly prepare for conferences by, for example, reading the assignment, con-ducting background re-search, and, if helpful, out-lining the analysis.

2.) Think independently – i.e., before a confer-ence, carefully evaluate the matter and attempt to re-solve any concerns without assistance.

3.) Create targeted questions – i.e., determine precise con-cerns and formulate specific questions to address them. If a professor agrees to re-view a portion of a student’s draft, the student should understand that the profes-sor will do so only to address a particular concern (e.g., whether the text is precise or concise) rather than to deter-mine whether the draft is flawless.

4.) Devise a realistic number of questions, and priori-tize them. If a professor doubts whether the student has properly prioritized the questions, the professor may wish to review all of the questions before answering any of them and to help the student to prioritize them.

5.) Bring hard copies of any text about which the student has questions. If the profes-sor allows students to bring laptops to a conference, stu-dents should expect that the text may be reviewed on the laptop. In this instance, stu-dents should disable email and other alerts and should ensure that their documents are open and in an easily legible font. Students should also highlight the text at issue to avoid the need to scroll through the document.

6.) Understand that, to en-courage in-d e p e n d e n t thinking and problem-solving, a professor may pro vide guidance rather than a direct answer.

How to Have a Great Conference, by Karin Mika

The core mission of any stu-dent conference is getting through to the student and seeing the proverbial light go on. Making the light go on, however, is often the chal-lenge.

I believe the key to a great student conference is follow-ing the advice to we give to our students when they do writing assignments – know your audience!

We all relish in the student who arrives for a conference with revisions that are spot on as well as intelligent questions, but the students who most need our help are students who arrive either with no preparation, or are so lost that they do not know what to do with draft com-ments, or how to even begin a redraft. It would be easy to write off these students as not worth our time, but in many situations, the stu-dents themselves need to be taught how best to use the comments on the draft for purposes of a rewrite and also, how best to make use of the conferencing time.

There are various ways to attempt to engage the un-en-gaged student. Personally, I think the worst way to begin a dialogue is to remind or reprimand the student for (perhaps) not following di-rections in terms of prepar-ing for the conference by reviewing your comments and/or formulating ques-tions about their drafts. I think the best way to engage the student is to determine what the student’s level of understanding is about his/her writing issues and then figure out whether there is a way that the student can be made to understand what steps can be taken toward improvement that do not necessarily involve the comments made on the draft. In other words, sometimes the best thing to do is to start from scratch – for you, in terms of how content is com-municated, and for the stu-dent, in terms of his/her understanding about how to grasp what is being taught. The most important concept, however, is to make sure you do your best to fig-ure out how best to connect to each student, even if the student seems unwilling or unable to connect with you.