"This is it?": A Better Conference Response Framework

Karen Sheriff LeVan
Hesston College, Hesston, Kansas

Marissa E. King
Teaching & Leading Initiative of Oklahoma

Abstract
Despite collaborative teacher intentions, students often fall silent or acquiesce to the teacher's agenda during writing conferences. In annotation-driven conferences, students prepare for and lead with annotations on their own writing. Their self-annotations provide a blueprint for teachers to recognize and respond to rhetorical choices. Annotation-driven conferences follow a rich history of writing teachers' efforts to gain additional insight into students' intentions that are not immediately obvious on the page.

Keywords
developmental writing, remedial writing, annotation, conferences, feedback, writing, self-annotation, writing response, first-year writing

Back-to-back student-teacher writing conferences usually mean only a few minutes to prep for each writer, and with the pressure of students lined up outside office doors, our best intentions for responding don't always play out. Especially when a student brings a paper with lots of errors, our responses can fall short of acknowledging all of the student's careful decision-making.

Even in conferences where teachers prioritize student interaction, nervous writers can retreat to safe responses rather than risk sharing narratives of their thought process. Students who are new to college writing expectations or intimidated by previous harsh responses to their writing can easily shift into a passive role and acquiesce to what seems like a teacher's revision agenda (Heller, 1989; Gulley, 2012). When teachers are rushed and students are silent, there is an understandable tendency for the teacher to take over. In these moments, one risk is to ignore the very real intention and effort behind a glaring error or incomprehensible sentence.

For students assigned to "remedial" writing courses like the ones we teach, feedback that seems dismissive or hasty can add to the already-prevalent narrative that they aren't "college material" (Herrington and Curtis, 2000; Sommers, 2006; Hogue Smith, 2010). Comments like "this doesn't make sense" or "think about your word choice here" are well-intentioned and efficient but can underscore the stereotype that "underprepared students 'just can't think'" and are "gate crashers" at the college party (Hogue Smith, 2010, p. 668). Here's how one of our students at a small central Kansas college described feedback during a freshman-year conference:

> "I felt my intentions were overlooked; like my effort was misunderstood. . . I carefully chose one particular word that my professor circled and scribbled 'word choice' in the margin. In that moment, I was unsure if the word was used incorrectly, if the professor didn't think it fit, or if I didn't understand the content at all. Either way my intentions felt undervalued and the time I spent picking the word felt wasted."

Especially for students already struggling to feel a sense of belonging in the college classroom, responses to writing make a critical difference in how student writers develop, if they develop, as writers (Sommers, 2016, p. 251). We've seen students quickly resist or disengage when

their effort feels dismissed (Herrington and Curtis, 2000). Recently, we sat down with a group of students to discuss how they feel when teacher responses seem to overlook their effort. Below is an excerpt from the focus group.

> Student 1: Sometimes when you spend six hours on a rough draft and [the teacher] will look at it or one of your peers will look at it and you can just tell on their face that they are like, "This is it?"
>
> Student 2: Yeah, all that work I put in!
>
> Student 1: And you're just like, "Really? I just spent six hours on this, on a rough draft and you just give me that look like, "This is it?"
>
> Researcher: What do you do when that happens?
>
> Student 3: That's six hours of work!
>
> Student 4: There's this kind of "screw this" reaction that you initially want to have if that happens, I think, right?
>
> Student 1: Yeah, I get frustrated.
>
> Student 4: I think some people just have maybe a harder time with it, and so it's like when they see that they've put in so much work and they're not getting out of it what they wanted, it's kind of like, "I put in all this work, like, I know I'm not the best writer."

Our students are clearly voicing frustration with feedback that seems to overlook their efforts and intentions. Their frustration suggests that teachers like us and like those of the students quoted above, need ways to illuminate what writers tried to do and recognize students as "thinking persons behind and within their prose" (Herrington and Curtis, 2000, p. 361).

For decades, English teachers have worked on responding to intention. Assignments like Dana Heller's (1989) "paragraph of intention" in which students chronicle their overall plans for a paper (p. 211), allow students to unpack their thought process in ways that may not yet be obvious in their writing. Attached to the first draft of a paper, Heller's students give a paragraph-length "account of what he or she has tried to do . . . . ostensibly making it possible for a reader to understand the primary aims and disposition of the writer's task" (p. 211). This strategy directs teacher and student attention to overall intention rather than errors in the early planning stages.

We also need strategies to bolster conference conversations about what students try to do (and how) compared with what the reader experiences (and why) in the nitty gritty details. Without such conversations, students with a "submissive relation to authority" may see teachers as unpredictable, arbitrary rule-driven, writing authorities (Jarrett et al., 2009, p. 52) and dismiss their feedback as "instructor idiosyncrasies" or bias (Sommers, 2006, p. 252).

