The Tutoring Book

Fall 2008 Edition

By the CSUS Writing Center Tutors
1998-2008
When you walk into the Writing Center, you’ll notice that there are pairs of students sitting together talking. Sometimes, there are students who are writing and sometimes there are students who are reading. But most of what goes on in the Writing Center is just talk – talk about writing. How one most usefully engages another student in talk about writing is the subject of this collection of ideas for tutoring.

The authors of these pieces are CSUS tutors who took English 195A/410A in previous semesters. Each tutor has come up with some material that he or she feels would have been useful to know at the beginning of the semester. And, of course, in each case what the tutor has written is something he or she could not have known at the beginning of the term.

Some of these pieces give you advice or information from a fellow tutor; some of them provide strategies or activities you might use with your students. The tutors were free to include whatever they chose in their contribution to the collection. So, this book represents the unique group of individuals who make the Writing Center a lively, encouraging, productive place to talk about writing.

Enjoy this material and this semester. At the end of the term, it may surprise you how much you will have ready to offer when you make your own addition to this book.

Professor Cherryl Smith, Writing Center Director, 1997-2008
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Tutoring Tips and Why They Work:  
Or Things I’ve Learned This Semester That I Wish I’d Known at the Beginning

Here are some tutoring tips I’ve discovered this semester and why they work – the things that I wish I had known when I began tutoring. These tips include:

- Special techniques for writers with article-based essays
- Examples of the techniques I have found most useful (including offering options, reading aloud, and sayback)
- How to adapt techniques to different writers, and what weaknesses the techniques have that a tutor needs to watch out for
- Common writing problems that I have noticed multiple writers having and ways to solve those problems
- What to do about sentence structure problems
- How to use positive phrasing instead of negative phrasing when asking questions.

Ways to Use Drafts

Always ask the writer, “Which draft is this?” In an early draft, eliciting more ideas can be most important while surface errors can be ignored and fixed later, while in a final draft, you should always check sentence structure. Also, ask, “Has the professor read the essay?” Almost all the composition courses are arranged so students turn in their essays, and then get a chance to make further revisions. A clean copy could mean that it’s a revised draft, and seeing the original lets you benefit from the teacher’s comments – if a teacher says the writer needs X number of quotes, it’s good to address that, plus the teacher may emphasize a certain issue. A quick scan comparing the two essays tells you if the writer revises on his/her own. If a writer has not made any changes, then you may need to teach revising strategies, like ways to improve organization or telling the writer to reread the essay specifically looking for, and fixing, one issue such as run-ons. However, also ask the writer how s/he feels about the comments, since it could be that a writer deliberately decided not to make a change because s/he preferred the original version.

Ways to Use Articles

Ask the writer, “Did the teacher give out any articles?” Many of the English 1A, Learning Skills, and English 20 courses give essays based on responding to several issue-oriented articles. If the writer has the articles, then ask to see them, and keep them on the table for further reference. When a writer uses a quote in a confusing way, or doesn’t provide context or analysis for a quote, it helps to have the articles available. Often, when you ask writers for more detail, they may answer, “I don’t know,” and you can have them look back at the articles to find more information. This also helps if a writer uses generalizations and can’t think of a specific example when you ask.
It’s good to have the article because if you ask writers to include an example, they may write “add example” in the margin, but then never actually do so, even if they verbally tell you a new idea. When one writer, S--, did this several times, I learned to always check his papers to see if he’d made changes, then to have him actually write out what he said, so he merely had to type up the new ideas at home. “Add example” tells a writer s/he needs to include something, but not what is needed. Writers may not remember what was discussed when they get home, but if the article is available then the writer can find the specific example during the tutoring session. When one writer, C--, hadn’t read the article, I had him read it aloud in our session, stopping after each paragraph to ask if he’d seen anything he thought could serve as evidence in his paper.

Watch for Reoccurring Topics

Pay attention to essay topics and watch for reoccurring ones: Many of the English 1A, 20, and Learning Skills courses (which most of my writers were in) use the same articles and assignments, such as violent video games or the death penalty. This means you can build up a background understanding of the subject matter and a familiarity with the articles that writers are responding to, which lets you discuss the topic more easily.

Relate the Assignment to the Writer’s Personal Experience

It is helpful if the writer can relate the topic to his or her own life. One of my writers, L-, wanted to brainstorm for an in-class essay on violence in video games. Her professor had provided articles on whether the government should make it illegal for children under 18 to purchase Mature-rated games and on whether violent games made children aggressive. Though L-- was supposed to respond to the articles and support her own stance on the issue, no matter how I asked for her opinion, she expressed none.

Then I remembered L-- had a teenage son, so I asked if he played video games, and how she would reply if her son asked her for an M-rated game. L-- described how her son had purchased an M-rated game without her knowledge, and against her rules, and the argument that resulted. L-- realized she supported the law because it prevented children from buying M-games without parental knowledge. Moreover, L-- said she felt playing violent games gave her son a bad attitude, an idea she connected back to the article on violent games’ effects. L-- discovered her opinion and examples to support it, all because she had seen how a previously pointless issue actually affected her life.

Sentence Structure and the Wicked “Which”

In a final draft, you should always check sentence structure. I’ve had a writer’s essay go from a C to an A after I asked her to clarify sentences that were understandable with effort, but much better after her verbal rewording. Writers who are trying out more complex language often write sentences like, “Doctor Jones, who argues that children need exercise,” without realizing it’s a dependent clause and end the sentence there, or will write “thereby creating a problem” as a whole sentence. In “Becoming a Dumb Reader: Reseeing Error as Opportunity,” Jessica Hankins describes a student whose mistakes “while seemingly sentence-level error, were actually manifestations of her attempt to advance her writing style and engage in the discourse of the
academy” (CSUS Tutoring Book Fall 2005). The which-sentences, like “Books, which can be an important resource for time-pressed teachers in the modern era,” are an example of this, where a writer creates a complex fragment in an attempt to be academic. So many writers have repeatedly used the which-sentence that whenever I see the word “which,” I double-check whether they actually completed the sentence. Usually, the writers know a complete sentence requires a noun and a verb, but they assume that a verb in a dependent clause counts, plus they are fooled by the length of their sentence. To solve this, I show them a similar, simpler sentence, like “The car, which I own,” and I explain the car doesn’t own anything, so they need to give the car a verb: “The car, which I own, goes fast,” because “I own” is a description of the car, not an action by the car.

Demonstrate How Changes are Made

The main goal in correcting lower order concerns is teaching writers how to find their errors for themselves. Explaining how is incredibly important – if you ask a writer about a confusing sentence and s/he replies, then make sure s/he writes the new phrase down, but also show how it’s different. This way, the writer personally sees the difference between a clear sentence and a garbled one, instead of just agreeing with the tutor’s statement that one is clearer. When I asked D-- to clarify confusing sentences, he did so verbally, but then couldn’t remember what he said. I repeated it back to him and had him write it down, but I also went over the original sentence. I pointed out where he added a word, what words he deleted, and showed him how he had moved a phrase from the sentence’s end to its beginning. Though this took a bit longer than simply letting his correction stand, I wanted him to understand the process, so he would realize how he fixed it and learn the difference between the clear sentence and the unclear sentence. When a writer sees which changes s/he made, the unconscious, automatic verbal reply becomes a conscious revising choice. By seeing the editing process acted out, the writer can then do the same thing without a tutor.

Offering Options and Explaining Them

If a sentence or word looks like an error, don’t assume it’s incorrect. Instead, ask the writer what s/he means. One writer’s “accordingly to John Smith, we must...” looked like a misspelling of “according,” and when I asked what she meant, G-- wasn’t sure why I was confused. When I explained that “according to John” meant “John says” while “accordingly” meant “as a result,” G-- replied she meant both, and wrote, “Therefore, as John Smith points out, we must...” This leads to another tip: If writers don’t answer your questions on their own, always offer options instead of telling them what to do. For example, another writer’s garbled sentence included “to focused on,” a phrase J-- couldn’t clarify, until I offered the choice of “to be focused on” or “to focus on.” Even then, J-- asked me “Which is better?” Only when I explained the first referred to an event already done and the second to an event still going on did he decide. J-- couldn’t tell the difference between the phrases without an explanation, nor did he understand “past/present tense” without a definition. Once he knew, J-- decided which tense he meant, and then placed the rest of the sentence into a time frame so it made sense.
Reading Aloud

I’ve discovered that the most effective method for dealing with lower order concerns, like grammar errors, is having writers read their essays aloud, because it forces them to slow down and focus on each word, so the ear hears errors that people subconsciously correct when reading silently. It’s important to always explain to the writers why you’re having them read aloud, because you want writers to understand the editing process so they can apply it outside of tutoring. Reading aloud also helps get writers engaged in editing their own work. A writer will not only notice missing words, but will also stop to add examples, expand analysis, and cross out or change a sentence.

When you have a writer read aloud, it’s important that you both listen to what the writer says and read silently along with them. Most writers read the incorrect statement as it is, stop, say it sounds odd, and write in a missing word or change the tense. But several writers make subconscious corrections even when reading aloud; they say it correctly without noticing they wrote it incorrectly. When writers make an unconscious verbal correction, stop them and mention the change: “You said ‘is,’ but wrote ‘are,’” pointing to the word so they can see the difference. Always emphasize that the writers made the verbal correction themselves, and compliment them on catching the mistake.

Sayback

If a sentence or idea is unclear, I begin by asking, “What do you mean by...?” and quoting the passage. Usually, the writer explains the idea in clearer terms, and I tell him or her to write the new sentence in the margin. If a writer doesn’t answer after several moments or replies s/he does not know, I use Peter Elbow’s sayback technique from Sharing and Responding, in which I repeat the writer’s phrase in a slightly different way, asking, “Do you mean...?” Usually, this triggers the writers to rephrase the original sentence in their own words. However, the sayback does have one drawback, because occasionally, a writer wants to use my said-back phrase instead of inventing his/her own. Elbow feels “sayback is particularly useful at early stages where you are still groping and haven’t yet been able to find what you want to say” (8). What I’ve found most useful with sayback is that often a writer can’t clarify confusing sentences because s/he doesn’t know what part of the sentence creates the confusion. Sayback helps the writer know what the reader is hearing so the writer can clarify what s/he meant. I use sayback differently than Elbow does, but it seems to help writers understand a reader’s confusion.

Unpacking and Expanding “Idea Paragraphs”

Writers frequently create what I call “idea paragraphs,” where a writer crams five different topics into one paragraph, without providing analysis or details for any of the ideas. Rather than making a negative statement like, “You have no analysis” or “You’re not staying on topic,” I use a positive statement such as, “This paragraph is full of great ideas, and I’d like to know more about each one.” The first step is to help the writer separate the sentences out into paragraphs by topic; often, each sentence can be a topic sentence for its own paragraph. The next step is asking the writer questions to draw out his/her ideas and making sure s/he writes down the replies. If
the writer seems stuck and the essay is article-based, it helps to refer back to the article for supporting evidence.

Tutor Notes – How They Can Help You

After each session with a writer, you’ll need to fill out the tutor log in your writer’s file, telling what you and the writer worked on during that session. It’s best to give a detailed description, about three or four sentences, rather than just a single phrase like “went over portfolio letter” or “discussed focus.” You’ll be tutoring five hours a week, seeing up to ten different writers, and it can get difficult to remember what you did with each person. This is especially true since often, writers will work on one essay for a single session, then bring the same essay back weeks later after the teacher has returned it for revisions. Writing “worked on organization” doesn’t offer many clues, while “discussed putting all the sentences on cats into the same paragraph and all the dog sentences into another paragraph” does help. At the start of a session, glance at your tutor log, and when you see the essay again, check to see if the writer made the changes. One writer, S--, would say, “I want to add more examples,” then brainstorm great ideas, but the next time I saw his essay, he hadn’t typed them in, and his first comment would be “I want to add more examples.” By looking at the tutor log, I could remind him of what he said last session, and suggest he record his ideas in more detail this time.

Last But Not Least

You’ll be nervous at the start, but try to relax. You’ll meet a variety of people; my writers came from many backgrounds, worked in different majors, and ranged in age from eighteen to eighty. You’ll learn an incredible amount, not just from the essay topics, but also from the writers themselves, and not only about writing. You’ll discover how people bring their own unique ideas and experiences to their writing, resulting in a variety of opinions, and you’ll feel not only the intellectual thrill of hearing other people’s ideas, but also the personal satisfaction of knowing that you’ve helped them find a way of expressing those ideas in written form.
A Crash Course in Tutoring
OR What Really Happens in the Writing Center
OR How to be the Yoda of Writing

First let me say, if you are a student and you are reading this, then it’s a miracle! Okay, maybe not a miracle, but it is an unlikely event. If you are a teacher or somebody on the CSUS tutoring book committee, then I apologize, because this is not for you. I’m sorry, but this is a private conversation between me and my fellow student intern tutors. This is just a talk, the same way that all the interns of my semester discuss tutoring with each other (minus the foul language of course). Okay, are they gone? Just us students again? Good. Anyhow, as I was saying, it is unlikely that this is being read by you because this isn’t the kind of thing you should find in the readings for this class. Everything you are reading is so… academic, and I am sure that it is taking its toll on you. If your semester is anything like mine was, then you are reading PLENTY of highly intellectual material to help you try to learn what to do in the Writing Center, on top of whatever readings you have for other classes. So, if you are looking for any research or theory, you will have to look elsewhere. Instead, let’s talk about what kinds of things will REALLY happen in the Writing Center this semester, how to make the most of every challenge, and Star Wars (just a little).

Feeling Unprepared - Your First Time Off Of Tantooine

You can read everything in the assigned texts for this class, you can read everything in other composition teaching classes, and you will still find yourself lost on that first day in the Writing Center. It’s okay, that’s cool, happens to everybody. In fact, you will constantly be faced with problems that you aren’t ready for. Being in the Writing Center isn’t like anything you would have expected from reading all that stuff. You can’t really be prepared for it. The only way to “get it” is to do it yourself. So don’t worry that you don’t feel ready to tutor after reading a handful of literature on the subject or taking that grand tour of the Writing Center during the first week of class. You will be nervous that first day and you won’t have anyone to hold your hand, no Obi-Wan by your side. I was nervous and everybody in my class was too. But wait, if you now know that everybody is nervous, and it’s normal that you don’t know what to do, then shouldn’t you actually be calm now, knowing that? Tricky isn’t it? So yeah, don’t be nervous or, “Nervous, you should not be, young jedi.” I’ll try to help you to see that being nervous, and every other problem you will have this semester is quite common, so don’t get down on yourself.

Questioning Your Abilities as a Tutor - You Are Not A Jedi Yet

Anyhow, like I was saying, you will constantly be questioning yourself throughout the semester. You will always be wondering if you are doing what you are supposed to be doing, and if you are actually helping anyone; again, don’t feel bad because everybody feels this way at some point during the semester. There are even things you will be told that you should NOT do, and you might accidentally do them, or maybe you will do them on purpose sometimes too. Not every session is ideal or perfect, many of them aren’t. Students and their teachers put us in difficult situations. I have found myself breaking the “rules” more than a few times, and the other
student-interns in my class have too. Let me help you. Learn from my mistakes. You are not a jedi yet.

**Breaking the Rules of Tutoring – Turning to the Dark Side**

In the tutoring class and in the readings, you will be told a short list of things that you should not do. You may have already read the list by now. It’s found in Chapter three of *Tutoring Writing*, by McAndrew and Reigstad, called “What Tutoring Isn’t.” Let’s check that out and look at the things that you will almost certainly do in the Writing Center that you “shouldn’t” be doing. Okay, so the authors say that tutoring IS NOT the editor-journalist model, cheerleading, correcting errors, therapy, usurping ownership, being an expert, and responding too late. However, the dark side of tutoring is strong, and you will do those things anyway.

