

**Fairfield Public Schools**

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# **Writing Conference Guide**



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# Introduction:

## Writing Conferences and the FPS Vision of the Graduate

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### Vision of the Graduate:



The logo for the Fairfield Public Schools' Vision of the Graduate can be interpreted as an allegorical representation of the importance of education in an individual's life. As such, the confident little boat in the bottom-left corner is a metaphor for the student navigating the uncertain waters of life and the lighthouse a symbol for the school system. The red beacons of light emanating from the lighthouse represent the teachers, who inspire the acquisition of knowledge and help students develop the necessary skills for success.

One of the clearest examples of this allegory is the [writing conference, a one-on-one meeting between an English teacher and student to discuss the student's writing](#). Writing conferences can occur during any stage of the writing process: generating ideas, gathering evidence, drafting, editing, revising, and reflecting. Likewise, a student might use a writing conference to deepen understanding and hone skills, including conceptual understanding, logical thinking, organization, development of ideas, integration of support and detail, grammar, and/or mechanics.

## Section 1:

# Writing Conferences and the FPS Vision of the Graduate

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**Writing conferences help all students achieve the six components of the FPS Vision of the Graduate:**

### **Communicators:**

Written communication is among the most important skills for success in college and the workplace. Writing conferences help students develop their skills by focusing on their individual needs. Additionally, students engage in communication with adult mentors when meeting with English teachers. Through these experiences, students learn to become confident communicators and self-advocates who take ownership of their learning.

### **Collaborators:**

Writing conferences are inherently collaborative. Students engage in requesting and receiving feedback as they move toward their learning goals. Students and teachers work together to create and refine writing pieces as well as to improve critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

### **Critical Thinkers:**

Writing is one's thinking made explicit, so it follows that writing **IS** a form of critical thinking. During writing conferences, teachers are able to meet individual students where they are in their critical thinking process and help them grow in their analytic reasoning. The learner develops essential skills that transfer to other assignments and activities, not only in English class, but in future college and professional work.

### **Goal-directed, Resilient Learners:**

One of the most important components of a student's culminating English portfolio is the reflective work the student composes. These reflective pieces demonstrate metacognitive awareness or, more simply, students' understanding of their strengths and weaknesses as learners. The reflection process includes setting goals for future improvement. Essential to this work is the writing conference, during which students discuss and process patterns in their work and set appropriate goals to develop excellence in writing and critical thinking. (See section five, Writing Conferences, Student Outcomes, and the Portfolio.)

The writing process can be difficult and frustrating for anyone, especially for emergent and reluctant writers. Students develop resiliency when they work through problems in their writing and revise their work. Working one-on-one with an instructor is a reassuring experience that can encourage students to push past uncertainty, learn from failure, and achieve success.

### **Responsible Citizens:**

Students must schedule, attend, and prepare for each writing conference. The resulting attributes of self-advocacy, responsibility, follow-through, and respect are among the most important qualities of responsible citizens.

### **Innovators:**

To achieve excellence in writing, one must be willing to think and compose in unconventional, creative, and bold ways. In order to help students develop the skills to write in the manner best suited for the subject and audience, it is essential that they become innovators. During the writing conferences, students can test their ideas with the person who will be assessing their work and develop the requisite intrepidity necessary for risk taking.

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Writing conferences enable English teachers to shine the light of education more brightly on students so that they become the successful communicators; collaborators; critical thinkers; goal-directed, resilient learners; responsible citizens; and innovators of Fairfield Public Schools' Vision of the Graduate.

## Section Two: Writing Conferences as an Instructional Tool

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The Fairfield Public Schools' writing program has been built on the constructivist principles of learning. These emphasize learning as a process of discovery rather than a transmittal of information. As such, teaching involves shared inquiry rather than telling, and it places the students at the center of the learning process. Constructivist writing instruction encourages students, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said, "to put [their] heart[s] on the page" so that the writing means something more than simply fulfilling an assignment. The ultimate goal is for students to become independent learners.

