

# A Recipe for Successful Student Conferences: One Part Time Sheets, One Part Student Conference Preparation Questionnaire, and a Dash of Partial Live Editing

By Candace Mueller Centeno

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Individual student conferences provide valuable teaching moments if a student is prepared for and engaged during the conference. During an individual conference, a student has the opportunity to have a one-on-one discussion with the professor and to ask specific, focused questions about what the student has been learning, the written assignment, and areas of uncertainty. An individual conference also allows the professor to focus on a particular student's strengths and weaknesses, rather than the generalizations that are discussed in class and addressed to an entire classroom of unique learners.

Unfortunately, busy law students can be unprepared for or not invested in the conferencing process. It is difficult to use this teaching moment effectively and fully if a student has not reviewed the relevant materials prior to the conference or if the student comes to the conference without questions. In addition, it is challenging to get insight into how individual students are using their time during the new writing process that they are learning. When faced with these dilemmas, I changed my approach to conferences to expect more of my students and to better prepare myself and my students for more focused, student-driven conferences. In order to have “well-done” conferences, I implemented three strategies.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I implemented these three strategies during conferences that were held in the fall semester of my legal writing and analysis class after the students had spent two weeks researching and writing an eight- to 10-page objective memorandum. After the individual conferences, the students then rewrote the memorandum within one week of the conference date.

This article discusses my pedagogical goals, the three strategies I used for “well-done” student conferences, and the pros and cons of each strategy. The first ingredient I dished out to the students was a weekly time sheet requirement so that I could review and assess my students' time management. The second ingredient I added to the mix was a mandatory student conference preparation questionnaire to help students better prepare for the conference. The final ingredient I stirred into the pot was a dash of partial live editing to get students more involved during the conference. Despite a few minor drawbacks, these three strategies dramatically improved the level of student preparation for and engagement during the conference, and the strategies also helped me to better meet the individual needs of my students.

## First Ingredient: Weekly Time Sheets to Assess Student Time Management and Provide Individual Feedback

Getting inside the head of a law student and gaining any insight into how the student is using time for a writing assignment is not an easy task. Asking a student to tell me how much time was spent on the various writing and analysis steps during a conference—which was often held a week or more after the student had written and handed in the assignment—was not likely to result in an accurate recollection. I wanted to have a more concrete idea about how much time students spent on their writing assignments and whether the students used time effectively. Therefore, I required weekly time sheets to gain some insight into how my students were spending their time.

### A. The Mechanics of Weekly Time Sheets

When my students received their writing assignment—in my case an ungraded open objective memorandum assignment—they were also given a blank time sheet for recording all time spent

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on the assignment. I provided separate written instructions that explained why they had to keep time sheets and the requirements for keeping them, and I also gave the students a sample time sheet with sample entries. The instructions set forth the following requirements for recording time:

- You are being asked to keep time sheets so that I can review how you are spending your time on the assignment, provide feedback on more effective time management, and identify areas of sufficient/insufficient focus.
- Your time sheets are due *each week* in class.
- Your time should be recorded *each day* that you work on the assignment or your time will not be accurate.
- Your entries can be typed or handwritten (as long as they are legible).
- Your time is to be entered in 15-minute increments (round up when at 10 minutes and down if less than 10 minutes).
- Your time sheet must describe each specific “task” in a separate entry even if it is done on the same day (examples provided on sample time sheet).

Examples of the required descriptive “tasks” for the assignment were included in the written instructions and at the top of the blank time sheet.<sup>2</sup>

I also considered how to encourage timely submission. In the instructions, I informed the students that there were two consequences for a late/missing time sheet. First, the student received a check minus for a late/missing time sheet; a check minus was significant to students because professors at Villanova Law School can decrease a grade by one increment for numerous late/missing assignments. Second, I stressed that I would be unable to provide helpful feedback if I did not know how they were allocating their time.

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<sup>2</sup> The “task” key at the top of the time sheet included the following descriptions that students used for the entries: reviewed and analyzed facts, reviewed and analyzed issues, legal research re: (delineate), read statutes/cases, analyzed and synthesized the law, drafted discussion, continued drafting discussion, first rewrite of discussion, drafted issue, drafted conclusion, drafted facts, revised (or continued revising/rewriting), proofread memorandum of law, checked and proofread citations.

I specifically told them that the amount of time—either a little or a lot—would not result in a check minus or, alternatively, a check plus. Students only had to complete and hand in the time sheets each week to avoid a check minus and get credit for completing the time sheets.