**The Editor-Journalist Model – Being the Galactic Empire**

There are times when you will find yourself acting as an editor for your student’s work. You will look at a prompt and visualize a way that it should be written. However, when you look at the student’s paper, it won’t resemble your vision and it will be full of problems. You are not supposed to simply tell the student what they should do to fix it or tell them how it could be improved. You are supposed to act like a coach and help them write better. You do not fix papers, you fix writers. That makes sense doesn’t it? You are there as a collaborative partner, not an authority. What you should do instead is to help them realize what they have actually written by telling them what you see in the paper and asking questions that you have after reading it. Nevertheless, if they struggle continuously, you will sometimes find yourself asking your writer to do things the way that you want them to.

**Cheerleading – Making Han Solos**

They tell you that you should be careful not to give constant praise and sugarcoat the truth. But guess what, you will have a difficult time not doing this. Your students will more often than not come to the Writing Center with a negative image of themselves as writers. They will come to you and say, “I am a bad writer” or “I can’t write” or “I suck.” They will bring you papers that their instructors have marked with so much red ink that it is impossible to see anything good left. They will come in thinking that they simply can’t turn in a good paper. And you aren’t supposed to cheer them up? Get real. You will develop relationships with these students and you will probably grow to care about how they feel at least a little. And while you are there to help them improve their writing, because you are such a nice person and you want to help them, you will undoubtedly stroke their egos a little. Go ahead and do that, transform them from a meek and uncertain Luke Skywalker into a calm and cool Han Solo. You will have a better working relationship with your writer if you help to boost their confidence and make them feel good about being there. Just don’t lie to them. If they have problems, go ahead and tell them. But there is no reason why you can’t also make them feel better while you do it. I like to point out the positive aspects of their work and relate to them that they aren’t ‘bad” writers, they are simply “beginners” or “less practiced writers.” Writing is a skill that needs to be developed just like anything else.
Correcting Errors – Taking the Lightsaber Out of Their Hands

Everyone tells you that you are not supposed to do this. Heck, the writing center even has a little sheet of paper that says we do not proofread for students. But you will find that this is the most common request in the Writing Center. I don’t know how many times a student has come in for a drop-in session and plopped down a “finished” paper and asked me to “fix” any errors. You are supposed to help them find the errors they continually make and learn to fix them by themselves. This just isn’t a realistic option when it takes 10-15 minutes to read through the paper itself and your hyperdrive is down. This will just be our little secret, you will correct errors. You aren’t supposed to, but when a drop-in student comes in for 30 minutes, and you will never see them again, are you really going to try to teach them something they haven’t been able to learn in how many years of school? If you do, you are basically saying that you won’t help them, because you can’t teach them and you aren’t supposed to correct their errors, and you may choose to do that. Or, you may have a student that you have been seeing all semester, and you have been working on a paper with them for a few weeks through all of its drafts, and now it’s time to turn it in for a grade. You want them to get a good grade right? You are only human. I don’t necessarily “correct” errors by myself, but I am guilty of finding them and giving my students some guided choices on how to fix them from time to time. We all want our students to get good grades.

Therapy – You Aren’t Han and Chewie

We all want to help people, that’s why you are tutoring, isn’t it? But, you shouldn’t become a therapist, although sometimes you will. You are not there to listen to personal problems and give advice. You aren’t a licensed therapist, are you? I know what you are thinking, “But hey, I give my friends advice all the time.” Yeah, I do too. And while you won’t be sitting in a chair with a notepad while the student is lying on the couch telling you that they just discovered that their father is Darth Vader, you should be warned that working with students’ writing may bring you closer to them than you have anticipated. You will see them often over the semester and their writing may bring you into their personal lives. You should be aware of any signs that your student is in a personal crisis and needs help. If you think you have a reason to be concerned talk to your instructor. However, I am not saying to be distant and cold with your students. There is nothing wrong with becoming friends with them and naturally discussing your lives with each other. So don’t shut them down completely if they tell you about their problems. Your student will be more comfortable working with you and trust you with your writing help if you develop a relationship of some kind. Just be aware and know where the boundaries are.

Usurping Ownership – Jedi Mind Tricks

As I just said, your students will develop relationships with you and trust you. So it may become all too easy to fall away from a collaborative discussion to one where you are overtaking the student’s ideas and inadvertently performing jedi mind tricks. They are going to see you as a much better writer and everything you say might seem like a great idea to them. Therefore, you have to be careful and watch yourself, or else your writer might simply try to adapt everything you say into their paper. But hey, it happens to all of us, sometimes not so accidentally. At times you will work with a student who is struggling to say something that you wouldn’t and you can’t
figure out how to help them write it their way. Occasionally, you will just tell them what you would write. I have done it myself. Sometimes I say, “well you could do this” or “maybe this would be better” without considering what the student wants to say because they can’t get it to work their way. You will also be surprised that often a student has no real opinion on what they are writing, they are just choosing an argument that they think they can write to earn a good grade, which makes taking over the paper all too easy. If you discover yourself doing this, then find a way to stop it. The whole point of the Writing Center is to help students become better writers and express THEIR ideas through writing, not to write your ideas. If you are usurping ownership, you are not only doing them a disservice by not teaching them anything, but you are also taking away their voice from their writing.

**Being an Expert – But I’m a Jedi Master!**

You might want to be an expert. You might think that you are one. You might feel like you have to appear to be one in order to gain credibility with your students so that they trust you. I know that I have felt uncomfortable when I didn’t know what to do or how to answer a student’s question. I have even found myself reaching for answers that I knew I didn’t know, just to save face. It is embarrassing to appear that you don’t know something about writing. You are a master writer, aren’t you? Well, actually, you don’t need to put on that facade in order to help your students. It is okay to just say “I don’t know” or to be honest. I know that you are a jedi in your own papers, but don’t be afraid to admit that you don’t have every answer. You are there as a fellow student who works WITH other writers, not as part of the institution. You are not their instructor. Don’t worry about being the expert.

**Responding Too Late – The Deathstar’s Fatal Flaw**

In a perfect world we would get to work with our students throughout their writing processes. Unfortunately, due to circumstances beyond our control, we will not always have the chance to help when it makes the most sense. A student will come in with a “final draft” and ask you to give it a read before they turn it in a few hours later. This WILL happen. Unfortunately, you will often look at it and see that it needs more than sentence-level help and realize that there isn’t enough time to make the revisions necessary. That isn’t your fault if you have never seen the paper before. However, when you have the chance to help a student with her paper in its early stages, you have to take advantage of this as much as you can. Prioritize your responses. Look at higher order concerns first, such as structure, organization, or a vulnerable exhaust pipe that will allow your whole Death Star to be destroyed by a silly little farm boy. You can’t fix these problems at the end. You should wait to fix sentence-level problems until everything else has been worked out. If you focus on grammar and sentence structure junk in a session when the paper obviously needs help with the thesis, organization, or other global concerns, you have messed up big time. On the second draft, they might have a paper with flawless grammar that still makes absolutely no sense, and now it’s too late to rewrite it all in time for the final draft. You should also try to make sure that you make it to all of your appointments. If a student tries to come in to you with a first draft and you miss the appointment, the next time you see the student, he may still have a mess for their second draft because you weren’t there to help. Consider giving your students your email in case you think you might miss appointments.
The Futile Appointment – Hanging in the Mos Eisley Cantina

Unfortunately, some sessions have the chance to be a complete waste of time. A student will have absolutely nothing to work on, but she will come because she needs to attend every meeting to ensure that she keeps her appointment for the semester. You can shoot the breeze and chit chat about global warming on Endor, you can try to find something to work on with the student, or you can dismiss her and take a drop-in session with a student that really needs your help. Yes, I have done the former a few times and spent an entire session talking about nothing. However, I would suggest that you take this time to work on issues that you have noticed your student has problems with from previous papers so that she can improve her writing. Remember, you work on improving writers, not just whatever paper they are working on at the moment.

The Danger of Prompts – When You Can’t Use the Force

Sometimes, actually more often than not, your task will be made more difficult by the assignment prompt. Either the student won’t have it with him because it was stolen by jawas he will not understand it, or it will just be a terrible thing to work with. I found it very difficult to help with papers when a student didn’t bring the prompt because I didn’t know the purpose of the paper or what to check for. You will be surprised how often the student has NO CLUE what the prompt is asking him to do. Unless you can see it with your own eyes and help to interpret it, you don’t know what the students are supposed to do, and you shouldn’t take their word for it. Search within yourself as much as you like, but the Force won’t help you solve this one. You will also be surprised how often the prompt is a piece of garbage that does nothing to help the student write their paper. In these instances, I went ahead and said so. I never bad-mouthed the teacher, but I wasn’t afraid to admit that a prompt was the stupidest thing I had ever seen. Your student will actually appreciate this. They will be comforted to know that their struggles with an assignment are rationale and that a person they see as a much better writer (you) shares their plight. Do whatever you can to discuss these problematic prompts and help them think of ways to tackle them. Encourage the student to get help from the teacher so that he can understand what to do.

ESL Students – Working Within the Galactic Alliance

Non-native speakers of English will inevitably be a great challenge to you. Unfortunately, these students will present an entirely new set of problems that you won’t be prepared to deal with. Even though the majority of the students I worked with were ESL students, I can’t even begin to tell you everything you need to know to help ESL students. If you have a protocol droid that speaks over 6 million languages, that would help. Other than that, my most important advice is to have patience and understanding. ESL students have language barriers, write differently, and have cultural backgrounds that influence their behavior and interaction with you during tutoring sessions. You are not going to fix their language problems or any significant grammar issues. I almost had to ignore grammar issues because the ESL students I worked with needed so much help just utilizing American Academic writing styles. Expect to work on thesis statements, logic, support, organization, and other global issues (repeatedly). Also, you can expect many ESL students to be more reserved and to treat you like their professor. You may need to be more chatty with them before they are confident discussing their work. All of these things make these
sessions incredibly difficult. So be patient and realize that these sessions will be different than those with native speakers.

**Anything Else? – Ready to Save the Galaxy?**

Is that it? It can’t be. Like I said, there are students and sessions that will bring you challenges you don’t expect and can never be prepared for. I am certain you will see things that I haven’t mentioned here. However, I hope that I have helped prepare you to deal with most of the trials you will have to deal with this semester and gave you some understanding of what it is really like being a tutor. May the Force be with you (sorry, I had to say it).
“What are you trying to say here”: Encouraging New Writers to Express Themselves Clearly and Write What They Mean.

Much of the clientele visiting The Writing Center consists of students enrolled in English 1 (Basic Writing) or English 1A (College Composition). These writers, in general, will view you, the tutor, as a “good writer” and see themselves as a “bad writer.” While grammar is always a concern, the truth is we all already possess ninety percent of the grammar we need to communicate instinctively as native users of the language we are writing in. So what is it that’s keeping these writers from achieving what they are capable of? Encouragement is key, and any writer who views him or herself as “bad” often just needs a little nudge in the right direction and a little polish on his paper.

Writers for whom English is a second language also often struggle to express their ideas clearly. The ideas and techniques presented in this article are just as applicable for ESL writers as well; however, grammar will usually play a more significant role in these sessions. The goal remains the same – encouraging these writers to identify phrases in their own writing that may not be clear and compose a phrase into what fully describes the idea they mean to express.

Achieving Clarity

Often, all that these writers lack is a little practice. This is hardly surprising; we are looking at students at the beginning of their college career. Sometimes, the ability to clearly express their ideas in writing is still developing, and during a session you are set with the task of asking your writer “What are you trying to say here?” It’s an awful question. It says to the writer: “What you’ve written here makes no sense, and no matter how hard you worked on this sentence, it has fallen short of the basic requirement of communication.” Still, as harsh as it is, it’s a wake-up call. Hopefully, the writer will understand that the effort he applied is not going to cut it and that more effort will be needed if he is going to succeed. Ambiguous sentences that rely on an instructor’s understanding of what he meant will not be sufficient. The writer will need to learn to express him or herself clearly and completely.

The Active Ear

Many writers are told by their writing instructors (and also by you) to read aloud when proofreading their papers. It may be the case, though, that the writer has not been fully informed as to how important and useful this practice really is. For writers to simply proofread silently to themselves is not effective; the human mind has a tendency to fill in correctly where errors exist, making it very possible to glance over obvious discrepancies. Take, for example, this popular piece of internet flotsam: 
Aocdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uine rvtisy, it deosn't mtaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are aneargrd, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can stll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey ltteer by istlef, but the wrod as a wlohe.

This piece, forwarded across email inboxes around the globe, well demonstrates how the human mind is able to correct a text if read silently. By reading the text out loud, though, it is readily apparent that serious spelling errors exist. Indeed, try it yourself right now; some of these words are unpronounceable in their current arrangement.

Beyond just reading out loud, the writer also needs to pay attention. It may seem redundant to make this point clear; be assured it is not. Not all writers are as excited about writing as we are - shocking, I know! Care is necessary to avoid speaking the words as they are written on the page. It is important for the writer to observe and pronounce exactly what is written. By sharing the responsibility of reading, the tutor has the opportunity to set a good example for the writer. Also, reading aloud helps keep both the writer and tutor engaged with the paper, something a fledgling writer may be adverse to out of shyness.

**Read Aloud Technique**

This technique requires an existing draft. By reading the draft aloud, passages that lack clarity may be more easily identified. By using a well developed ear, incongruencies filled in by the writer’s brain may be more easily detected. This method may be approached from two different ways. One way is for the tutor to read the paper out loud. Do not allow the writers to read along with you silently to themselves; this will sabotage the effort as the silent reading may take mental precedence over your oral presentation. Encourage the writer to speak up when she hears something that does not sound quite right. A second approach is to reverse the roles – the writer reads his or her own work while the tutor listens. Unlike the previous arrangement, the tutor should read along silently in order to more easily detect oddly-written statements. This method allows the writer to practice reading aloud and detect her own potential areas of improvement with a tutor present. This should help writers become more confident in proofreading on their own.

The best method may be to combine the two approaches, allowing the writer to first become comfortable hearing his own writing being read aloud, then comfortable reading aloud himself, and finally reading on his own before the tutoring session. In this case, maybe spend two or three sessions conducted in this fashion before switching roles. An engaged writer may instigate the role reversal on his own, taking over the reading of his own papers without your encouragement. Another variation the tutor might try is to switch off every other paragraph.
This method is also very helpful with ESL writers seeking to improve their command of English grammar. These writers may have their own methods and ideas in writing and speaking English, applying native structure that is incongruent to academic style. The amount of English these students speak and write, though, is greatly out of proportion to the amount of English they read and hear. Promoting the use of active hearing with these writers will help them to better express themselves in the manner they seek.

**Blind Explanation Technique**

This technique requires an existing draft. Without looking at what has been written, the writer will explain aloud what she intended to convey in the sentence. The tutor may find it necessary to physically cover what the writer has written. Note key words the writer uses in her oral version. When comparing the two examples, note the differences between the two. Often there will be no comparison, the written and spoken sentences may be conveying two different ideas, though they will seem the same to the writer. It takes a critical listener to distinguish between the two and remember word differences. Usually the spoken version will contain word choices more appropriate to the writer’s idea, but were omitted for one reason or another. As in the previous section, this is also a beneficial technique to use with ESL students who may not think they know how to write what they mean, only to have the words roll right off their tongues!

**Oral Composition**

This technique is a replacement for freewriting. Some developing writers seek a method by which to start the writing process, but are not keen on freewriting. Reluctant writers may take shortcuts in their writing, stunting their expression in an effort to be economical. These shortened sentences may not clearly convey the writer’s message. By using oral composition, writers may gain some of the benefits of freewriting – the beginnings of ideas and organization – as well as the opportunity to fully express what they mean to write without the temptation of verbal shortcuts. Make no mistake though, writers will have to write at some point lest they forget their ideas, but this may be a method by which a writer might finally get started, and achieve clarity right from the get-go!