To position students as purposeful writers, regardless of error-ridden prose, correctness alone can't be the measure of effort nor the sole focus of conversations. Despite a misplaced appositive or a confusing signal verb, a writer likely selected its details and placement with care. We need conference practices that position students as the "thinking person behind and within their prose," the expert of their own writing (Herrington and Curtis, 2000, p. 361). Like Sommers suggests, we want our students to "imagine their instructors as readers waiting to learn from their

contributions, not waiting to report what they've done wrong on a given paper" (Sommers, 2006, p. 255). Especially in the shadow of heavy workloads and limited time to really look at student writing, we need a conference practice in which students can lead us to places of thoughtful intention and interest (King and Sheriff LeVan, 2018b).

Self-Annotation as Conference Preparation

To respond to students *and* their papers we ask students to use self-annotation—where students describe how their work matches up to grading criteria prior to conferences—to prioritize the invisible work we often overlook. Students use textual markings to spotlight required content and marginal or endnotes to explain intentions. Their sideline commentary guides teacher attention to the process along with the product.

Figures 1 and 2 are examples of what annotation might look like as students enter a conference. In each case, the student finds ways to show where they believe their writing meets the grading expectations and explains their thinking in marginal notes. If a student spent a great deal of time integrating a source, for example, she might annotate some of her thinking to reveal purpose and effort.

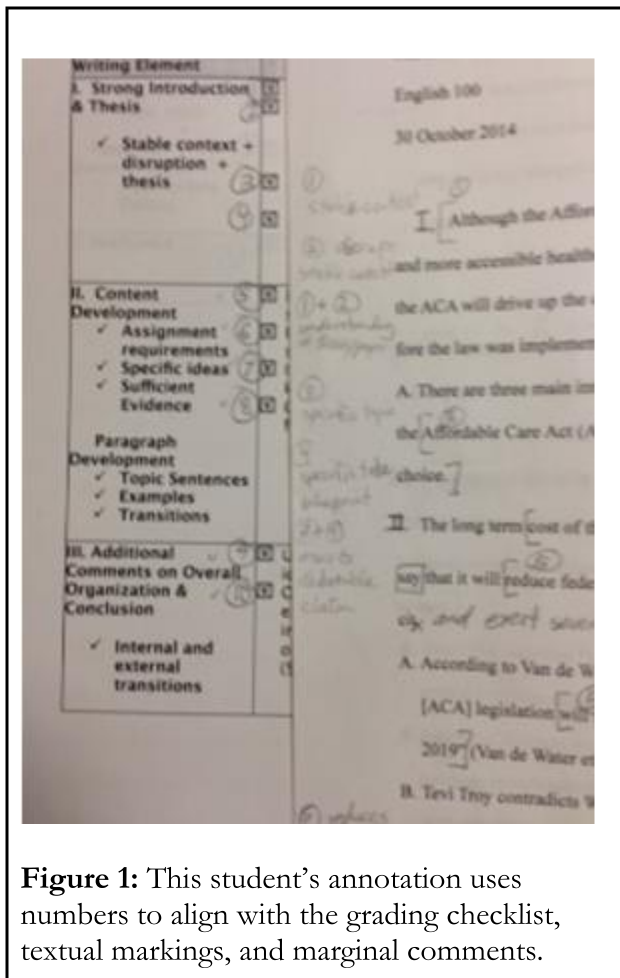


Figure 1: This student's annotation uses numbers to align with the grading checklist, textual markings, and marginal comments.