Once all time sheets were submitted, I reviewed them prior to the beginning of the conference period. I added up the total time spent by each student, calculated the average time spent by all students, and made notes regarding low and high total times. In addition, I reviewed and calculated the time spent by all students on specific tasks (researching, reading, analyzing, and writing). Then, immediately prior to a student’s conference, I reviewed the specific time entered by the individual student so that areas of question or concern could be discussed during the conference.<sup>3</sup>

#### **B. The Pros and Cons of Time Sheet Requirements**

Requiring time sheets allowed me to get a glimpse into a student’s use of time for the writing assignment and allowed me to provide individualized feedback. For example, if a student spent an insufficient amount of time on an assignment, which was generally an amount of time well below the average, and turned in a memorandum of poor quality, I discussed with the student that perhaps he or she did not spend enough time on the assignment. As another example, if the student’s time sheet recorded that the student did not start writing until the day or so before the assignment was due, I addressed time management issues with the student and the importance of rewrites.

In addition, reviewing the individual entries in the time sheets helped me to assess the steps in the analysis and writing process that a student needed to spend more or less time on or that a student may have missed. For example, if a student recorded less than two to four hours for the reading of relevant

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<sup>3</sup> Students also submitted a time sheet for their rewrite of this open memorandum. In addition, they submitted weekly time sheets when they wrote their graded open memorandum, which I reviewed weekly so that I could make a general announcement to the class about progress or so that I could contact a student if he or she was not managing time effectively.

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cases prior to beginning the writing steps (approximately seven to eight cases for my assignment), I discussed with the student that the amount of time spent reading and studying the cases was not sufficient for a full analysis, particularly at this stage of law school. On the other hand, if a student spent more than eight to 10 hours reading the relevant cases, I discussed reading and synthesis strategies with the student, particularly if the analysis in the memorandum was of poor quality. The time sheets also provided an opportunity for positive feedback. If a student used time wisely, I commented on the student's positive use of time, discussed the importance of the skill, and emphasized that time management will become even more important as the assignments become more complex.

Furthermore, the time sheets served as a reminder to the students of the writing and analysis steps that they should have followed when undertaking the assignment. The “tasks” listed on the time sheet mirrored the analysis steps and writing steps that I discussed with students during the first few weeks of class.

Finally, requiring time sheets also provided two teachable moments regarding the real-world practice of law and ethics. First, since many students will need to keep track of their time once they are employed, keeping time sheets in class gave them some practice (and likely made them begin to dread the habit). Second, the need to record time provided a teachable moment about how important it is to be a complete and honest recorder of time in the practice of law. I specifically told students that they must be honest and complete in the recording of both the time spent *and* the description of the work done. They were not to “add” time if they thought their hours were too low or “subtract” time if they thought they spent too much time on a task or tasks.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The time sheet instructions warned as follows: Ethics start right now! If you are tempted to be less than honest now and record inaccurate time, you are not being responsible and ethical. “Adding” time (or, as a young associate, not recording all your time because it looks like you are spending too much time on something) will only be more tempting—yet still unethical—in practice. Start being an ethical lawyer right now!

Admittedly, it is likely that some students did not accurately account for all time. As an example, when I raised a concern with students who did not enter sufficient time for reading the cases, a couple of students responded by telling me that they thought they had spent more time reading cases but that they did not record the time. In this situation, it is likely that the students either did not carefully record time or they were embarrassed to admit that they actually did not spend enough time reading. As my goal was not to embarrass students, I used this situation as a friendly teaching moment, reminding them that it is very important to record all time in practice. I felt that, even if they had actually not spent sufficient time reading, I sent the message to the students that more reading time was needed when I discussed the needed amount of time for this task during the review of the time sheets.

In order to obtain a more accurate recording of time, I did require the submission of time sheets on a weekly basis, rather than at the end of the writing process. Although submitting daily time sheets probably would have resulted in a more accurate accounting of time, daily time sheets would not have made the recording of time sufficiently more accurate for my purposes. I also concluded that daily time sheets involved too much paperwork (even if submitted electronically) for both the student and myself. In many respects, students were surprisingly candid, even if an entry did not make them look particularly stellar. For example, several students reported on their time sheets that they did not start the writing steps until the day before the memorandum was due.