“And they all lived happily ever after.”
The Challenge of *GASP!* Drop-ins

It was my first day at the Writing Center and I had no appointments yet. I sat there nervously, wondering whether I would have any students that day. Finally, one of the ACs came in to ask if I would like to take a drop-in writer. I thought, well, here goes nothing. The session started out with us introducing ourselves and me asking the student to read her paper out loud. As she read, I settled into the session and started to feel a little less anxious. Things were going smoothly. We started out with the higher order concerns and moved on to the lower order concerns, wrapping up with some issues that detracted from her intended meaning. For my first tutoring session, I felt that this one had been quite ideal, given that the writer was cooperative, came into the Writing Center with a paper, and we achieved something by the end of the session. I was ready to take on anything at that point.

My next experience with drop-ins came when I had two of my hour-long students cancel for the day and I had five drop-ins in a matter of three hours, along with one regular half-hour session. Each one was quite different from the others, ranging from students still in the brainstorming process to having very strict guidelines as to how to write the paper to expecting me to be the expert writer with all of the answers. At every half hour I had to switch my mindset to be open to another student’s issues and how I could best help them in the time we had. Needless to say, by the end of the three hours I was exhausted. My mind had been to philosophy to the merits and detriments of video games to the first amendment. I was not at all sure that I had helped each person to the best of my ability, since I felt as though my abilities had been tested as much as possible. I hoped, though, that each person had walked out feeling as though he or she had at least an idea of how to start the paper or how to edit it in the best way possible. I suppose that was my main goal – not to fix anyone’s paper, but to foster ideas, to challenge their ideas in order to help them expand, and to give them some writing tools to take away from the Writing Center.

As a tutor, I feel that drop-in sessions can be just as valuable to the student as a regular appointment. There can be some important differences, though. In the half-hour allotted to the drop-in students, it is possible to listen to the student read his or her paper, explain how I heard the paper, and discuss any issues that the writer has. After all, some of the weekly appointments are also only half an hour. What I’ve found to be the difference, however, is that drop-in appointments require flexibility. One has to be prepared for pretty much anything when it comes to the drop-ins. Students may come in with nothing written, a paper that is due in an hour or a paper that needs so much work it is almost impossible to address the necessary problems within the time they have. With our weekly appointment students we usually have some idea of what they will be working on, but with drop-ins, it is quite unpredictable. Probably the most common issue that drop-ins come in for (at least in my experience) is . . .
Since we are not really supposed to do just a grammar check for anyone, it is necessary to explain to a student that we need to focus on the big picture as well. Thankfully, I have found that no one has put up much of a fight when it comes to needing to also focus on the big picture. When someone requests a grammar check, I try to first focus on the big picture and then if there is time left over, I help them through their grammatical issues. Instead of merely pointing them out to the student, however, I try to help them identify the problematic areas themselves and make changes as they see fit. This does not always work, but I have found that it is definitely easier for them than they think to identify and correct the grammatical problems. This is especially the case when they read their papers out loud. Being able to hear how their paper sounds and any places where it is rough is definitely a help for them.

I do this for several reasons. First of all, it is sort of taboo, as you may well know, to do grammar checks in the Writing Center. We like to help people develop as writers and tend to focus on the bigger picture in order to do that. Also, I do not believe that merely pointing out all of a student’s errors will necessarily help him or her learn to recognize and repair the errors in the future. I believe that the student should be able to walk out of the Writing Center with at least the beginnings of forming self-editing skills. That is not to say that helping students to recognize the errors is a bad thing, but it is important to let them figure things out on their own, since that will benefit them more in the long run.

I cannot say, however, that I do not feel the urge sometimes to just correct all of a writer’s errors and smooth out the paper myself. I am a bit of a stickler for grammar and often the errors will be like neon signs coming off the page, but I restrain myself and try to just point out the main issues and help the students recognize the patterns of error themselves. It is, after all, their writing, and their intellectual property. It is essentially their responsibility to make sure that their writing is accessible to their audience and that their message is clear. We are there to help, but not to intrude. On a little side note, I believe that some of this can be extended to teaching, which is what I plan to do. It is important to teach students, but it is also important to help students learn how to think for themselves and how to develop their own tools of critical thinking, problem solving and self-editing, and not just for writing. This can extend to learning a language, mathematics or biology. Who knew we could learn so much from drop-ins!

Agendas and Positive Feedback

Another major issue involved with drop-ins is that we must, within at most a minute or so after they finish reading their essay out loud, come up with something positive about their writing as well as what to work on within the half-hour session. We must be quick on our feet and ready with a response, since we don’t have much time. We must also create an agenda quite early on in the session and in a rather short amount of time, to make use of every minute we have with the student. This requires communication between the writer and the tutor, which must be established within minutes of meeting, so that the rest of the session can be as productive as possible. It is important to get all of the useful information within the first few minutes, such as what the student is working on, the prompt, the due date, the teacher’s previous comments on the
paper and his or her expectations of the student, and the student’s own expectations of his or her writing.

What to Make of All of This

This is not to say that drop-ins are too much to handle. You will most likely have them, and it is certainly possible to establish an agenda, get through the paper or the brainstorming, and have both you and the student walk away feeling accomplished. I have had productive sessions with drop-ins and felt on top of the world. I have also felt as though I did not help them at all, but I believe that even having been in the Writing Center and having thought about their writing in a critical way is helpful for most students.

I have had a number of experiences with drop-ins since that fateful day, and I usually find that they are just as eager to work on their papers as any of my weekly students. I do still get a little nervous when I have to take a drop-in, since one never knows what kind of student or what kind of paper will be waiting in the tutoring room. Still, I tend to look forward to the drop-ins, since they are something different and potentially interesting. The challenge of coming up with a way to work with them and their writing can be refreshing.
Time to Tutor

“Tutor”

He sits, opens a binder
and a muffled hello falls.
She sits, but looks at the redlining
clock rather than his face.
He says his weakness is writing;
she says there’s an extra space
between “the” and “problem.”
He looks at the clock while
she asks questions. “So what do you
think about that?” His pen falls,
he picks it up and her stomach
growls. “Go to lunch,” he says,
and she stands and smiles.

-Adam Crittenden

Tutoring is something that requires confidence, knowledge, tactfulness, and experience. Now that I am comfortable with being a tutor, I tend to find myself being methodical in my questioning, commenting, and even essay reading. I do not try to sound smart like I did in the beginning to gain the trust of my students, but rather I let the collaboration go where it may. I do not force the issue regarding prompt responses but rather let the students say whatever they have to say about a specific topic. The only problem that has plagued my tutoring style is time management. When tutoring shy students, a talkative style will falter and sometimes be ineffective. The students’ writing skills are improved when they collaborate with tutors rather than ask tutors to edit and proofread. It is that simple, but still challenging to achieve successfully.

Tutoring in the writing center is challenging in many aspects. Such aspects include: telling students that tutors are not available for editing papers only, guiding students to improve their writing skills rather than simply improving their essays, and utilizing all of the time allotted for a thirty minute or one-hour session. The latter is very difficult when a tutor is trying to help and collaborate with a shy student or a student who speaks English as a second language. These students, in my experience, do not engage in discussing their writing as well as other students, which makes two things occur. First, their paper is in my control and is not being worked on in tandem with the student. When this occurs, the students’ writing skills do not improve. Second, the tutoring session usually ends up to fifteen minutes early for a half-hour session. It is necessary for a tutor to make students feel comfortable and confident so that they can be active in the tutoring session. When students are active and willing to participate completely, the tutoring sessions fill the entire amount of time allotted.
In the beginning of my tutoring experience, I was taking all of the Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) and applying them as an authoritative but personable aid to my students. I ended early with some of my students, but most of the sessions actually ended on time. Reflecting back on my strategy then, however, I did most of the talking and limited the collaboration aspect involved with tutoring. Since then, I have realized that collaboration is a key factor involved with tutoring. As I changed my tutoring style to a more conversational style, the students either played active roles and used their entire session or did not play active roles and became fidgety from answering my problem-posing questions that required more than a yes or a no. Of course, nothing can be perfectly dichotomized, so there were a few instances when students would be somewhere in the middle.

In The Tutoring Book, Rachel Dodge addresses the importance of collaboration between tutors and students in her essay, “The Keys to Collaborative Sessions.” She describes the importance of brainstorming with students and how this initial step instigates the formation of their writing. Dodge states:

The first key to collaborative tutoring sessions is talking; you must keep the lines of communication open with your writers and make sure that they not only feel comfortable talking, but also that they feel heard. I have found that brainstorming with a student is the best way to break the ice and become more comfortable with each other—which, I believe, lends itself to productivity and collaborative tutoring sessions. (182)

While I agree with Dodge that collaboration between students and tutors is necessary and productive, I do not agree that it is as simple as she makes it seem to be. Some students do not want to be heard; they want to be led and directed to improve their essays. Knowing that I cannot indulge this, I realize the dilemma that is presented. Some students come to the writing center for a temporary fix, when in fact they need to solve the real problem, which is the way that they write.

To analyze my tutoring style, I recorded four of my tutoring sessions. One of the most helpful recordings was of a session that I had with a regular half-hour student. She and I collaborate well and usually spend our time talking about ideas, concepts, prompts, and MLA structure. This recorded session was no different. Her topic dealt with a novel that she read for a class. She needed to do some research on immigration in California and relate the research that she found to themes and characters within the novel. We were able to keep a solid half hour block filled with collaboration. I told her some sources she might want to check, such as the Census Bureau and books within the library. We were also able to look over the MLA Handbook to better understand the format of citations. I realized after hearing our tutoring session that we have a distinct pattern for how we approach topics and prompts. Our collaborative process is similar every time in regards to what questions I ask, such as, “What do you think about that?” or, “What might be a topic sentence you could write to summarize that?” Her questions are similar as well. She will often start a session by saying, “I was wondering about….” or, “How should I…?” The latter question is unanswerable, to some extent, in the sense that it is not my role to tell her how she should do anything, unless it is a specific problem that can best be answered in one way.
After listening to a tape-recorded session, I realize that options are important. This is why collaboration, when both the students and the tutors are equally participating, can yield the best results for critical thought and exposition. This is evident in Stephen North’s essay, “The Idea of the Writing Center,” when he states:

That is, given the idea of the writing center I have set forth here, talk is everything. If the writing center is ever to prove its worth in other than quantitative terms—numbers of students seen, for example, or hours of tutorials provided—it will have to do so by describing this talk: what characterizes it, what effect it has, how it can be enhanced. (St. Martin’s Sourcebook 44)

North’s concept of the importance of talk in the writing center is exact in regards to how a successful tutorial can be explained. Talking, and by talking I do not mean reading somebody’s paper to them for ten minutes for editing purposes, is the fundamental means of hatching ideas and polishing previous ideas.

Collaboration is the key element to successful tutoring sessions. If students are not willing to collaborate with their tutors, then the half-hour session (or worse, an hour session) drags on. Neither students nor tutors really want to be there when the sessions become banal and one-sided. Whenever I tutor students for the first time (not drop-ins, but regulars), I try to make them laugh with some cheesy jokes so that they feel more comfortable around me. Of course, I am not a comedian nor do I try to be, so my jokes are not that funny. Whether they are good are not does not matter; what matters is that I try to break the initial walls that the students put up. They know nothing about me when they come in to the writing center, and yet they are expected to carry on conversations about their writing. Not all students are capable of doing so, but I try to make the environment comfortable to promote collaboration. In short, when collaboration works well, tutors do not have an excess of time that seems impossible to fill.
Let the Tutee Speak: Balancing Talk and Silence

When we push students to speak, to evaluate; when we listen and don't rush in to fill silences, we may be able to transform the rules of studenthood [...] 

-Thomas Newkirk, "The First Five Minutes: Setting the Agenda in a Writing Conference

The premise of my advice for future tutors is based upon silence and a somewhat privileged silence at that. My advice will only matter after some tutoring has been accomplished. The irony is that before I began tutoring myself I wanted advice; I wanted someone to tell me how to tutor, to take me by the hand, to lead me through the steps. But tutoring is an experientially based endeavor: I learned as I tutored. Within the frightening silence that is called "I don't know what to do or say or write" a transformation to "I will try this or that" can occur, will occur. What I realized is that within my silent lack of practical knowledge lie a theoretically sound idea of how to help other people become better writers. I already knew how I wanted to tutor, which is not to say that I did not learn anything all semester because I learned a great deal about how theory works in practice. The advice I give to future tutors is to not fear the silence in themselves or their tutees, to not feel the need to know everything all the time, and to learn how to teach the tutee to take charge of his/her own tutoring sessions. I will also provide a list of questions that I often asked my tutees in order to encourage them to take over the session.

In the Beginning

Before I began tutoring in the Writing Center, I had no idea that the position of tutor held potential power. I saw myself-rightly so-as a peer, a fellow student willing to offer what little, questionable "expertise" I could to a fellow writer. When I experienced the initial rush of nervous, scared-out-of-my-mind energy the first week of tutoring, I came face to face with a side of myself that I was not quite comfortable with-a person who took control of "conversations." Initially, two of my five tutees came to me empty-handed, seemingly without purpose, and sat for forty minutes in virtual silence after our quick, bland introductions. I silently screamed "why are you here?" inside my head, not sure to whom the pronoun referred, me or the tutees; I calmly asked question after question of these two tutees and, at best, received barely audible assents and slight nods. After the sessions, I knew I had failed, would never see these students again or, if I did, it would be with better, more qualified tutors. But, both of them came back, one even remaining with me all semester, to teach me how to tutor, how to help them better express themselves while learning better expression myself, how to wait out the important silences in our conversations.
Idealistic but Workable Beliefs

I believe that the power of tutoring lies not in the hands and minds of tutors but in the responsibility that tutees can learn to take for their own writing agendas. Every time that I met with a tutee I reminded myself and him/her that I was not an authority figure, but a peer, an audience, a responder. Beverly Lyon Clark states in *Talking About Writing*:

Some beginning tutors [...] and many tutees think that a tutor is an authority figure [...]. But the tutor and the tutee are partners in learning about writing. Or, better still, the tutee should do most of the work. (4-5)

Clark touches on what I found to be tremendously important for effective tutoring to occur. First, I needed to remember that the tutee chose on some level to come to the Writing Center and that alone placed him/her in the driver's seat from the very beginning. Second, most tutees not only expressed the contradictory things that they had been told by past and present instructors would improve their writing but also had their own ideas about the strengths and weaknesses of their writing, both process and product. And, third, the tutees that I judged to be most serious about working to improve their writing were the ones who stated outright what they wanted and expected from me, or who learned, through my continued encouragement, through our conversations and my "loud" silent pauses, to take advantage of our partnership to speak through their ideas, to develop and share the ideas from skeletal beginning to maturing form, and to question me.