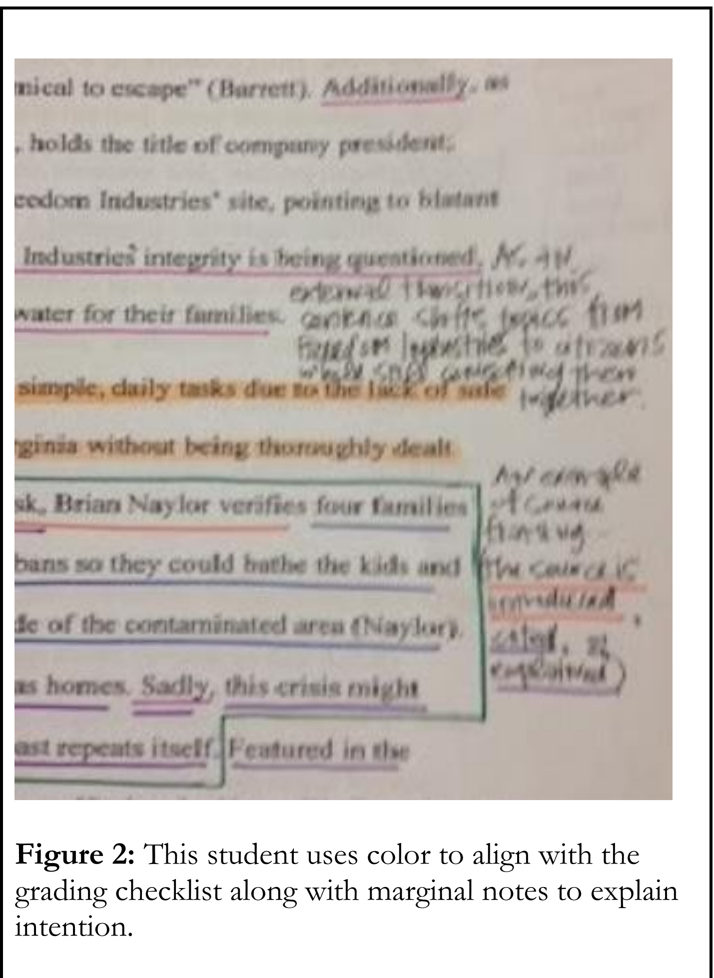


Figure 2: This student uses color to align with the grading checklist along with marginal notes to explain intention.

With annotated writing in hand, students can participate in student-teacher conferences as leaders who narrate the thinking behind their writing decisions. Students adopt a self-evaluatory role

in which they mark their own work before getting feedback from others (King and Sheriff LeVan, 2018a). Instead of showing up with a clean writing sample, students come to conferences with their work already annotated, with their own commentary spilling into the margins. Although it's possible to prepare and lead conferences without annotation, the physical representation of student thinking gives students a place to start when they might shrink away from a teacher's question.

Variations on Annotation

Of course annotation—even on the student's own writing—isn't a new idea. Many scholars use annotation to help students show how they understand their rhetorical choices and improve metacognition (King, 2012; Andrade et al., 2009; Marsh, 2015; Bunn, 2013; Hogue Smith, 2010; Zywica and Gomez, 2008). In their work with middle school students, Heidi Andrade and Beth Boulay used a color coding annotation system to match text with rubric elements—a quick and easy way for students to demonstrate where they think their writing meets the requirements. Other annotation approaches spotlight decision-making and writing rationale. For example, Cheryl Hogue Smith asks students to use track changes between drafts and explain those changes with endnotes. Michael Bunn's submission notes ask students to annotate the places they imitate another writer's moves, and still other teachers, like the ones Bill Marsh describes, use annotation to show where writers intend to connect their own writing content to another text. In each case, annotation provides additional insight into students' intent that isn't immediately obvious on the page.

Annotation, in any mix of the already popular forms, can help set teachers up to respond to both intention and product. How we ask students to annotate depends on what additional information we need to be thoughtful responders. At times, this means our annotation requirements are extremely specific. We might, for example, ask students to annotate where they acknowledge a naysayer or explain how appositives build credibility. Not every annotation receives a conference comment; students have their own reasons for marking their papers. They might want to check their own thinking, compare their work with the rubric, and other times underscore the work they've done. Often student commentary fills the margins with their intention and effort in ways we can't predict.

Self-Annotation to Guide Conference Preparation and Structure

Using self-annotation to drive the conference process influences what students do before they arrive for a student-teacher writing conference. Even for accomplished writers, knowing how to prepare for a writing conference can be murky. Below are three student reflections, taken from recorded metacognition exercises, where students reflect on how they prepare for and lead conferences with annotations:

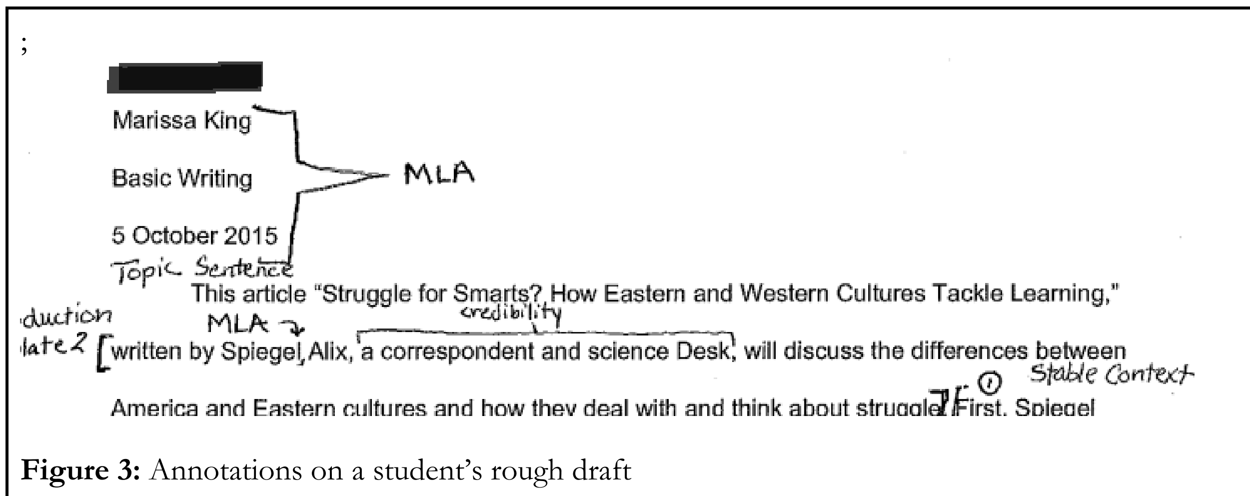
Student 1: After I print my final draft, I go through and I annotate it. Then I go look at my rubric. Then I go through and annotate and make sure that I have everything. And if I missed something, or see something that I didn't do, I go back and I fix it. You go in and you have your stuff ready and you tell—show [the teacher]—what you did and why you did it and why you did it that way.

Student 2: I followed the step-by-step rubric to make sure that I had what I needed to before conferences. You explain each step and the teacher can truly understand what you're wanting them to understand if you read and explain why did you wrote—decide—to use that word or phrase. It's very beneficial, I think. It helped me have a better self-confidence in myself.

Student 3: The way that I have prepared for conference is annotating my papers and knowing what to explain and how to explain it. So like when I use a transition word why I used it and how it works with the paper or another example of appositive, how that builds credibility for the author. And then what it means to lead a conference is to take control and show how you wrote the paper and then I was never used to like conference. I [was] always used to handing in my papers and being done with it.

Annotation to Spotlight Intention

For teachers, student self-annotation offers a chance to see what students intend even when there are errors. Figure 3 shows a rough draft that a student brought to a conference. Citing the annotation of her source introduction, the student explained how her source introduction ("Speigel, Alix . . .") met MLA expectations. Although the voice marker is incorrect and misspelled, her annotation offered an explanation of why she inverted the author's name. As responders, we could clarify the easy-to-fix misunderstanding while acknowledging the effort to implement MLA. Although this error is not a pressing concern and could be quickly fixed in any conference, annotation prioritized the student's explanation of what she *did* know and the careful, although wrong, choice she made. Especially for students with many errors, annotation helps students highlight their intent.



;

Marissa King

Basic Writing

5 October 2015

This article "Struggle for Smarts? How Eastern and Western Cultures Tackle Learning," written by Spiegel, Alix, a correspondent and science Desk, will discuss the differences between America and Eastern cultures and how they deal with and think about struggle. First, Spiegel

Figure 3: Annotations on a student's rough draft

In another conference a student used the annotations in Figure 4 to begin the discussion of her supporting evidence. Her paper laid out the dangerous, time-sensitive work of athletic trainers assessing concussions and made a case for how quickly trainers have to respond. Then, in a section annotated "repeated issues trainers face," she wrote, "Peters refutes that 'most concussion symptoms—70-90%—are resolved in two weeks.'" At first glance, the sentence seemed to contradict her earlier claims. But the student's annotation for the signal verb "refutes"—that it "shows there is lots of evidence"—pinpoints a misunderstanding of the word's meaning. Her annotations turned the conference conversation towards her well-informed intention to underscore the evidence with a quote and treated the word choice as the minor issue it was. As physical signposts of the writer's thought process, annotations take some of the guesswork out of responding to a confusing verb or other misstep.