### **Second Ingredient: Student Conference Preparation Questionnaire to Obtain Better Student Preparation for Conferences**

During my first and second years as a legal writing professor, I was disappointed by the lack of preparation by some students for their individual conferences. These students came to the conferences with no questions, other than perhaps a general “what could I do better?” My goal was to figure out how to get a busy student to be more prepared for the conference and how to understand the student's individual questions and areas of concern. The next

year, I created and used a student conference preparation questionnaire, and my conferences changed dramatically from a professor-dominated conference to a student-driven conversation.

#### **A. The Mechanics of the Student Conference Preparation Questionnaire**

I scheduled my individual student conferences (between 38 to 43 conferences) over a two-week period of time, with approximately four to five conferences per day. In years past, the students completed a one-page evaluation of what they thought they did well and what they struggled with in the writing assignment and submitted this evaluation with their memorandum. Although this one-page evaluation did help me analyze the students' preliminary assessment of their strengths and weaknesses, it did not prepare them for a discussion of my comments on their papers. Thus, I designed a student conference preparation questionnaire that students answered *after* they received my written comments and before the scheduled conferences.

I provided my comments on the student's memorandum and the questionnaire the day before the scheduled conference (usually at noon). The student prepared written responses to the questions and then presented the completed conference questionnaire to me at the beginning of the conference. If a student came to the conference without a completed questionnaire, I cancelled the conference and rescheduled a makeup conference on the last day of the conferencing period.<sup>5</sup>

Part I of the questionnaire involved a series of questions directed to my typed comments. I instructed students to first read and study my comments. Then, they provided written responses to the following questions:

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<sup>5</sup> The following warning was provided to students: You must do the following or you will receive a check minus *and* your conference will be rescheduled to the end of the conference period: 1. You must review and study my typed comments *prior* to your conference so we can have a meaningful discussion during your conference. Be prepared! 2. After you study my comments, you *must* handwrite or type specific written responses to the questions in the student conference preparation questionnaire. These written responses must be handed in to me at the beginning of your conference.

**What questions do you have, if any, with regard to my comments on the following introductory parts?**

Heading:

Issue:

Conclusion

Facts:

**Identify your strengths and weaknesses and any questions you have with regard to my comments on the following:**

1. Macro Organization

Strengths/Weaknesses:

Questions:

2. Thesis paragraph

Strengths/Weaknesses:

Questions:

3. Implementation of CREAC and development of each part

Strengths/Weaknesses:

Questions:

4. Writing (including clarity, conciseness, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.)

Strengths/Weaknesses:

Questions:

5. Analysis of relevant law and focus on issue presented

Strengths/Weaknesses:

Questions:

The questionnaire was designed to be answered after the students read and studied my comments so that the students would reflect on their strengths and weaknesses after they had additional input from me.

Because part of the conference involved a live edit, one subsection in the discussion section of the memorandum had no comments. Part II of the questionnaire contained questions to prepare the students for the partial live edit and some information about the live edit.

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### **B. The Pros and Cons of the Student Conference Preparation Questionnaire**

Unlike the years when I did not use this questionnaire, all my students came prepared with specific questions. In fact, I did not have one student who came to the conference without written responses, perhaps because I clearly spelled out the consequences if the questionnaire was not completed. In addition, most had done a very thorough job. As a result, the conference was a dialogue driven by the student.

The questionnaire provided students with an outline to guide them as they reviewed my comments and reflected on their writing. It also helped my quieter students feel more comfortable communicating their questions and concerns because the dialogue could begin through written communication. Finally, because the students had to answer specific questions regarding each part of the writing assignment, the questionnaire required them to closely read my comments rather than “avoid” reading my comments because of lack of time or the desire to avoid potentially negative feedback.

The only drawback was that the questionnaire required the students to do more written work; however, the work required in this formal written manner was something that they should have been doing to prepare for the conference. I expected more from my students and most benefited from the extra work.

### **Third Ingredient: A Dash of Partial Live Editing to Further Engage Students and to Assess Whether an Individual Student Understood Relevant Concepts**

Although the questionnaire did provide a stepping-stone for student-driven questions and reflection regarding my comments on the writing assignment, I wanted to further engage my students during the conferences with regard to the critical analysis needed in rewriting and editing. To do this, I decided to allocate at least 20 minutes of the conference to a live edit of a portion of the writing assignment.

