

Individual Reading Conferences – Some Thoughts...

By Steve Peha

Many teachers find conferencing very challenging. Mostly, it's the management that they struggle with—it's hard, if you're not used to it to keep the other kids quiet while you focus on individual students. But that's just a matter of teaching style, and not related specifically to reading. For me, the trick—if there is one—to having a good reading conference is simply to come from a place of curiosity when talking to a reader. I never cease to be amazed at what kids tell me about the books they read, and how revealing of a reader's process such insights can be. Even when I'm conferencing with a student on a book I've read a dozen times, something new always seems to pop up. And if I don't know the book, so much the better, I'm even more curious. There are many different ways to conference. You'll find a basic conference here. This conference usually takes me less than two minutes and tells me a lot about a reader.

1. **What are you reading?** Look for the reader to quickly tell you the title and maybe even the author. Don't let students just show you the cover. It's amazing how often kids can't remember what book they're reading. Of course, some adults can't either.
2. **Is it any good?/Do you like it?** Any comment other than "I don't know" is a good start. If the reader doesn't like the book, he or she should probably get another one. If a reader does like a book, I always want to know why. This can help me track things like decoding and comprehension abilities because often our reading preferences are related to reading level. It's very important to encourage readers to express concrete preferences. This is the beginning of reading response.
3. **What makes it good?/Why do you like it?** If the reader has a feeling about it, he or she should be able to tell you why. Look for students to use the language of your classroom writing criteria to analyze the quality of a book as the year progresses. Encourage students to comment on technique and style in addition to content. You can also ask the reader to show you an example of what they are talking about.
4. **What's your favorite part?/What's the best part?** Most readers can answer in just a few seconds. Kids who can't find a part they like may not be remembering or understanding much of what they read.
5. **Can you read me some of it?** I prefer to check kids' decoding skills on passages they like and are familiar with. I have come to realize that cold reads

on teacher-selected texts don't give me the best information. The amount and type of expression a reader uses tells me a lot about comprehension. If I want to know about the student's decoding or comprehension strategies, I'll look for the hardest word or phrase in the passage and ask: "How did you figure that out?" or "What does that word mean here?"

6. **What's going on there?** This is a basic comprehension check. The student should summarize the passage in his/her own words. If the student simply "re-reads" certain lines, I say "Yes, that's what it says, but what does it mean?" Readers with excellent comprehension often fill in additional details to supply context.