Power in Partnerships

As a tutor I learned that whatever power I could lay claim to was in my ability to get my tutees to see that they were in fact the ones in our "partnership" who had the power to direct their own writing processes, to have the final say about what was written, to authorize the validity of their own ideas with a little encouragement from me. After my initial panic about tutoring wore off, I began to talk less during all of my sessions, asking various questions and waiting for responses without prompting or leading the students to answer in any way but their own. When I was able to wait through the silences, the awful pauses and stares after I'd asked them what they thought or felt about their essays and even my responses to their essays, most times I got to hear their ideas, feelings, fears, needs, abilities and could better and more objectively assess what was centrally problematic for them in the writing process; in other words, they spoke their ideas before I ever spoke mine or before I even read their essays so that I would not have some agenda firmed up before I knew what their agenda was. I found that most of my tutees were able to speak more clearly and logically about their ideas than they actually wrote about them. Discovering this gap between speaking and writing every time I tutored a student, validated my decision to speak less, giving the tutee more speaking time because their ideas, not mine, needed to be spoken, so to speak, into a more polished writing.
Examples of Powerful Exchanges

I was not always successful in my attempt to be a "passive" tutor to an active tutee. I can provide two very different situations that occurred during my tutoring semester: one involved a tutee telling me my "job," and the other involved a tutee interrupting my monologue on how to repair her paper by speaking louder than me. Both events were good for me as a tutor, and, as it turned out, at least one of the events was a positive learning experience for the tutee involved. In the first case, a tutee told me that it was my job to fix all of the errors in her paper. I had been working with this tutee for at least three weeks, had no indication that she would "turn" on me one day, and felt somewhat betrayed; I had feelings too and thought that she was taking too much power by dictating to me my job. Suddenly I found myself full of anger and resentment, as if I had "given" her something that she was abusing-power over her tutoring sessions. I waited until our next meeting to discuss this episode with her because I knew that I needed to think about why I was so hurt and angry. My decision was to tell her that tutoring was not my job, that I volunteered, and that I would happily tutor her in how to edit her essays but that I would not do it for her while she sat and watched. What I realized is that the responsibility for learning was in the hands of my tutee, not me, and that I did not have to relinquish the power I had over what I would or could do to help the tutee learn in order for the tutee to maintain power over what he/she wanted to learn. As I said, I believe this experience was of benefit to me because sometimes I lack the ability to say an unmediated "no" and need to be less passive, but I am not sure if the outcome was beneficial to my tutee. She continued to attend each session for the whole semester so I guess she came to terms with the fact that she would edit her own essays if I was her tutor.

The second situation involved my taking a fairly assertive role one afternoon with a long-term tutee who was exceptionally quiet; I was anxious to make her speak. And, speak she did, loudly and authoritatively about how I was changing her ideas. Immediately, I felt embarrassment and shame and pride and joy. My tutee was basically telling me to be quiet so that she could think and talk. Not only was this tutee's writing improving, and she a second-timer in 109W, but she was asserting herself and the value of her ideas; she was telling me that she could think for herself and needed me to listen and respond. I was amazed at how good I felt, not because I thought I had much to do with her new found power, but that I was witness to a young woman's serious attempts, numerous failures, and what I hoped would be the beginning of success for her or, at least, the end of her WPE nightmares. This particular tutee has impressed me the most: she began quiet and unresponsive (one of the original two who scared me into talking too much with her silence and purposeless attitude) and completes the semester telling me to be quiet so that she can think about how to provide a fuller description in her essay. Between these two experiences, I learned how to answer, at least contextually, Laurel Johnson Black's questions in Between Talk and Teaching, "[w]hen does direction become directive? [w]hen do we choose to use our power and why?" (7). When my tutee essentially tells me to be quiet, I am being directive; and, when my tutee tells me my job I need to assert some of my power as tutor, as a peer.
What Not to Say as Loud as Possible

If I had to sum up my tutoring experience and within that experience leave a new tutor with solid, practical advice, I would say to remember that a tutor is a peer to the tutee and that perhaps the most important thing a tutor can do for his/her tutee is to listen. And to listen, a tutor must not always be speaking. To not speak, to not lead a tutoring session, is difficult and can be quite uncomfortable, but it may be necessary in order to hear what the tutee thinks, to hear who the tutee is, and find out what the tutee wants and needs. There are many important ways to help a tutee: teach them to be in control of their own learning; show them the respect they are due for their intelligence, knowledge, and expertise; do not hide your own strengths and weaknesses; explore their ideas, helping them to expand, clarify, and construct meaning; ask them how they feel about the progress of their tutoring once in awhile; and remember to wait, to listen, and to respond. One thing is certain: tutoring involves a lot of speaking-more speaking than writing, and the more that tutees speak about their ideas, the better their ideas become expressed in their writing. But the tutee must do the work, must lead the conversation about his/her own writing. I recommend saying as little as possible; I recommend questions; I recommend listening.

Questions to Ask: Mentoring the Silence

I conclude with a list of open-ended, albeit "leading," questions that I often asked my tutees throughout the semester. They are questions to "guide" the silences; the eventual goal is to encourage the tutee to speak more and the tutor less.

1) Why are you here?
2) What do you want to work on?
3) How is it that you see me helping you?
4) How do you feel about writing?
5) Tell me about some of your positive and negative writing experiences.
6) Assess your own strengths and weaknesses as a writer.
7) Tell me how you wrote this essay.
8) Tell me what the essay is about.
9) Why should I want to read your essay?
10) Do you feel that you said all you wanted to, all you could?
11) How do you feel about the essay's topic in general? Is there anything you want to say but feel you shouldn't for some reason?
12) What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of your essay?
13) What did you learn writing this essay? What do you want me to learn?
14) How did you write this essay? What are your writing habits?

My list of questions could go on, but I think that I will leave off with it and simply say that most of the questions I asked were to get tutees to take charge, to explore what they thought about a topic, to encourage them to learn how, why, and when to expand/explain their ideas and to get them to better recognize/visualize "who" they were writing for-themselves, their audience. I finish tutoring happy that I gave my tutees the opportunity to answer the questions I asked, that we sat through some very uncomfortable silences together until we got to their voices. It seems to me that theirs' should be the dominant voices we hear when we walk into the Writing Center.
Watch Your Mouth: Dealing With Silence and Letting the Student Speak

There were many issues that I faced as an intern tutor in the Spring 2008 term. Two of the most difficult for me to deal with were the silence I faced from some of my writers (especially early in the semester) and my own behavior of interrupting the writer (most evident in the recorded sessions of March and April of this term). This many issues piece is going to expressly discuss my own experiences with these issues, as well as ways to deal with them. By reading this, hopefully any new tutor will feel more comfortable and prepared to face these challenges.

Dealing with Silence:

I know that when a person comes in to be tutored they should do most of the talking. But what happens when they do not speak? It seems as though I am not doing right by them to simply let the silence reign during our session. I know that I am not the first tutor to feel this way as Carrie Bowen-Mercer advises in the 2008 CSUS Tutoring Book: “[tutors should] not fear the silence in themselves or their tutees, to not feel the need to know everything all the time, and to learn how to teach the tutee to take charge of his/her own tutoring sessions.” She also give a very good list of significant questions that can open up the session for both the tutor and his or her writer. Some of the questions I often used to prevent and end silences in tutoring sessions were:

*Why are you here?
*What are we working on today?
*What class is it for?
*What do you think you need to work on?

Some of these questions are mine and some are Bowen-Mercer’s, but all open-ended questions help to prevent silences by giving the writer something to talk about.

My experiences with ESL students, while frustrating when they do not speak, are at least those I am more prepared for. According to the Harris article in St. Martin’s, “[ESL students] think their role is to listen, remember, and ask questions that clarify their understanding” (211). It is possible that in his/her home country a student is not allowed to ask questions of the teacher. If an ESL student sees me as a teacher, that student may simply be expecting me to tell him or her how to fix the paper because that is what a teacher would do. If this is the case, then it may be a bit easier to get on track once I explain the differences between the role of tutor and the role of teacher. Collaborative tutoring seems to be one of the best ways to work with ESL students, and it is discussed in Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences by McAndrew and Reigstad thusly: “the tutor encourages the writer, often with open-ended and probe-and-prompt questions […] As a consequence, the relationship between tutor and writer changes from teacher-student to converser-converser” (26). In the case of ESL students, it is necessary for
them to realize that tutors are not teachers and it is good for them to voice their ideas and questions (and answer the tutor’s questions), rather than being silent.

I had a couple of students who just sat back and had me read their papers (because they were uncomfortable reading aloud), and when I finished and asked them what they would like to do with their papers or how they would like to change things, I would get nothing more than blank looks and mumbled ‘I don’t knows.’ I asked one of the returning tutors what she does when a student she is tutoring is totally silent with her. She said she simply responds to a student’s silence with silence. She said that she may first rephrase the question that caused the silence. In her words, “maybe it was a sucky question. It’s totally possible.” This is because all questions in a tutoring session are improvised. She said if the rephrased question yields no results (in the form of conversation) then she just lets it be quiet. When I asked her about this, she did not seem to feel guilty about simply letting silence reign because she said that silence can even be helpful.

She did have a second suggestion, however, one that did not seem to be so brutal to the tutee. She suggested that if a student is non-responsive, or seems to need time to digest a question or statement, tell her that I need something from the tutors’ room and give her a few minutes of time and space. She said that when I go back out there the student may be more open and willing to carry on a conversation. It certainly seems like a possibility, and definitely a more positive alternative than simply letting silence reign over the tutoring session.

**Stopping the Interruption:**

Occasionally, you may want to interject your own ideas instead of allowing your writers to fully express themselves and explain to you what they are trying to say. I know I do this. For example, in the session I tape recorded, I noted myself saying things like:

“I don’t think this is the word you want here. It has the wrong connotation. What about this word instead?”

I know I do this because I am looking out for the best interest of my writer (I do not want this person turning in his paper with an issue like a word with the wrong connotation when he can adequately explain to me what he was trying to say, but did not have the word for); of course as a tutor I want to help all I can. However, it is clear that I do not always do full justice to my tutees’ work.

I seem to want to give ideas not only when the silence reigns, but for no particular reason at all. According to McAndrew and Reigstad, “[t]he writing tutor must respect the writer’s ideas and words. As tempting as it might be for the tutor to rewrite the student’s work […] she should resist doing so” (19). I really want to work on not offering my own words because I want my tutees’ papers to sound like them, not like me. I think one way I could do that is not talk unless my tutee asks me a specific question about something, or if the session gets really quiet and I need to ask a question of my own to get things flowing again. Other than that, the tutee should be the only one to speak during the session. It is very important to allow your writer to as much talking as they are willing to do.
The first time I really noticed my own problem with interrupting was during the first session I tape recorded for the tutoring class. We were discussing my tutee’s new paper, and she had her outline done and was talking to me about her various paragraphs to make sure they made sense. As I listened to the recording I found that even though I knew she had ideas she wanted to share with me, in order to get feedback, I kept interrupting her. I really wanted her to clarify her idea before I had even fully listened to her. I thought I knew what she wanted to say and I wanted to make sure that she did not say something she did not mean. I should have just listened as carefully as I could and encouraged her when everything she told me sounded good and plausible. I stopped myself as soon as I heard myself do it, but I feel guilty having a habit that could ruin my writer’s train of thought. A classmate in the tutoring class offered me a suggestion of how to stop interrupting. She said I should stick a pen in my mouth whenever my writer starts talking, in order to keep myself from interrupting, and only take it out when it is clear she is finished speaking!

I do not want my tutees to think that their ideas are not worthy of being listened to or discussed. Hence, it is important that I do not interrupt them while they are on a roll, so that they do not get discouraged. My writer tells me her ideas, I ask questions for clarity, flow, and the like, and she responds. It is definitely more important for my writer’s confidence that I listen to the ideas she has, so she does not feel that they are mistaken. As a tutor, I should encourage the writer to do as much talking as possible, and I should only speak when necessary.

I am grateful that I did not notice awkward silences on the two recordings I made with this writer. I do not know if that is because she is particularly open and talkative or if I am better at asking the kinds of questions that allow students to open up about their writing; I hope it is some of both. However, I am regretful that I interrupted my student so much while we discussed this paper. Still, I think that learning that I have that quirk will allow me to become a better tutor. Tutoring is a practice after all, and one must evolve one’s style after learning something new.

Silences and interruptions are likely to be a part of some tutor sessions because it takes time for students to trust their tutors and tutors are not perfect people. It is okay for these things to happen, but it is important to address these issues when you realize they are happening to you. As the tutor, you are not responsible for ending all silences and you do not have to be the only one to speak. Open-ended questions are a very useful way to get your students involved in the tutoring session. As for interruption, it is important to find a way to avoid it if at all possible, and to remedy it if you notice you do it often. Most importantly, watch your mouth and listen to what your writer has to say. It is possible that you will learn as much from your writers as they do from you.
Becoming a Dumb Reader: Re-seeing Error as Opportunity

The Writing Center is a place for students not only to improve their writing skills and strategies, but also to acquire a sense of writing as a communal act, as informed by social context and multiple discourses. Julie, a senior English major, continues to meet with tutors in the Writing Center because she recognizes that the responsive audience of tutors is an invaluable addition to her writing; it gives her writing that hard-to-grasp sense of audience awareness that can be very difficult for the idealized notion of the lone, “inspired” writer to come by. While “a good modernist would ask: Can [the student writer] now write on her own?,” the deeper-reaching benefit of the Writing Center is the creation of a writing community and the writer’s awakened awareness of the profitability of collaborative writing (Grimm 21). Student writers do not make the writing-talking connection by individually fathoming The Answer from the deep blue sea of Romantic inspiration, but by working with tutors in conversation of equal terms that is mutually productive.

I have learned that treating the student writer with probity, as a genuine writer with something meaningful to say, is one of the most effective methods of drawing new and unsure writers into a place where they feel socially comfortable with and intellectually prepared for the discourse of the academy. As a new tutor, you can do this by participating as an equal in your tutee-tutor conversations: show the writer that you value her ideas by responding with vitality and enthusiasm, and soon your conversations will take on a conceptually meaningful life of their own. Although many writers you will help have myriad errors that may seem to grasp at your pen for correction, you should treat those errors as parts of the writers’ ideas, as possible moments of complexity, nexus, or disconnection that invite further development. Remember, above all, that the absence of error does not necessarily indicate an absence of writing difficulties, and can, in fact, point to overly simplistic writing that has little idea development or complexity; conversely, a proliferation of errors does not necessarily signify a poor writer, but may in fact signal that the writer is trying to say something complex with the limited tools available to him. Unfortunately, conventional approaches to writing instruction have often perceived error as an indication of written incompetence and worse yet, cognitive incompetence. Treating errors as points of entry into idea development can help the writer develop confidence about writing that will enable her to take more risks and express more ideas, however error-ridden they may be in writing; looking at productive error will also help the writer develop her critical consciousness and make meaning.

But before I wrongly admonish error as a conservative academic chimera, let me make the necessary distinction between purely grammatical errors and errors of idea complexity or, perhaps more succinctly, non-productive and productive errors. Consistent sentence- and word-level errors are usually indicative of grammatical misunderstandings that can be easily corrected with some basic instruction, and might include such errors as subject-verb agreement, misspellings, and usage problems; you might think of these as non-productive errors, or errors that the student commits out of a lack of, or sloppy, editing skills. You will encounter many
situations in which students need help with grammar and have been unable to find that help elsewhere. In these cases, you can help the writer by following this simple three-step plan.

1. Look for consistent errors (only when that is what the writer really needs and wants to work on)
2. Point out one or two specific instances of the same problem to the writer, and
3. Ask the writer to find the remaining identical errors.

This method can work well with harried drop-in students, and even better with regular students who will get more practice in later sessions at recursively identifying errors. With a little imagination, a broader spectrum of discussion, and a series of appointments to work with, the three-step scheme of error correction can turn into higher-level revision of development of ideas, transitions, integration and interpretation of sources, and organization.

Many times, what you might normally think of as non-productive error might actually be productive error. Confusing sentences, for example, may indicate idea complexity; and sentence and idea disconnects may be points of entry for developmental revision. Instead of correcting confusing sentences, use them to develop the student’s essay by asking open-ended, broadening questions such as “What do you mean by this?” or “What were trying to say here?” that force the student to explain and explore his ideas verbally (see a longer list of broadening questions at the end of this essay). Instead of merely noting that something does not make sense to you or that ideas do not connect, use these errors as opportunities: with verbal dialogue, help the student develop the missing clues, the nuances of ideas she probably knows so well that she neglected to write them down. Draw student writers into the circle of discourse by asking “broadening” questions that force the writer to expand on these moments of complexity. This discursive strategy may not help students to learn free agency and isolating autonomy, but it does help students to learn the practical applicability of E.M. Forster’s question, “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” by finding out what they have to say in relation to others and what others have to say in relation to them. When you ask a student writer to explain a confusing point, he learns that his writing is a collaborative process on all levels; even when his thoughts take place internally, they are still informed by social and environmental context, and all the texts that have been written and spoken in between.