Writing conferences serve as a positive, high-impact instructional tool for student learning. In the widely regarded meta-analysis of educational studies by John Hattie, the following educational influences are listed among the top 10% most effectual: **response to intervention**, **providing formative evaluation**, **feedback**, **teacher-student relationships**, and **metacognitive strategies** (Fisher, et al. 196-201). Writing conferences directly serve these five educational influences, all of which are addressed in this document.

Writing conferences are a kind of formative evaluation, during which a teacher has the opportunity to give immediate feedback on any number of tasks including prewriting activities, essay outlines, and drafts. This meaningful feedback helps students achieve their potential on summative assessments.

### Writing Conferences as Support for All Students:

- Every student must take English all four years of high school. Writing conferences are available to all high school students in the Fairfield Public Schools.
- Each student is an individual who comes to the classroom with unique talents, needs, interests, and experiences, all of which affect learning outcomes. The most efficacious strategy for differentiating writing instruction is the teacher-student conference.
- Writing conferences are an integral part of the Scientific Research-Based Interventions (SRBI) process. Response to intervention is "a multi-tier approach" to the identification and support of struggling students. The Response to Intervention Network identifies three levels of interventions: 1) High-quality instruction at the whole-class level, 2) Targeted strategies employed in a small group setting, and 3)

One-on-one, intensive, individualized interventions. Writing conferences enable English teachers to employ Tier 2-level Response to Intervention strategies when necessary, which would not otherwise be possible during the high school day.

- Writing conferences benefit students who receive special education services and 504-level support, including those who struggle with academic skills, executive functioning, and/or anxiety.
- While every learner is gifted in their own way, students who are identified as gifted and talented may need to be challenged according to their needs. Writing conferences support the unique needs of these students.
- Talented and motivated students who are ready for college-level English while in high school have the opportunity to take UConn's Early College Experience Course. Writing conferences are a mandatory component of this class. For more information about this course and its requirements, please refer to the [HANDBOOK FOR ENGLISH INSTRUCTORS](#).

#### **Bibliography/Further Reading:**

- Anderson, C. (2000). *How's it going?: A practical guide to conferring with student writers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- Fisher, et al. *Teaching Literacy in the Visible Learning Classroom*. Corwin, 2017.
- Graham, S., MacArthur, C. A., & Fitzgerald, J. (Eds.). (2007). *Best practices in writing instruction*. NY: Guilford Press.
- Graves, D. (1982). Six guideposts to a successful writing conference. *Learning*, 11(4).
- [What is Response to Intervention \(RTI\)?](#)
- [What is a Writing Conference?](#)

## **Section Three: Writing Conferences and Equitable Access**

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The Connecticut State Department of Education's five-year plan for [Ensuring Equity for All Connecticut Students](#) articulates the idea that public education is the great equalizer in our democracy, stating that "The promise of an excellent public education is to equip every child, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, family wealth, zip code, or disability status with the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college, careers, and civic life." Education can only act as an antidote to systemic inequity when all students have equal access to key educational resources.

All Fairfield Public School's high school students have access to high-quality individualized instruction in their writing conferences.

A rigorous writing program such as Fairfield's ensures high quality results. Among the most important components of the college application process are grades, letters of recommendation, and the essay. Individual writing conferences are vital to providing equity and excellence to all students.

### **Bibliography/Further Reading:**

- [Ensuring Equity for All Connecticut Students](#)
- [Equitable Family and Community Engagement](#)
- [A Guide to Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education](#)

## **Section Four:**

# **Writing Conferences and Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

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### **Definition of Social Emotional Learning (SEL)**

CASEL, the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, defines SEL as “the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.” Writing conferences offer students the opportunity to develop authentic connections with teachers.

### **The Particular Need for Social Emotional Learning in School Today**

The Covid-19 pandemic has gravely revealed the necessity of providing students with social and emotional support. Students are experiencing overwhelming loss from the deaths of family and friends. School and community have been dramatically affected, postponing organized sports, relationships, and other rites of passage. One-on-one writing conferences and relationships help students find ways to express their thoughts and feelings during challenging times.

