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### The Key to an Effective Student Conference is...What Happens After the Conference!

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## The Key to an Effective Student Conference is...What Happens After the Conference!, by Amy Stein

In the 15 years I have taught legal Writing I have conducted well over 1,000 student conferences. While that is an enormous quantity of conferences, I want to ensure that the quality is also substantial. It is vital to find ways to assess that what the student and I are discussing is actually having a positive impact on their writing in the future, not just on the next paper.

Any individual conference includes a far-ranging discussion of techniques and strategies aimed at improving the student's writing. I have come up with an interesting way of assessing which ones are effective for a particular learner by encouraging them to continue the discussion beyond the con-

ference. For example, if I give a student three strategies for improving wordiness when we meet, I will ask them to write me a note at the end of their rewritten paper telling me which of the techniques they tried and how useful they found each to be and why. The explanation is vital- I am often surprised by what I read. I make it clear that I am interested in hearing about both the methods that work and the ones that do not. I also ask them to let me know if they have come up with different ideas on their own that are helpful. I do make it clear that this will not impact their grade, it is just an additional way for me to help them.

This has proven enormously popular with students for a

number of reasons. First, it means that they must think actively about their learning- they cannot just rewrite the paper, they have to think about the *process* of writing the paper. Second, they feel a sense of accountability because they know that I will be looking for their notes, which makes them more likely to apply my advice. Third, this technique makes students understand that I care about their progress and that we are engaged in a dialogue to improve their writing. I always take the time to write a response to their note, and will often bring it up in their subsequent meetings. Finally, I make it clear that the data helps me not only to help them but also to help others going forward, an idea which they find appealing.



**Jennifer Rosa**  
Associate Clinical  
Professor of Law, MSU

## How To Make the Most Effective Use of a One-On-One Student Conference, by Jennifer Rosa

**1.) Allow autonomy in scheduling:** Although I require a conference early in the semester, I allow students to choose the day and time. Research shows that the more choices they have, the better.

**2.) Establish rapport:** Students want to know we care about them as individuals. Ask questions about how they are doing, what brought them to law school, and goals they have, before critiquing their writing.

**3.) Require students to complete a thorough self-evaluation before the conference:** I give my students a self-evaluation that takes 3-4 hours to complete. They highlight facts from

precedent cases and our case to visually see any deficiencies in their analogies or distinctions; they enter thesis sentences in boxes and read them together to see if the rule develops; they label the IRACs; they circle apostrophes to ensure they used them correctly and mark grammar or citation errors to get extra credit. The exercise forces them to become self-aware of their writing issues before I say anything. Students often apologize for a weak memo and they have many questions for me about how to improve it. I found that this exercise breaks down the barriers between us. They no longer look at me as a "grader," criticizing their writing and telling them the weaknesses. Ra-

ther, they recognize their own deficiencies and see me as a tool to help them achieve success.

**4.) Allow students to lead the conference:** Begin the conference by asking them how the self-evaluation went and if they have any questions. They detail the strengths and weaknesses and ask questions regarding how to improve the memo. They become empowered and take ownership of their learning process.

**5.) Reinforce the positive, offering encouragement and support:** By working as team, students feel we are vested in their success.