Suzette, a UCLA Writing Center student who Mike Rose worked with, was producing sentence fragments that appeared as if they might fit under my definition of non-productive error: it appeared that she was merely unaware of the elements that went into the creation of a complete sentence. As Rose and the other Writing Center tutors worked with her, however, they began to realize that “Suzette’s fragments . . . originated from a desire to reach beyond what she considered simple” (171); Suzette used fragments because she felt that restating the beginning of each sentence – “‘She was, she was, she was,’” – was evidence of a juvenile, high school-ish, simplistic writing style (171). So she attempted, in the only way of which she was aware, to approach the sound of academic writing by omitting the repetitive parts of her sentences (which led to incomplete sentences because they then lacked a subject and verb). Her fragments, while seemingly sentence-level error, were actually manifestations of her attempt to advance her writing style and engage in the discourse of the academy.
Unlike most writers, Sarah, a first-year English 1 student, had problems grasping some of the more basic conceptual patterns of her writing, including making sense or meaning of her ideas, and seeing the internal logical flaws in her arguments. She seemed to have more trouble than other student writers verbally explaining her own ideas even in the semi-informal tutor-writer relationship. I wished, but cynically without hope, that these conceptual wrinkles could be ironed out if we engaged in meaning-making discourse, the verbal parley of idea exchange that had been successful with other students. Although, in the tradition of essentialist thinking, I wasn’t sure if the “meaning” was there to be made, we engaged in discussions prompted by my prototypical question, “What does this mean?” The discovery I made was that, in treating Sarah like a genuine and valuable writer who had something meaningful to say and write (not a “basic” writer as she had been labeled by the English Placement Test), our conversations began to take on a conceptually meaningful life of their own. As is typically true of the writing process itself, which is an engagement in dialogue with oneself and one’s social context, Sarah did not have the “answers” to my questions until, together, we talked them out. We discovered thoughts by verbalizing them and letting language make its own meaning in the space between us.

Because “error . . . [can signify] the most interesting and productive moment for a writer,” the points in Sarah’s essay that were most unclear became the most promising moments of complexity and multi-faceted nexus, doors of opportunity to explore more complicated notions (Grimm 13). In the following conversational exchange, discussing sentence-level error led to a more complex understanding of Sarah’s intended meaning and led Sarah to open up and expand on her original thought. Sentence-level “error” can actually be an indicator of a complex thought that has found trouble squeezing itself into a solitary, contorted sentence.

**Tutor:** “She had no freedom to choose her own decision in class.” I’m not sure what that means.

**Writer:** Um, like she had to follow um basically everybody, had only one decision, one decision only, and she could not make – choose her choice – basically. Like they only had one choice, they didn’t have two choices.

**Tutor:** OK. So how could we restate that so it could be a little clearer? It sounds like she’s sitting in class and she doesn’t have a choice in class.

**Writer:** Oh gosh. I don’t know how to explain it. Like in Japan, OK, everybody follows one thing –

**Tutor:** One area of study?

**Writer:** Yeah, one, like idea, that say for – like how we have like metaphors here, like they can’t say, you know, like a flower something, like ‘she was as pretty as a flower,’ but you know everybody would have to say, ‘she was as a pretty as flower.’ They can’t say, ‘she was as pretty as a daisy’ or something . . . they don’t have the freedom to choose what they want to do.

This conversation started out as a discussion of Sarah’s written sentence that had inherent logic and word choice problems: “She had no freedom to choose her own decision in class.” Instead of pointing out Sarah’s “lower-order errors” and simply “correcting” them for her, I
played the “dumb reader,” the anti-authority who knows, or pretends to know, nothing (Caposella 20). Questions like, “So how could we restate that so it could be a little clearer?” and “One area of study?” while obvious and simple, helped Sarah to clarify her spoken thought processes. Even though Sarah originally said she “[didn’t] know how to explain” what she wanted to say, tasking her with helping me to understand eventually helped her to clarify her own thoughts – indicating another benefit of the writing-talking connection in a collaborative environment.

According to convention, perhaps, students come to the Writing Center to learn successful writing strategies and skills; but by far one of the most important “strategies” students can learn is a critical consciousness informed by communal discourse. While some would argue that the Writing Center should be a place where students learn how to write autonomously, the Romantic myth of the inspired writer/student should be demystified, deflated, and replaced by the notion of the writer/student as a member of a community that informs, and is informed by, its members. If students’ writing discrepancies are asked about in meaningful ways rather than corrected, two things will happen: they will begin to develop a critical consciousness and meaning-making skills, and they will learn that areas of confusion can actually be points of opportunity that they can use to their advantage during revision.

**Broadening Questions**

**The Topic**
- What is your professor asking you to do in this paper?
- What do you know about this topic? How might you find out more?
- To answer this question, what other questions would we have to answer first? What does the question assume? Why is this question important?
- I’m not sure how you are interpreting the main question at issue.

**The Essay**
- Do you feel that you said all you wanted to, all you could? Is there anything you want to say but feel you shouldn’t for some reason?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of your essay?
- What did you learn and what do you want me to learn from this essay? Summarize your essay for me.
- How did you write this essay? How do you usually write essays?

**Audience Awareness**
- How would other groups/types of people respond? Why? What would influence them?
- Can/did anyone see this another way?

**Clarifying**
- What do you mean by X?
- What is your main point?
- How does X relate to Y?
- Let me see if I understand: do you mean X or Y?
- Can you give me an example? Explain that further?

**Probing Assumptions and Implications**
- You seem to be assuming X. Do I understand you correctly?
- All of your reasoning depends on the idea that Y. How would you justify taking this for granted?
- When you say X, are you implying Y?
- What effect would that have?
For Drop-Ins: An Abbreviated Procedure
1) What do you feel needs work in this paper/assignment?
2) How do you start writing your paper?
3) As the tutor, locate the thesis (if there is one), read the topic and last sentence in each paragraph and the conclusion.

Mike Rose is a writing teacher at UCLA who has written Lives on the Boundary, an autobiographical account about America’s “educationally underprepared”: his own test results were confused with another student’s when he was young, erroneously placing him in the Vocational Ed. track.
Questioning The Tutor’s Questions

Is there significance in what a tutor asks a writer and how they question that writer? The spoken interaction between a tutor and writer is the most important function of a tutorial. Many writers benefit tremendously from participating in an actual conversation about their writing, and perhaps some of the most influential elements of this tutor-writer exchange are the tutor’s questions to the writer.

*The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring,* by Gillespie and Lerner, suggests significance in the function of what the tutor says to the writer (129). There is often a connection between the tutor’s questions/comments and the success of the tutorial. Of course analyzing a tutor’s questions is not necessarily indicative of the tutorial’s success or failure, but analyzing how the tutor interacts with the writer (not just what is being said) can allow for understanding of the tutorial.

At the beginning of the semester, when I was a neophyte in the world of tutoring, I was more concerned with keeping the conversation afloat than worrying about what questions I was asking. But, if you know which questions (or type of questions) to ask, the conversation will thrive on its own! Here are some things to contemplate:

**The Importance of Questioning Your Writer**

There are a number of benefits that can result from a tutor questioning the writer. From writers’ perspectives, it shows that the tutor is interested in what they are thinking and what they have to say. This may sound trivial, but many writers that seek help from the Writing Center have little confidence in their writing. Asking the writer questions makes him or her feel (understand, really, because it is true) that his or her contribution to the conversation is important. Along these lines, the writer will be encouraged to actively participate in the discussion, which is the goal for all tutors! Of course, not all writers will decide to actively participate in the conversation, but asking questions for them to answer will encourage them to do so. When writers willingly participate, two things happen: they have control of their writing and it gets them thinking!

**Questions To Get Started**

I almost always begin a tutorial by asking a question directed to the writer. This tactic, as mentioned above, encourages the writer to participate and also sets some groundwork for the session. Asking questions at the onset of a tutorial is an effective way to establish what the writer is concerned with, the goals for the tutorial, and even what he or she is working on. Here are some sample questions to get started:

- What are you working on today?
- What is the assignment?
- What are your concerns with this paper?
- What is your main argument?
Recognizing the Purpose of the Question

The purpose of a tutor’s question can vary almost as much as the question itself. A tutor’s question can sometimes be intended to encourage the writer to participate or expand on an idea in the paper. This can be useful for brainstorming or when a passage in the writer’s paper needs more clarification. Some questions are intended to gain information. If something in the writer’s paper is unclear, you may ask a question because you are confused (yes, it happens). In this scenario, questioning the writer can clarify the tutor’s understanding/interpretation of the paper.

Yes/No Versus Open-Ended Questions

The type of questions that tutors ask during a tutorial can influence the amount of discourse that the writer will contribute to the conversation. There will most likely be a natural mixture of yes/no and open-ended questions. But, a dominance of yes/no questions can leave the writer feeling as if there are only two things the tutor wants to hear: “yes” and “no.” These questions can make the writer feel that his or her input is not valuable. While yes/no questions are not always taboo, they do need to be balanced with open-ended questions that allow the writer to contribute to the conversation. Open-ended questions can include questions such as, “What are your concerns with this paper?” and “What is your main argument?” Open-ended questions such as these open the channels of communication and allow the writer to “own” their piece of writing.

Asking How and Why Questions

At the risk of sounding like a therapist (how do you feel about the paper?), questions that ask how and why are crucial to most tutorials. As a tutor, I was constantly asking writers how and why. These are important questions to ask the writer because they can help to develop an essay by adding complexity. Many writers do not ask themselves why or how in an essay, but these types of questions can add depth to a piece of writing.

Commands Embedded Within The Question

Although questions can be encouraging, often there can be a command unintentionally embedded within a tutor’s question. I was unaware of this concept until I reviewed one of my tutorials. I had asked the writer questions such as, “Do you want to read the essay to me and then we can look at the professor’s comments?” Although I posed a question to the writer, the writer could also have interpreted this statement as “read your paper to me and then we will look at the comments.” Some writers may interpret this type of question as an informal command. I am not implying that questions with a potential command embedded within them always have a negative impact on writers. In fact, this type of question may benefit some writers if they need extra guidance.

What To Do With A……….Pause After The Question
My worst fear as a novice tutor was SILENCE. I had confidence that I would be able to ask the writer at least some kind of question, but what if the writer made no response? Should I keep talking to fill the silence? Should I change the topic? Should I repeat the question? I was terrified of silence…until I actually experienced it. If you ask the writer a question (especially an open-ended one), a pause in the conversation may not be negative. This is where you, as a tutor, must “read” the writer. If the writer is rolling his eyes and playing games on his cell phone, yeah, there is probably a problem. However, sometimes a writer is silent because he is actually thinking. The tutor does not need to jump back into the conversation to fill the void; this could actually cause the writer to lose his train of thought and ideas. If the writer takes more than a few moments to answer, consider giving him some space. He may come up with a better answer if he is not pressured to respond immediately. It may be helpful for the writer to appear occupied (no really!). Although you do not want to appear disinterested, if you quickly jot down some notes or write in their folder, the writer may feel better prepared to answer your question with some room to think.

Balancing Questions With Other Needed Discourse

Although I have concentrated on the importance of questioning your writer, I also want to acknowledge the importance of other discourse in a tutorial. This could include statements, explanations, and words of encouragement. It is essential with most writers to incorporate both encouragement and statements/explanations in the tutorial. The perfect ratio of questions to explanations or encouragement depends on the individual writer. I had a writer for the majority of the semester who needed more explanations and encouragement than many other writers. During our first tutorial, I asked her several questions, and I got mostly the response “I don’t know.” She eventually opened up with me and started asking me questions of her own. She asked me questions such as “What does it mean to analyze?” and “What does a good example look like?” We covered explanations of these questions together, which enabled her to better understand some of the questions I asked her. With this writer, as with many, encouragement is also a crucial element of a tutorial. Encouragement can be aimed to get the writer to speak, to acknowledge the validity of a claim, or even to boost her confidence with her writing. Encouragement from a tutor can be as simple as “okay” or “right.” Questioning the writer can be very effective, but balancing questioning with other forms of discourse based on the writer’s individual needs will be most beneficial to the writer.

Questions To Close The Tutorial

Asking questions in a tutorial is beneficial to the writer and tutor, even at the close of the session. Closing questions can ensure that the writer’s goals for the session were met and the writer has an idea of what to work on to improve their paper/writing. Here are some examples of closing questions:

- Do you know what you are going to work on (for our next session)?
- Did we accomplish your goals for this tutorial?
- What changes will you make with this paper/assignment?
- Were my comments regarding your paper clear?
Last Piece of Advice

Asking the writer questions is a good way to give the writer control of the paper and encourage conversation, but ultimately the tutor must cater to the needs of the individual writer. As I stated previously, some writers need more encouragement or explanations than others. Addressing the specific needs of the individual is the ticket to success. After all, we are here for them!
“Playing Dumb”

I thought that I was well prepared to tutor at Sac State. I tutored for two years in my hometown at Sierra College. I tutored English, Spanish, Anthropology, Astronomy and Humanities. I worked with many different types of people. I helped younger students, students my age and students who were older than me, students who didn’t speak English or Spanish but languages that I had no clue about, such as Czech, Russian and Japanese. Tutoring came easily for me. I thought it was ridiculous that I had to go through another semester of how to tutor when I had already done that at my community college. However, unlike my tiny community college, Sacramento State is a four–year college and there are a lot of upper division classes and graduate courses. I was not prepared to tutor at the Writing Center students who were working on thesis papers and academic papers for different fields such as science.

The first week I had a student come in who is a microbiology major. She is doing her thesis paper about a forensic study about more in-depth DNA investigating techniques of casting shells found at crime scenes and she is hoping to get it published in an academic journal by the end of March. I know absolutely nothing about microbiology, forensics or casting shells except what I’ve seen on CSI. I was intimidated by her subject matter and I had absolutely no clue about how to help her. I have also never written a thesis paper, so I do not know what the process is for writing a thesis paper. When I met with her I kept my mouth shut and let her talk about her paper. In the article, “Let the Tutee Speak: Balancing Talk and Silence” Carrie Bowen-Mercer describes silence on the tutor’s side as a good thing. It allows the student to become more involved in the tutoring session. In my case silence allows for me to hear all the information that would help me understand the student’s needs. Thankfully, the student understood my lack of scientific background so she let me know that she didn’t need help with the content of the paper, that she only needed to work on the structure of her paper. However, in order for me to understand the structure of her paper I would need to have some understanding of what the paper was about.

In Bowen–Mercer’s article she has a list of questions that a tutor can ask a student. These encourage the student to take a more active role in the session. The student I was working with was very open and talkative. I did not need the questions Mercer suggested to draw her into the session. Instead I used the questions to help me to understand her paper and her objective. I asked her questions like: What is this paper for? What is the purpose of the paper? What kinds of concerns do you have about this paper? I also took into consideration a large portion of the article “Becoming a Dumb Reader: Re–Seeing Error as Opportunity” by Jessica Hankins. I loved the title because that is how I felt as I was talking to this grad student. The most helpful point in this article was that it is okay not to know the answers. If I came across something I didn’t know about like robots that analyze DNA from shell castings then I would ask the student to explain.