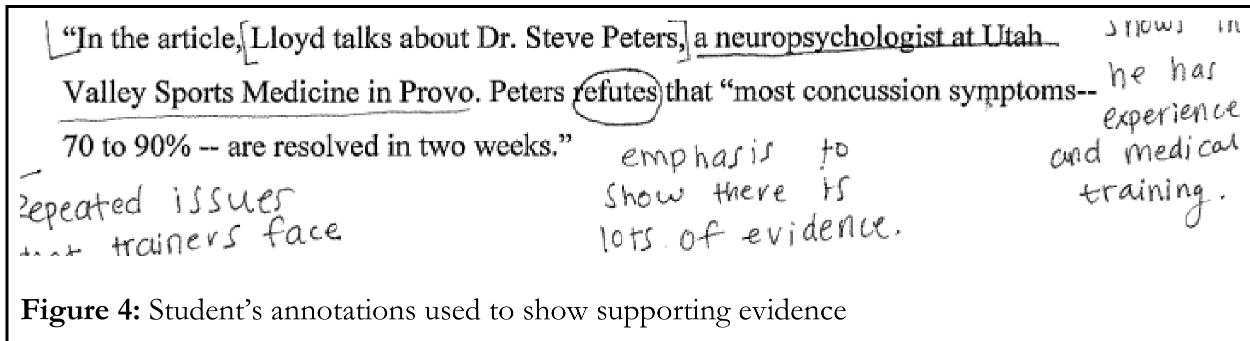


Figure 4: Student's annotations used to show supporting evidence

Perhaps the students in Figures 3 and 4 could have easily articulated the intentions behind the inverted author name and the confusing signal verb but it's also easy to imagine a conference breezing by both issues. As conference preparation, annotation can prime students to consider their own decisions and remind teachers to dig beneath areas of confusion.

Even in polished prose where students use annotations to accurately explain their moves, the teacher can respond more fully to the student's intent. A teacher's comments such as "another reason this works so well . . ." or "this is similar to X author's moves" add to a student's knowledge of rhetorical practices, deepening understanding of writing success.

Most English teachers have a repertoire of strategies to employ during writing conferences and annotation-driven writing conferences is one more tool to position students as experts of their own writing and teachers as responders. Students' annotations provide a blueprint to recognize and respond to rhetorical choices. To borrow one of our student's descriptions, annotation helps us find "treasure underneath the ashes and dust of error-filled writing."

References

Andrade, H.G. & Boulay, B.A. (2003). Role of rubric-referenced self-assessment in learning to write. *Journal of Educational Research*, *97*(1), 21–34.

Andrade, H.G., Buff, J. T., Erano, M. & Paolino, S. (2009). Assessment-driven improvements in middle-school students' writing. *Middle School Journal, 40*(4), 4-12.

Bunn, M. (2013). Motivation and connection: Teaching reading (and writing) in the composition classroom. *College Composition and Communication, 64*(3), 496-516.

Gulley, B. (2012). Feedback on developmental writing students' first drafts. *Journal of Developmental Education, 36*(1), 16-21.

Harris, M. (1986). *Teaching one-on-one: The writing conference*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Heller, D. (1989). Silencing the soundtrack: An alternative to marginal comments. *College Composition and Communication, 40*(2), 210-215.

Herrington, A. & Curtis, M. (2000). *Persons in process: Four stories of writing and personal development in college.* National Council of Teachers.

Hogue Smith, C. (2010). 'Diving in deeper': Bringing basic writers' thinking to the surface. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 53*(8), 668-676.

Jarrett, S. C., Mack, K., Sartor, A., & Watson, S. E. (2009). Pedagogical memory: Writing, mapping, translating. *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, *33*(2), 46-73.

King, C. (2012). Reverse outlining: A method for effective revision of document structure. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication, 55*(3), 254-261.

King, M. E. and Sheriff LeVan, K. (2018a, February 10). A conference framework to champion self-advocacy [Blog post]. Retrieved from http://www2.ncte.org/blog/2018/02/conference-framework-champion-self-advocacy/

King, M. E. and Sheriff LeVan, K. (2018b). Annotation-driven conferences: A pragmatic approach to papers, papers, papers. *California English, 24*(1), 25-27.

Marsh, B. (2015). Reading and writing integration in developmental and first-year composition. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, *43*(1), 58-70.

Sommers, N. (2006). Across the drafts. *College Composition and Communication, 58*(2), 248-256.

Straub, R. (1997). Teacher response as conversation: More than casual talk, an exploration. In Koster Tarvers, J. (Ed.), *Teaching in Progress: Theories, Practices, and Scenarios.* (pp. 269-299). New York: Longman.

Zywica, J. & and Gomez, K. (2008). Annotating to support learning in the content areas: Teaching and learning science. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 52*(2), 155-165.

Author Biographies

Karen Sheriff LeVan teaches English at Hesston College, a two-year college in central Kansas. With zeal for writing identity across the lifespan, she currently researches and writes about the struggle for words in the 5th grade classroom, college writing culture, and older adult creative writing groups. She can be reached at kslevan@cox.net.

Marissa E. King's teaching experience ranges from kindergarten to college. She is a regular contributor to Edutopia and Education World. Marissa is currently the Chief of Staff at the Teaching & Leading Initiative of Oklahoma. She can be reached at marissa.e.king@gmail.com.