### **A. The Mechanics of Partial Live Editing**

First, I felt it was important to provide some written feedback to the students, rather than to have a complete live edit of the entire memorandum during the conference. Before this writing assignment, my students had written only one short closed memorandum that was under four pages. I was concerned that they did not have enough individual feedback to fully understand the new legal writing and analysis concepts they were learning; similarly, I concluded that many students may not have enough experience to critically and completely evaluate and edit their own writing. Accordingly, as I wanted to incorporate live editing, I decided to provide some typed comments on a portion of the memorandum so students could get more written feedback from me and then leave a portion without comments for a live edit.

My writing assignment, an eight- to 10-page open memorandum, was specifically designed so that the students had to discuss a multiple element test that required at least two subheadings in the discussion section. Under each subheading, the student had to prove a conclusion for each element using CREAC organization (the organizational paradigm that I teach). Because I wanted to provide written comments on at least one subheading in the discussion section and leave at least one subheading for the live edit, it was necessary to have a problem with a multiple part analysis.

Based upon class discussion and the questionnaire, students were aware that the conference would involve live editing. For the subsection without comments, the students were asked in part II of the questionnaire to provide written responses to the following questions: (1) C [conclusion]: was it present and effective? (2) R [rule]: was it present and properly synthesized? (3) E [explanation of the rule]: was it present and fully developed with assertive topic sentences? (4) A [application to client's facts]: was it present and fully developed with explicit analogies and distinctions and a complete discussion of the relevant facts? (5) C [conclusion]: was it present? and (6) Was the writing clear, concise, and easy for the busy lawyer to read?

During the conference, I first discussed questions and concerns regarding my typed comments. After I answered these questions, the remaining time focused on the live edit of the uncommented subheading in the discussion section. I used the student's answers to part II of the questionnaire as a springboard for the discussion.

Importantly, the live edit did not involve a line-by-line, word-by-word edit. Rather, the live edit focused on discussing general concepts with the students, including implementation of CREAC and clarity/conciseness of writing. I devoted particular focus to the development and depth of the legal analysis in the explanation and application parts of the discussion. If a student was struggling with an area, I would work with the student on a specific sentence or two—either by having the student edit what was in the writing or by rewriting a few sentences completely. However, much of the discussion was more general, as the student was required to rewrite the memorandum after the conference. Finally, the discussion during the live edit varied from student to student because the strengths and weakness of each student differed.

#### **B. The Pros and Cons of Partial Live Editing**

Almost all my students were very engaged in the process because they were part of the editing process. In addition, the questionnaire provided several added benefits. First, it gave the students some guidance so they could start thinking about the live edit prior to arriving at the conference. It also provided a tool for me to engage a student who was quieter and needed prompting to get more involved. For example, if the student responded in the questionnaire that the initial conclusion was not clear or fact specific, this response was the springboard for discussing what needed to change.

In addition to getting the students more engaged, I found that the live edit had one additional benefit. It allowed to me to assess whether a student was beginning to understand the legal writing and analysis concepts that were being taught in class. It also allowed me to tailor the discussion to the needs of the individual student. Moreover, because I gave

the students some written feedback on their writing prior to the conference, the live edit allowed me to see if the student studied the comments closely and learned what was done correctly or incorrectly based upon the written comments in prior subheadings of the discussion section.

For example, I taught my students that they need to make explicit analogies and distinctions when applying the facts of their case to the case law. In my typed comments, I noted if a student did not make an explicit analogy (or distinction) and also often provided an example of an explicit analogy. If a student, in the questionnaire or during the live edit, recognized that an explicit analogy (or distinction) was missing from the section we were editing, I knew that the student studied my comments carefully and was beginning to grasp this concept. I would then work with the student to rewrite at least one explicit analogy and then ask the student to further revise this concept in the rewrite that was due one week later. On the other hand, if a student did not recognize that an explicit analogy was missing, particularly if I had commented on this previously in my written comments, I would spend additional time explaining the concept itself and its importance.

The one potential drawback to live editing is that it is time-consuming. All my conferences lasted at least 45 minutes, and most were one hour. As I generally have around 42 students and because I do not teach during the two weeks I hold conferences, one-hour conferences were manageable. Even if time-consuming, because students were so involved in the process, the conferences were enjoyable and went by very quickly.

Although other ingredients can be added to this mixture of strategies, the combined use of these three suggested strategies resulted in interactive, student-driven conferences. At the same time, it also allowed me to better tailor each conference to the unique needs of the individual student.

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