After asking many questions, I was able to assess what kind of help the writer needed and how to give it. At times, I did need some background information about the content of the paper so that I could understand its structure. My writer’s professor had made the point that the paper’s structure was essential. In order to help her figure out the structure I had to become familiar with
some of her scientific background in order to know if she needed to organize her paper differently. There were times when I was confused about some terminology and phrases, however, because of her involvement in the session we were able to work together to organize the paper. The book Tutoring Writing discusses an advantage to using a collaborative method as “Both writer and tutor grow as writers because they collaborate on the process and the production of writing.” (McAndrew 6). Talking to the writer and having her answer my questions kept her focused. While actually helping her paper most of the session was spent going over her abstract, which I later found out was the part of her thesis where she presented what the paper would be discussing. I was unclear as to what an abstract was. I asked her to explain and she was more than happy to tell me. It is basically a paper that was like a promise to her teacher what would be included in her paper. It covers all the topics she would be covering in her paper.

The abstract was difficult to go through because it wasn’t organized. In Mandy Bond’s article, “Shout it Out: The Benefits of Reading Aloud” Bond stresses the importance of reading a paper out loud. This method of reading out loud is useful to help engage a student and have them recognize their errors, but I decided to read the paper out loud for this tutor session. I read the paper out loud because if I didn’t I would have gotten lost in all the terminology. By reading out loud, I was able to focus more on the paper and stop to ask questions when I got into the more technical sections of the paper.

After getting all the questions out of the way we were able to go through the 13 pages of the abstract. By reading out loud she and I were able to go through her paper and find grammatical mistakes. Because I asked questions about background information she was able to see organizational problems in her paper. In tutoring it is never safe to assume that one will know what to expect from a student, especially since a writing center will get students from disciplines other than English. The best thing to do is listen to the student’s needs and concerns. That is the best way a tutor will be able to get a better understanding of how to help the student.
Teaching the Writing Tutor to Praise

*To say, "well done" to any bit of good work is to take hold of the powers which have made the effort and strengthen them beyond our knowledge.*

*Phillip Brooks (1835-1893)*

Paul Diederich, a senior research associate for the Educational Testing Service, once stated that “noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly, and that it is especially important for the less able writers” to hear praise because they “need all the encouragement they can get” (Daiker155). Indeed, the view that praise aids students in developing the type of confidence required in college-level writing has long been touted by members of the academic community. However, while many tutors may know intuitively that students become better writers when they are given the proper encouragement and feedback, many are hesitant to really use the art of praise to its fullest advantage. Therefore, in the effort to make praise more available to tutors as a means of connecting with and responding to tutees, this essay offers various perspectives and suggestions that will not only aid you in developing and increasing your personal arsenal of praiseworthy habits, but also in acknowledging the true power of praise and the various forms it takes in the tutor-writer relationship.

**Step One: Recognizing Why We Praise**

In “Learning to Praise,” author Donald Daiker notes that “praise may be especially important for students who have known little encouragement and, in part for that reason, suffer from writing apprehension” (155). For many tutors, myself included, praise just seems to come more naturally when working with students who have difficulties with their writing. Perhaps, in some ways, we see any little amount of improvement as a reason for celebration and our comments to students not only seem to be an attempt to point out moments of progress, but also an excuse for offering encouragement to continue writing. We give more praise to these weaker writers because we know their history—poor grades on papers, endless pages of negative teacher feedback, and a deflated ego to match their status as “failures.” Our praise for these students therefore stems not merely from our need to recognize and honor their evolution as writers, but also from a need to reestablish their long-lost confidence as authors. We praise—sometimes more than necessary—because we want these students to feel like they have accomplished something and made inroads as writers. We praise because we want to erase some of the frustration, anger, hurt, and disillusionment that has collected over the years because of their continual inability to master the conventions of form and language required of “good” writers. In addition, we seem to praise students more often when we fear that they may have already given up on writing. As Daiker notes, students who are highly apprehensive about writing because of their weaker skills “anticipate negative consequence” and therefore “avoid writing” (155). In turn, “the avoidance of writing—the lack of practice—leads to further negative consequences: writing of poor quality that receives low grades and unfavorable comments” (Daiker155). Maybe, by praising the students we feel are apprehensive about even approaching a writing task, we hope to rejuvenate or re-motivate them—to instill within them some of the
zest for writing that we have found over the years. However, while this increased amount of support may be valuable to weaker writers because it provides them with much needed positive reinforcement, it often seems that we neglect to give “stronger” writers equal treatment. Consequentially, we must ask ourselves why this inconsistency exists and whether our uneven praise has negative effects on these individuals.

Step 2: Learning to Praise Equally

While many composition scholars and instructors acknowledge the positive effects praise has on student writing, many do not even recognize that their praise often does not seem to be dispersed equally. In fact, throughout my time at the Writing Center, I have noticed that individuals seem much more likely to praise students that they consider to be weaker writers than students characterized as strong writers. What causes this inequality in the dispersion of praise and why do we differentiate between the achievements of more- and less-able writers?

After recording some of my recent tutoring sessions, I noted that I praise “weak” writers twice as much on average than students whose writing I consider stronger or less error-filled. I especially neglect to praise students with only low-order concerns on their papers compared to students who still need assistance with the fundamentals of writing such as organization, analysis, and support. However, while I do not consciously recognize that I refrain from praising students with stronger writing skills, I wonder to what extent I am actually impeding their growth as writers by withholding praise or by praising them only for truly outstanding work?

In a 1972 study conducted by Thomas Gee, the author found that “students whose composition received either criticism alone or no commentary at all developed significantly more negative attitudes toward writing than students whose composition received only praise” (Daiker 156). Moreover, Gee’s study determined that after only four weeks, “students who received only negative comments or none at all were writing papers significantly shorter than those of students who were praised” (Daiker 156). As this study proves, even a lack of praise seems to have negative consequences on the quality of students’ work; therefore, it seems crucial that even strong writers receive acknowledgement for their accomplishments because failure to provide such support may in fact be crippling their desire to continue writing at the same level of excellence.

Step 3: Making Praise an Everyday Habit

Now that you have learned the importance of praising students in an equal manner, regardless of their level of ability, there are a few additional reminders that will aid you in best utilizing praise as a means of positive reinforcement.

Reminder 1: Allow Students to Experience Success on a Consistent Basis

As Daiker notes, “since positive reinforcement, or its lack, is so crucial to a student’s level of writing apprehension,” one way to reduce this apprehension and support writers regardless of their skill level, “is by allowing [all] students to experience success with writing” on a consistent bases (156). Tutors can immediately implement this change by becoming more aware of themselves as individuals whose positive feedback affects the confidence of students and consequentially their work as writers. Every student should have the opportunity to experience success as a writer and, while it may be more difficult to find moments of praise in the work of
strong writers, there are always areas that improve in their work and therefore deserve recognition. For instance, students who are strong writers often will attempt to use language in innovative, very personal ways in order to establish their identity as authors. Tutors should praise students for such an attempt (even if it fails) because the student at least made the effort to experiment with style, voice, tone, etc… In addition, you can always praise students for insights that are especially well-articulated or profound or that teach you new ways of looking at the material or at the world.

**Reminder 2: Praise Needs to Be Genuine to be Effective**

Regardless of what you choose to praise in your student’s writing remember that the praise needs to be genuine and paper-specific. As Nancy Sommers notes in “Responding to Student Writing,” “most teachers’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text;” therefore, tutors should at all times avoid generic forms of praise and instead attempt to point to specific areas in the text where students evidence their evolution as writers (111). Even weak students know when praise seems artificial or forced and they are less likely to trust future praise if they feel you are being insincere or dishonest about their improvement as writers. Finally, remember to praise often and equally because “it’s a good bet that [this] genuine praise can lift the hearts, as well as the pens, of the writers” who we tutor (Daiker 162).

**Reminder 3: Try Using Nonverbal or Alternative Forms of Praise**

While most students respond well to verbal praise, other students—particularly those who are shy and experience a lot of anxiety when given recognition—might benefit from an alternative form of praise. For instance, consider the fact that approval can be communicated in a variety forms including through eye contact, facial expressions, and even hand gestures. A friendly smile combined with a simple thumbs-up goes just as far as a verbal “good job” in building student confidence and, accordingly, writing ability. Nonverbal messages therefore are a critical link in developing proper praising habits and incorporating some of the below suggestions will not only increase your tutor-writer repertoire, but also give you an alternative to traditional verbal forms of praise.

- **Body orientation.** To indicate that you like what you are hearing and want to learn more, make sure that you orient yourself in a way that shows students that you respect and value their time and efforts. Avoid positioning yourself in a way that causes you to turn your back on a student or that seems to give them the “cold shoulder.” Instead, your body and chair should be positioned in a manner that enables you to turn towards the student in an open and sociable manner. Remember, if you like and respect the person, show them by facing them when you interact.

- **Posture.** Good posture is associated with confidence and enthusiasm. It indicates our degree of tenseness or relaxation. Observing the posture of others provides clues to their feelings. Students will immediately pick up on your lack of enthusiasm and engagement if you slouch or sprawl in your chair. Instead, you should seem eager and excited to hear more about the student’s thoughts and beliefs. When sitting back in your chair, remember that you should look comfortable, but also attentive. Bad posture, like
negative comments, can really sour the dynamic of a conversation. Therefore, always consider that the way you sit can be just as important as what you say.

- **Facial expression.** Facial expressions are a window into the inner thoughts and feelings of the individual. Therefore, if your facial expressions do not align with or contradict your verbal messages of praise, students will immediately recognize that your words may not be genuine. Avoid grimacing, quizzically raising an eyebrow, and even frowning as such expressions communicate to students that something in their writing might be amiss. Instead, try smiling when you deliver a compliment or at least keep your face neutral in order to avoid causing a sense of confusion that might destroy the tutor-writer relationship that you have worked so hard to establish.

- **Eye contact.** Frequent eye contact communicates interest and confidence. Avoidance communicates the opposite. Rolling your eyes, staring off into the distance or even continually looking at the clock can belie any praise that you offer since it indicates to students that you might be weary of tutoring and accordingly their writing. Try instead to communicate your encouragement by letting your eyes speak for you. If you like what you see then let the student know by letting that excitement shine through.

- **Hand gestures.** Students who are visual learners might benefit from the use of hand gestures or signs in order to communicate praise. For instance, try using a simple thumbs-up, “ok” sign or even “snaps” to show readers that you like what you are reading. These simple alternative to oral forms of praise not only are great because they are just as effective, but they also allow you to engage with students in a highly demonstrative and tactile manner. In addition, hand gestures allow you to extend praise even to hearing-impaired students.

- **Use of space.** The less distance between you and the writer, the more intimate and informal the relationship. Arranging yourself in a manner that increases the distance between you and the writer only increases the student’s impression that you are unapproachable. By arranging your chair in closer proximity, you not only let the student know that you are not afraid to get closer to them spatially, but also personally. This will go far in showing students that you are eager to work with them and therefore make praise all the more genuine.

While these suggestions are not exhaustive and may not account for all student types and situations, they should aid you in developing habits of praise that truly communicate to students that you value them as a person and as a writer. After all, the job of a good tutor should not be to merely reinforce what students have already heard from their teachers regarding their writing, but really to give them the tools and confidence to become members of the academic writing community. However, in order to achieve this goal, we must be **willing** to praise and praise often.
Putting Process Before Paper  
(And Helping Your Writers Succeed Without You)

There is an old Chinese proverb that says, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” We can easily translate this philosophy to the work we do in the Writing Center where we strive to teach process rather than to simply correct papers. By focusing on just a single paper, we might be able to help a writer to get an A, but when we work on the entire writing process, we teach skills and strategies that will help our tutees become better writers – which can help them throughout their academic careers and beyond.

At this point, if you are nervously thumbing through this book looking for clues about how to tutor writing like I did at the beginning of the semester, you might be wondering just what we mean when we talk about the writing process. For me, it has meant an attempt to show the writers I have worked with that there is a lot more to writing a paper than sitting down at the computer the night before it is due and pounding out something. Process includes reading the assignment and deciding what the instructor wants; carefully thinking about the topic; thoughtfully reading and researching; putting initial thoughts on paper via outline, diagram or free write; writing the first draft; analyzing what has been written for focus, organization, structure, clarity, coherence; and finally revising (sometimes several times) until the paper is ready to turn in. Process also includes how we think about writing and how we think about ourselves as writers. It involves experimentation and coming to understand what strategies work best for us.

Despite all of your best intentions to help your writers understand how to improve their writing process, you may find yourself concentrating on individual papers in some of your tutoring sessions because that is what your writers bring to you. At the same time, we have to realize that we won’t always be there for our writers. As you address certain issues, you can try to generalize them so that your writers can use your advice to apply to the next papers they write, not just this one. This can simply be a way of rephrasing what you say. Instead of asking your tutee, “What is the focus of your paper?” you can say, “When you get to this point, ask yourself, ‘What’s my focus?’” In this paper I hope to offer you some practical advice to help you stay focused on the bigger picture when the individual paper looms large in front of you. Also included at the end is a “Take-Home Tutor” checklist that writers can use as they work on their papers.

Many of the writers that you will see will have negative feelings about writing. If writing were not a struggle for them, most likely they would be spending their half-hour a week somewhere besides the Writing Center. Many of them will say to you, “I’m not a good writer.” I often heard, “My grammar is terrible.” Correcting grammar is a “quick fix”; it is much harder to address the underlying problems in the writing process. The first step is an attitude adjustment. Of course, changing the way a writer feels about writing is much easier said than done, but to continue to borrow from philosophy analogies, the greatest journey begins with a single step.
When I had one writer who kept saying, “I can’t write,” I’d quickly respond with, “Do not say that! The more you say it, the more you will just convince yourself, and you are not a bad writer. So repeat after me – and every time you start to write a paper – ‘I can write.’” Writers, I believe, need to hear two things: one, that almost everyone struggles with writing, and two, that good writing just takes practice, like everything else. So as you work with your writers, try to help them explore – and if possible adjust – their attitudes toward writing.

If you are lucky enough to begin at the start of a writing project with your tutee, the first thing you might find yourself doing is assessing the assignment. As you examine the prompt, you can encourage the writer to read it carefully, highlight or underline the requirements, and even make a list of what will need to be done for the paper. This is a good time to talk about how each assignment is different and how different instructors might expect different things. It is also a good time to discuss the various ways the writer might approach their assignments.

The first step is usually brainstorming for ideas, and many of us enjoy these sessions. One of my writers needed to write a descriptive essay about a meaningful event in her life. As I kept asking her questions and we bounced ideas back and forth, it was very rewarding to see her face light up when she discovered exactly what she wanted to write about. It is important to remember, though, that we will not always be there for our writers during this important process. Here are some suggestions you can give to your writers for ways they can replace you:

- Talk with friends, family or classmates about the topic. This is a good way not only to explore your thoughts but also to gain insights from others.
- Read the materials that go with the assignment carefully for ideas and inspirations. (I have found myself encouraging many of my writers to view the assigned readings as helpful aids rather than as just something they were told to do. These readings can be a good source for ideas and support, yet surprisingly some of my writers neglected to use them.)
- Question yourself. What do I think this means? Why is this important? Do I agree or disagree with this? How can I support my position? Have I ever experienced anything like this?
- If you need to, research the topic further.
- Do a focused free write.
- Pick a tentative thesis.
- Diagram or outline.

Experimentation is an important part of this process. Many writers are struggling because they have never been taught many of the activities that help us to write. Some rebel against outlining. Perhaps some have never really practiced free writing. Others do not understand how important time management can be. I encourage writers to practice different methods of outlining, diagramming, free writing and researching to see which one works best for them. I worked with one writer who resisted doing outlines. I told him that was fine, that many people did, but he had to understand that once he wrote his first draft, he was going to have to go back and organize what he had written. Once he realized this, he decided that maybe he would try outlining first. Even if it does not work for him, he will have experimented to find out for himself. Another writer would sketch little circles and arrows when she was explaining what she wanted to write. I encouraged her to look into methods of outlining with diagrams. For many writers, free writing and focused free writing are wonderful tools for exploring what they want to
write about, yet many of them do not think to do it unless they are directed to in a class. All of these are powerful tools, yet we will not know how well they work for us until we try them.