These needs existed before the pandemic began, and they will not vanish when the pandemic is over. Students in Fairfield experience a wide range of stressors, including but not limited to the pressure to achieve high levels of academic success while navigating the normal trials and tribulations that accompany adolescence. The epidemic of stress, anxiety, and depression among adolescents today cannot be underestimated. Social and emotional learning is essential to helping students cope with the stressors of life -- in both ordinary and extraordinary times.

### **Supporting the Specific SEL Competencies and Skills**

CASEL has identified five broad areas of competence that help illuminate the specific actions and skills related to social emotional learning. By engaging in writing conferences, students are provided an opportunity to practice these important skills and they are also being guided by a trusted adult and professional who can model the skills. SEL competencies that writing conferences can build are Self-Awareness,



Self-Management, Social Awareness, Relationship Skills, and Responsible Decision-Making.

**Bibliography/Further Reading:**

- CASEL Roadmap for Schools
- Providing a “Secure Base” for Students
- Building Strong Teacher Student Relationships
- American Psychological Association-Improving Relationships
- Search Institute “Developmental Relationships Framework”
- SEL Competencies and Interactive Framework

## Section Five:

# Writing Conferences, Student Outcomes, and the Portfolio

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### Description of the FPS High School English Portfolio

Fairfield Public Schools value active and self-reflective learning. All students create an electronic English portfolio over the course of their high school careers. The portfolio follows the student from ninth to twelfth grade, serving as a testimony of the student's growth as a reader, writer, and thinker. The portfolio also provides a resource for initial goal-setting writing conferences each year.

A [good portfolio program](#) works best when it meets the following goals:

1. Allows students to reflect about themselves as readers, writers, and thinkers
2. Allows students to learn to evaluate their writing and that of their peers honestly but compassionately, and
3. Allows the individual student and a faculty member to discuss the specific strengths and weaknesses of the student as a writer to trace their growth over a period of time.

Writing conferences facilitate all of this work.

The English Portfolio demonstrates a student's level of achievement in all of the FPS High School Standards: Synthesizing and Evaluating; Creating and Constructing; Conveying Ideas; and Using Communication Tools.

The work students include in the portfolio might be expanded in the future so that it becomes an interdisciplinary artifact, showcasing a student's work and growth in both academic and extracurricular endeavors. It has the potential to serve as a springboard for the Capstone Project, which is likely to become a graduation requirement in the State of Connecticut.

### State Standards for Writing and FPS Writing Goals for Students

The overarching goal of the English Portfolio is to demonstrate how students have met targeted learning goals and achieved an understanding of course content. Writing conferences provide space and support for students to improve their knowledge, skills, and metacognitive awareness.

Connecticut State Standards for FPS Writing Goals and the English Portfolio process are:

- **W.9-12.1:** Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
- **W.9-12.2:** Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas, concepts, and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content; introduce a topic; organize complex ideas, concepts, and information to make important connections and distinctions; include formatting (e.g., headings), graphics (e.g., figures, tables), and multimedia when useful to aiding comprehension.
- **W.9-12.3:** Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details, and well-structured event sequences. Engage and orient the reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation, establishing one or multiple point(s) of view, and introducing a narrator and/or characters; create a smooth progression of experiences and events.
- **W.9-12.4:** Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- **W.9-12.5:** Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.
- **W.9-12.6:** Use technology, including the internet, to produce, publish, and update individual or shared writing products, taking advantage of technology's capacity to link to other information and to display information flexibly and dynamically.
- **W.9-12.10:** Write routinely over extended time frames (time for research, reflection, and revision) and shorter time frames (a single sitting or a day or two) for a range of tasks, purposes, and audiences.

### **Bibliography/Further Reading:**

- [Learning from Portfolios](#)
- [The Instruction of Writing Strategies: The Effect of the Metacognitive Strategy on the Writing Skills of Pupils in Secondary Education - Erkan Cer, 2019](#)
- [Olds, B.M. \(1992\) Using Portfolios to Assess Student Writing. ASEE.org. Session 2647.](#)