The actual writing of the first draft is usually a very individual process and you will rarely be there when your writers sit down in front of the computer to compose their papers. You can, however, talk with your writers about this part of the process. One thing most writers need to work on is their time management skills. I talked to too many writers who hadn’t anticipated how long it would take to write – and revise – their papers. The emotional state we are in at the time can also affect how we write. I had one writer who was so stressed about her paper that she started crying. Writing at that moment would have been a waste of time for her. Sometimes, when we are too stressed, it is important to step away from the paper for a little while and come back to it later, when we are calmer, refreshed and ready to think more clearly.

It is also important to remember that this is just the first draft. I tell my tutees that it is a very rare person who gets it right the first time; in fact, you should not even try to get it right the first time. The first draft is where you get the ideas all out, then you go back and put it together in the way that makes the most sense, that is the most concise, that says what you want to say. This can be the most difficult (and rewarding) part of your tutoring sessions, and it is also one of the more difficult to generalize because you will be working here on a single paper, trying to unravel and find the focus and organization for this topic. As we all know, no two papers will be organized exactly the same. Essentially what you want to do here is show your tutee how to do your job.

Here are some strategies that your writers might find helpful during the revision process and questions they can ask themselves:

- Check for focus and organization and identify the thesis. Ask: Does my thesis address what my paper is discussing? Does the paper say what I want it to say? Have I left anything important out? Said anything that is not important and should not be there? Does my thesis need to be restated to address what is really in my paper?
- Do a reverse outline. Make an outline of the paper after you have written the first draft and ask: Does it make sense? Should anything be rearranged? Should any paragraphs be rewritten because they talk about too many different things?
- Look for repetition and ask: Have I already said this? (This is something I saw on paper after paper. As writers struggled to figure out what they wanted to say, they would say the same thing in numerous slightly different ways. When I pointed this out, I was careful to remind them that this was an important part of the process. The next step was to pick the best way they stated it then delete the rest.)
- Look at each paragraph. Identify the topic and ask: Does everything in this paragraph work to support my topic sentence? (One of my writers suggested turning the topic sentence into a question and seeing if the paragraph answered it.)
- Look at your sentences and ask: Do they make sense or have some of them turned into tongue-twisters? (I had several writers who, in an attempt to sound smart, would end up writing tangled sentences instead. When I asked them to tell me what they meant, they would invariably restate it in a way that was much more simple but also made a lot more sense. Write it like you just said it, I’d encourage them.)
Have someone who is not afraid to tell you what they think read the paper. Ask them: Is my paper clear and focused? Can you understand what I am trying to say? Do you have any questions I have not answered?
Check the prompt and ask: Does my paper meet all the requirements for the assignment?
Look at the comments you have received on your other papers and ask: If I had any problems then, have I fixed them on this paper?

Some additional strategies include:

- Read it aloud. Listen carefully and revise anything that does not sound right.
- Keep a dictionary, thesaurus and handbook close by to check spelling, alternate words and grammar problems.
- Carefully proof your final draft before you turn it in for spelling errors, typos and grammatical mistakes.

I think one of the most valuable parts of the writing process we can instill in our tutees is the ability to constantly question themselves as they write and revise. Why is this important? How can I support that? Is there anything I have not talked about that I should? Does this make sense? Can I say that in a different way that would make it more understandable for my reader? Not only does questioning help them to become better writers, it also helps them become better critical thinkers.

So as you work with your writers, I encourage you to look beyond the paper in front of you and concentrate on the entire process. In essence, you will be providing your writers with a set of tools and strategies they can carry with them after they leave the Writing Center that will allow them to not only survive but thrive as writers.

**Take-Home Tutor**
**A useful checklist to help you write all your papers!**

**Assessing the Assignment**
- Read the prompt carefully.
- Highlight or underline the requirements.
- Make a list of what will need to be done for this paper.

**Approaching the Assignment**
- Talk with friends, family or classmates about the topic.
- Read the materials that go with the assignment carefully for ideas and inspirations.
- Ask yourself, “What do I think this means? Why is this important? Do I agree or disagree with this? How can I support my position? Have I ever experienced anything like this?”
- Research the topic further.
- Do a focused free write.
- Pick a tentative thesis.
- Diagram or outline.

**Writing the First Draft**
- Give yourself enough time to do the assignment.
- Find a time and place that works best for you.
- If you’re too stressed out, take a break before starting to write.
Revising the Paper

- Check for focus and organization and identify the thesis. Ask: Does my thesis address what my paper is discussing? Does the paper say what I want it to say? Have I left anything important out? Said anything that is not important and should not be there? Does my thesis need to be restated to address what is really in my paper?
- Do a reverse outline. Make an outline of the paper after you have written the first draft and ask: Does it make sense? Should anything be rearranged? Should any paragraphs be rewritten because they talk about too many different things?
- Look for repetition and ask: Have I already said this? (If so, pick the best way you stated it then delete the rest.)
- Look at each paragraph. Identify the topic and ask: Does everything in this paragraph work to support my topic sentence? (Also: Turn your topic sentence into a question and see if the paragraph answers it.)
- Look at your sentences and ask: Do they make sense or have some of them turned into tongue-twisters? (Sometimes, in an attempt to sound smart, we end up writing tangled sentences. Keep it simple instead. Write it like you would say it and strive for clarity instead.)
- Have someone who is not afraid to tell you what they think read the paper. Ask them: Is my paper clear and focused? Can you understand what I am trying to say? Do you have any questions I have not answered?
- Check the prompt and ask: Does my paper meet all the requirements for the assignment?
- Look at the comments you have received on your other papers and ask: If I had any problems then, have I fixed them on this paper?
- Read it aloud. Listen carefully and revise anything that does not sound right.
- Keep a dictionary, thesaurus and handbook close by to check spelling, alternate words and grammar problems.

Carefully proof your final draft before you turn it in for spelling errors, typos and grammatical mistakes.
Tutoring Anxieties, Expectations, Problems and Gaining Trust: 
How to Handle Tutoring Anxiety?

15 weeks of school, 13 weeks of tutoring and 5 hours of tutoring a week, which roughly equates into 65 tedious hours will consume you in the Writing Center as part of English 195/405 with Dr. Cherryl Smith. Nine others and I were taught the basics of how to tutor and work with students. At the start of the semester it seemed to be more like a burden than a rewarding experience, but the more we advanced through the semester, the more the polar opposite became true. We read many pages out of Tutor Writing, A Practical Guide for Conferences by Donald A. McAndrew & Thomas J. Reigstad and The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors by Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood during the first two weeks of the semester three times a week to prepare us for the long haul of tutoring. Then all of a sudden, the tutoring bug hit me.

At the beginning just thinking about working with fellow students, some perhaps who I knew or who I have classes with made me jittery. I was afraid the nerves would get the best of me. I have always been a nervous wreck when meeting someone, delivering a speech in front of a class, or even sometimes interacting in a small group. I was unsure how I would be able to keep my professionalism and seriousness intact without falling victim to the nerves, but then I remembered what Dr. Smith told us one day in class about being the tutee’s friend and our goal is to improve their writing, not necessarily to ensure that he or she passes the class. That helped me a lot because with a few students with whom I worked, I hung out after our sessions and we developed more of a friendship than an obligatory business-like relationship.

Initially I only thought of myself as being a new tutor, not thinking about the fact that most of my students were also experiencing newness to the Writing Center. Although tutoring may seem a little scary for you at first, do not forget that most of your students will also have a high level of anxiety. Try to get to know your regular students a little more the first day and focus less on the assignments at hand. With time, the assignments and discussing them will advance to become more relevant through the semester as the student will have more and more assignments for you to help them with. But even with drop-in students, I would not strictly adhere to the sessions in a business-like manner. I would toss in humor and regular conversation to settle the nerves no matter who the student was. With some students, some conversation is inappropriate, but for the most part if you keep the sessions a little light-hearted, your students will gain more trust in you and take your comments at face value.

What Students Should You Expect to Work With?

While some students are more likely than others to come to the Writing Center, expect to work with a lot of eager students who want help. Some students expect you to only proofread their paper, but never just do that. Although it is against Writing Center protocol, proofreading is okay, especially with drop-ins if you also go over problems with structure, development, and clarity of ideas. Remember that most students who come to the Writing Center are English as a Second Language students or incoming freshmen. While it is true that a lot of these students need to improve their writing greatly, it is not only because of their poor grammar. There are
underlying issues of structure, coherence, sentence development, etc. Some students are great thinkers and we will just talk or write down key points that should be included in the assignment. While grammar can cripple their writing, it should be in the background of the concerns you review. The foreground of the problems is the paper as a whole. Because I am often around the same age as these particular students, being their friend and gaining their trust is easier.

Occasionally you will get graduate or older students, but regardless of age or gender, the majority of them will be easy to work with. If you are an undergraduate student like me, it can be easy to get intimidated by older students, but remember that the reason they came in is they need help with resolving an issue. I have had students who are worried about writing fragments in their papers in their 30’s, grammar concerns from English as Second Language students in their 40’s, and Modern Language Association citations from students in their 50’s. Just remember everyone’s life experiences are different and even if you get a thesis paper you can still help out the student. Talk about how much time was spent working on the paper and what is strong or weak. Maybe what they are weak at is your strength. No matter the student’s situation, you can always assist the student with the assignment or better understanding the prompt.

In the Writing Center, you will undoubtedly work with students who are just there for extra credit. If that is the case, recognize their willingness to listen and work with you. I worked with Shawn this semester who had been working with another tutor. There were conflicts in their schedule so he was given to me. Since he was only coming to the Writing Center for extra credit, he felt like I could not help him at all. While that may have been true to a degree since he is a good writer, I still gave him feedback on essays and would get clarification on what a sentence means. Despite his reasons for coming to the Writing Center, I gained his trust and was able to collaborate with him more through the semester. However, if you ever feel like you have a student who is difficult to work with, either change your strategy or send him or her to another tutor. I have had a few other students who had other tutors while only losing one. In particular, there was one student who had worked with two different tutors. Their personalities did not mesh which frustrated the tutors. However, our personalities matched and I was able to understand what points she was trying to convey by merely asking her if that is what she meant.

Some other students are referred by their teacher, but also want help and then many are realizing either through the previous semester or late in the semester that they really need help. A few of my students did not pass English 1 last semester and have talked with me about their readiness to pass this semester. One of my students, Brandon, was quite agitated that he had to take the class over again due to the fact he did not pass two of his three essays for his portfolio. Although he started out angry and continues to be frustrated, he has e-mailed me and counted on me to help him with extra points. I have tried helping him, but as a tutor you only have the obligation to help students when you are working with them in the Writing Center.

**Recommendations for Future Tutors**

I strongly recommend future English 195/410 tutors not to give out their phone number and/or e-mail if they have a busy schedule. While it is gratifying to help others, it also has become a nuisance to me. I have been hesitant to tell my students that I do not have the time to go over their essays outside the Writing Center. In the book, *Tutor Writing, A Practical Guide for Conferences*, McAndrew & Reigstad stress that tutoring isn’t “giving false praise, not simply
detecting and correcting errors, not taking ownership away from the writing, and not necessarily having all the answers” (14). One of the more important lessons in tutoring is admitting that you do not know the answer or cannot explain it. It is better telling the truth than misleading the student; while it is exemplary to have good intentions, it is terrible to be arrogant. There is nothing worse than telling a student something and for them to complain to you the next session that what you told them confused their teacher or even caused them to receive a lower grade. In the same vein, you do not want to directly change what the writer has done. Instead, offer suggestions and collaborate with the writer. Do not make promises to your student, telling him that this is definitely an “A” paper or praising them because you do not want to bury them with criticism. Remember you are not an editor, you are a tutor.

Thoughts on Literacy and Holding Your Prejudices at the Door

One of the books that we looked at late in the semester made me reflect about the whole semester. In Good Intentions, Nancy Maloney Grimm writes her whole book generalizing a “white middle-class” perspective of how the Writing Center should work. In Chapter 2, "Literacy Learning in Postmodern Times," Grimm summarizes the chapter with an argument of “I believe writing centers can do a better job of supporting students if we stop locating literacy problems in individuals and instead locate them in cultural constructions” (29). While she has strong support for her argument, like any argument there are flaws. In addition to working with many Indian students all semester, I tutored Zoua, a Hmong student, from the beginning of the semester. She struggles with the English language even though her native language is eerily similar. The English and Hmong language share the same subject, verb, and object order. Yet Zoua writes how she speaks which is academically incorrect and quite difficult to change. She has tremendous struggles with speaking English, which has translated over to her writing. Over time, Zoua’s writing has improved and much to my surprise she has learned to catch her mistakes on her own in written and spoken English.

The main reason why I disagree with Grimm is my Hmong student’s main root of her problems is literacy and not culture. Grimm goes on to say, “We must also pay a great deal more attention to the cultural assumptions that we bring to writing center work” (29). Despite Zoua’s culture which condones silence and respect, she has opened up to me a lot into her personal life and has never been hesitant to tell me what she needs help with. Her cultural restraints limit her with her education, but do not clash with my tutoring sessions. I have supported Zoua’s literacy problems so I can help her locate her mistakes, find where her paper is underdeveloped and get her to be more reliable for her own work. As a tutor, I aide her with her work, but it is her job to write thoroughly and proofread her own work.

The Writing Center teaches the tutor to focus on the individual’s needs. We do not make promises and do not solely look at grammar. Our job is to guide the writer with his or her work in a half hour and sometimes an hour timeslot. While it is true that we are all culturally biased, we must look at individuals for who they are, not who their culture says they are. Grimm states that “While we are no longer allowed to publicly discriminate against people based on race, culture, or ethnicity, it is still permissible to do so if the person’s language is marked by his or her race, culture, ethnicity, and class” (105). I do not agree entirely with what she says, but do feel that the surroundings a writer has grown up in plays a significant role.
I had two African American students, Tenesia and Chris. Tenesia was a product of her environment. She went to a high school in west Oakland that not only was poor, but did not concentrate that much on writing. On the other hand, Chris went to school in Vallejo. Despite Vallejo’s poor test scores, he was an excellent student and maintained a 3.0 GPA in high school. When he got to college, he did not pass English 1 his first semester, not because he was not smart enough, but because of procrastination. I met him on one of my first days of tutoring and read his work. I thought to myself when I was reading it, “He doesn’t need a tutor.”

Varying Tutoring Strategies and Letting Go

However, some students do need more support and guidance than others to get through their classes. In The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors, Murphy and Sherwood say “If there is any one truth about tutoring, it is that no single method of tutoring, no one approach, will work effectively with every student in every situation” (1). Being a Writing Center tutor is a lot like teaching a child how to ride a bike. You hold the child's hand and help keep him balanced until his writing becomes scholarly or until the semester ends. Letting go is hard but necessary as a tutor. Offer encouragement until the training wheels come off or until the last day comes. While it’s not your job to ensure that students pass the classes you help them with, it is satisfying to be of help.
Academic Obstacles: Interpreting Expectations

Each step in our education requires a reconsideration of what is required to meet the standards set by our instructors and the institution. This happens in small steps, for example, each time a student receives a new assignment. It also occurs in larger jumps, specifically, when students are first entering the university or when they are moving from undergrad to graduate work. Many times students are essentially entering a new culture – an academic culture untraveled by them before. This is where the Writing Center steps in. Tutors can be guides through paths they may have already traveled, or tutors at least know how to decode the maps – the assignments and academic transitions – that are communicating the academic expectations that must be reached in order for the tutee to be successful as a student.

As a tutor, one of the most valuable tasks you can accomplish in your short meeting with a student is to help the student understand what is expected of them based on their current assignment and standard academic practices. By this latter category, standard academic practices, I simply mean that the standards of response rise when students reach new levels of academia and students must locate and accommodate the new expectations in order to succeed. Writing Center theorist Nancy Grimm discusses the writing center as a place where tutors “catch glimpses of the gaps between academic expectations and students’ cultural experiences” (29). She describes tutors' attempts to help these students “conform to institutional expectations” as a negative component of the writing center. I argue that understanding academia is essentially understanding a specific audience – an audience whose expectations are not justified by students’ conformity but must be followed as a means of meeting the contract entered into when signing up for a class. The same “gap” Grimm locates between cultural experiences (life experiences and subject position) and academic expectations are similar to the distances students must travel between academic assignments and levels. When helping students with their writing, it is important to also help them assess and adhere to the expectations of the assignment and the academic level.

By looking at a couple of specific sessions with students at the Writing Center, I can clarify how my theoretical assertions regarding the role of tutors can be put into practice. By beginning with the confusion and miscommunication often resulting when students attempt to decode assignment sheets, it becomes clear that a tutor can often play the role of interpreter. For many, this is just a matter of logistics. Tutors have most likely had many more writing assignments in their educational career than the tutees – the task within an assignment might be misconstrued by someone who has never seen a similar assignment and has not been trained to locate essential elements of communication to assist in navigating the assignment. For example, let’s look at a session with “Ann,” a student who made me feel like I was seeing a pattern in the difficulties faced by Writing Center patrons.

Ann was asked to read a narrative text (my description) for her advanced sign language course. Her instructor had asked for two “reaction” essays in response to the text. Ann had no idea what this word meant in regard to a writing assignment, and the first thing she said to me was that she was supposed to write a “book report” of sorts in two parts. Having read, created,
and responded to an abundance of assignments at this point in my educational career, when I saw “reaction” I read that as you react to the text within a formal writing situation. Composition specialist Dr. Dan Melzer expands on this concept of understanding what an assignment is asking for in his article “Understanding Writing Assignments: Tips and Techniques” (152). When looking at Ann’s assignment, my more experienced eye as an academic writer drew me directly to the word “reaction,” whereas Ann saw the assignment as a summary. Because Ann did not know that she was being asked to make an academic transition – from writing a summary to writing a reaction paper – she was going to write an essay that did not meet the academic expectations of the instructor. Once the assignment had been interpreted with Ann, her ability to respond to the prompt – correctly – was strengthened.

Each new type of assignment requires students to reevaluate the requirements of the course and level they are working within. This became clear with a graduate student I tutored this semester:

A theatre arts graduate student I worked with throughout the semester, who I will call “Marsal,” was asked to deconstruct a play for an African Dance class. As a graduate student in literature, I now am familiar with the theory of deconstruction and what tools might be used to deconstruct a piece of writing. I gave Marsal a general overview of deconstruction, then he told me about the play, and together we located areas that might be useful to deconstruct. Marsal had not entered the session wanting to know about deconstruction, but as a tutor, it became clear to me that the learning/teaching moment within our session had to revolve around understanding the assignment – before the actual writing could even be considered.

From these, and multiple other interactions within the Writing Center, it has become clear to me that one of the essential roles a tutor plays is of interpreter for the university. Tutors do not need to know everything about every kind of assignment, but we, and the tutee, do benefit from beginning our session by taking a critical look at the assignment and the academic level the student is responding within.
Dealing With Writer Expectations, Recognizing that You Will Have Failed Tutoring Sessions, and Figuring Out Where to Go from There

As a writing tutor, you will ultimately have to face the reality that some of your tutoring sessions will fail, particularly if your tutoring goals match up with the Writing Center’s tutoring philosophy, which is to help students become more aware writers, and to work with the writers, not only with their texts. Usually, your writer’s expectations will differ from your own and will be at odds with the philosophy of the CSUS Writing Center. Many times, you will be asked to work with writers who could not care less about becoming better writers; their goals for the tutoring session are simply to have you “fix” their papers, and to get out of there as fast as they can. Many of them want nothing more than a passing grade in their courses, and they will refuse to spend time learning writing strategies and talking about their writing processes.

It almost seems reasonable that the writers expect the CSUS Writing Center to offer proofreading services; after all, many of the tutors themselves actually thought that proofreading would be the main part of their jobs in the writing center before they started the tutoring class and learned what the job really entailed. This is after all what I, as well as several of my classmates, thought when we enrolled for the English 410A course. When I learned about what tutoring in the writing center would actually entail, however, I was very concerned, specifically when I learned that my job as a tutor was not to help students edit their papers, but instead to help them become aware of their own writing processes. In other words, I learned that it would not be my responsibility to “fix” my writer’s paper, or ensure that he or she gets a better grade from the teacher, but instead to help the writer to become a better writer overall by encouraging him or her to participate in different strategies at different stages of the writing process. My concern was not over the approach, but instead over the fact that the writers themselves might have other goals in mind that would not work with this type of tutoring philosophy. I did not think that the writers would appreciate the fact that their tutors would have their own agendas during the tutoring session, especially since those agendas would seem to conflict with the writers’ agendas. Specifically, I was worried that I would fail as a tutor because of the differences between my own expectations and the writer’s expectations.

Before beginning my tutoring sessions, I tried to place myself in the shoes of those students who I would soon be working with. I attempted to look at the tutoring sessions, which the writers voluntarily signed up for, as they would look at the sessions and tried to figure out what goals they had when they signed up for tutoring in the first place. While I determined that some writers probably really wanted to improve their writing ability in general and would probably be happy to participate in the type of tutoring sessions that I had been encouraged to have with my writers, I knew that these sessions would pose a conflict for many other writers. Writers who signed up for tutoring because they had concerns about their grades and how well they would do on particular assignments, and writers with very specific short-term goals in mind would be much more difficult to work with in terms of my own goals for the tutoring sessions. Despite my fears that what I was supposed to help writers with and what they actually wanted help with would be difficult to reconcile, I began tutoring with high hopes that I would be able to
find a way to resolve the potential conflicts between my goals as a tutor and the writer’s own goals.

As I began to tutor nine different writers during my first week, I quickly realized that reconciliation would not always be possible. Since eight out of my nine students came into the writing center with the expectation that their tutor would edit their papers and tell them what they needed to “fix” in order to get an “A” from their teachers, it was necessary for me to explain that the writing center is not an editing center and that our philosophy is to help the students themselves become better writers overall, not to help them “fix” specific papers for a grade. Although I let them know that I would of course be willing to discuss specific papers and help them become aware of specific types of errors with content and grammar, I would not, I told them, do all the work for them in correcting these mistakes. Instead, I would be more like a classmate who would listen to their ideas with an open mind, compliment what works in their writing, point out things that may not work as effectively as they might be able to, and give feedback accordingly. Although I didn’t scare any of my writers off with that speech, I could see in their eyes that they had a different goal in mind, and as the semester progressed, I found that I had to continually struggle not to let those students trick me into becoming their editor.

While most of my students were willing to work on their writing within the terms of the writing center’s philosophy, I had two students in particular who fought me during every session. They were determined that they would get me to edit their papers and tell them what was “right” and what was wrong so that they would do well on particular assignments. These students, Sarah and Saeko, kept me on my toes during each tutoring session because they were constantly trying to get me to back down from the philosophy of the writing center to help them achieve their own goals, which basically seemed to be having someone fix their papers as quickly as possible so they could get out of the writing center and do other things. They weren’t interested in improving their writing ability altogether, but simply wanted to achieve one particular goal short-term goal. For Sarah, that goal was to pass the WPE. For Saeko, that goal was to finish her thesis. In both cases, I found that what the Writing Center was trying to accomplish was not conducive to what these particular students were trying to accomplish, and I found myself caught in the crossfire.

Although Sarah and I got along really well on a personal level, I could not help feeling her frustration with me as we tried to prepare her for the WPE. After having already taken WPE twice, Sarah was already aware of what the test was like, but she was not yet able to achieve a passing score. She recently had found out that she had a learning disability that was affecting her ability to perform in the timed-writing environment. She had been diagnosed with severe dyslexia, so the next time she took the WPE, she would be allowed to have four hours to complete the exam, she would be able to write on a computer, and she would be assigned a reader to help her with the question. Both Sarah and I had very high hopes that she would, with these new testing conditions, be successful in passing the WPE; however, I thought it was a bad idea to depend on the changed conditions alone. Sarah, on the other hand, thought that she would have no problem with the WPE, although she did want to have me help her with the essays she had to turn in for English 109, which were designed as practice exercises to prepare her for the WPE.
I kept trying to convince Sarah that it never hurts to practice writing strategies for the WPE. She, however, did not seem motivated to do so, despite the fact that she was the one who signed up for these tutoring sessions. Instead of working on strategies for passing the exam, Sarah was more concerned with getting done with her writing assignments as early as possible. She had trouble focusing when we discussed her practice exams, assigned by her teacher, and she wanted me to tell her exactly what to say in her papers. When I wouldn’t do that, she got very frustrated with me. One day, while we were working on a paper about violence in the media, she was getting really irritated because she couldn’t come up with a thesis. I encouraged her to figure out how she felt about the issue by asking her questions that I hoped would lead her to some kind of opinion, but she just kept telling me that she just wanted me to tell her what to write. She kept asking, “can’t you just tell me what my teacher wants me to say so I can say it and be done?” When I told her that I wasn’t going to tell her what to write, that I was there to support her in making that decision for herself, her face got really red and she said, “Isn’t that your job? Why aren’t you helping me?” I could sense that she was about to get really upset, so I asked her what exactly she thinks I should be doing. She admitted that she signed up for tutoring so that someone would help her get her papers done. She said that she wanted to write the papers during the tutoring session so she would not have to do them at home. She let me know that she will never be interested in learning about the writing process, that she is not interested in finding strategies that work for her, and that she just wants me to help her get done so she can be done with her papers and spend her time doing other things.

After listening to all of these things, I couldn’t help but feel frustrated because I felt that there was no possible way for me to help Sarah. She wasn’t really willing to learn to be a better writer, and after hearing that, I really began to felt that the writing center could not be of much use to Sarah. What she was hoping to find when she signed up for these tutoring sessions was someone who would compose her paper orally while she typed out what that person was saying on her laptop. There was nothing I could do but tell her that her goals were unrealistic and that nobody is going to do that for her. I explained what our goals in the writing center were and told her the ways in which I would be willing to help her, but that’s all that I could do. She left after that session and never showed up again, even though I had been working with her for over a month. In this situation, I really felt that there was nothing I could have done to get Sarah the help she needs because her own goals were in conflict with the goals of the writing center. She wasn’t looking for actual help in learning to write; she was looking for someone to do the work for her. I could not see any way to reconcile such diverse goals, although I continued to search for ways to balance my own expectations as a tutor with the expectations of the writers I was working with. I was never able to find a solution for reconciling conflicting tutor and writer goals with Sarah, but I was determined that I would find a better way with my other writers.

Unfortunately, I had similar problems with Saeko, and was not able to reconcile the conflicting goals with her either. With Saeko, the issue of reconciling conflicting goals came about in a different way. Saeko was a graduate student in international business, and she was trying to finish a thesis she had been working on for several years. As a multilingual student, what Saeko needed the most help with was grammatical issues such as article usage and subject-verb agreement. The content of her writing was very developed and she had already had seven readers help her with her thesis. The problem I experienced with her was that she wanted me to be her editor, not help her learn to fix the patterns of error I was noticing in her paper. Each week
she came in with a section of her paper that she wanted me to edit, and each week, I chose one or two types of errors and tried to explain the grammar rules to her, but she kept cutting me off, claiming she already knew the rules. I understood that she had memorized the rules, but she still was not able to catch the mistakes in her paper, so I kept trying to find a new way to teach these rules to her, using her own writing as a way in which to do so, but she was not willing to take the time to listen and perhaps learn from what I said to her. She simply wanted me to fix her mistakes so she could turn the paper in and be done with it. I had to be very creative about finding ways to help her without actually doing the editing myself, but I could see that she was growing more and more impatient during each session. Melissa, another writing center tutor, worked with Saeko each week as well, and she had the same problem reconciling what we are supposed to be doing as tutors with what Saeko wanted us to do as her tutors. Ultimately, Saeko’s growing impatience finally materialized in a full-blown temper tantrum during one of her sessions with Melissa, and though I wasn’t part of that session, I was present in the Writing Center when it happened and I witnessed the tantrum taking place.

Saeko came in for her weekly appointment with Melissa determined to have Melissa fix all her errors with articles on a specific chapter of her thesis. Melissa went to the file cabinet drawers to get some handouts on article usage out and Saeko, insisting that she didn’t need the handouts, followed her back there saying that she didn’t want them. When Melissa grabbed them anyway, explaining that she just wanted to look at them for a minute so she could help Saeko figure out how to make the changes herself, Saeko started pounding her fists on the desk, crying, and saying that she only had half an hour and needed Melissa to fix her paper. She refused to let Melissa try and show her how to fix the mistakes herself. When the session was over, she told Melissa that she couldn’t continue to help her unless she would do what Saeko wanted her to do.

I never tutored Saeko myself after that incident because Professor Smith stepped in at that point and let Saeko know that the perhaps the Writing Center was not the appropriate place for the kind of help she was looking for. However, the fact that it happened at all has forced me to rethink not only my tutoring strategies with Saeko, but also with other writers who are looking for something different than I am willing to provide. What Saeko wanted her tutors to do for her and what we were told to help her with were completely different, and no matter how many times I tried to explain it to her, she refused to understand and accept that I could not and would not offer her the kind of help she was looking help for. While I wanted to be as helpful to her as possible, I let her know in no uncertain terms that my goal was to help her learn, not to “fix” her paper so that she could pass and she was simply unwilling to accept this.

When my session with Sara began to fail, I at first blamed myself for not being able to find a way to help her the way she wanted while still holding firm to my own principles. However, from this situation with Saeko, I learned that sometimes it is not possible to reconcile writer and tutor expectations. It had nothing to do with my own skill, or lack of skill, as a tutor, but it had everything to do with the interest of the particular writers in learning about themselves as writers and improving their writing abilities. The tutoring sessions in the Writing Center simply are not designed to provide help to those who are concerned only with passing classes and not with learning for learning’s sake. In order to have successful tutoring sessions, it takes a combination of an able and willing tutor and a dedicated and willing student. I learned, during
these particular tutoring sessions, that sometimes, no matter how hard I try, I will fail to reach my writers. I learned that failing to reach one of my writers does not necessarily make me a bad tutor. I learned that in order to be as successful a tutor as possible, I must not dwell on the fact that some of my tutoring sessions did not go as well as planned, but instead that I should always reflect on those sessions, determine what went wrong, and learn from them. Finally, I learned that sometimes, it is not in my power to ensure that a tutoring session is successful. When tutor and writer expectations differ, it is the responsibility of each person to try and work together to ensure a successful tutoring session. No tutor can cause a session to succeed without the active participation of the student he or she is trying to help. Although I struggled with these failed sessions all semester, I have finally recognized that I need to accept that failure for what it is and learn from it. Only by reflecting in this manner and learning from failed sessions can a tutor truly succeed in helping those writers who are willing to learn.
Tutoring the Underrepresented Student

Whenever race and ethnicity is discussed within the confines of academia, it is usually discussed with the primary goal being how we, as tutors, instructors, and/or administrators, can better help the underrepresented student, and how we can work together to reach an understanding of minority students’ special problems in regards to them being better able to achieve their goals. The problem is that the paragraph you have just read could be construed to be one of the problems, inasmuch as we (tutors, instructors, and administrators) see one’s race and ethnicity as being the reason why any student would be labeled as being “underrepresented.” Nevertheless, as a Writing Center tutor at more than one college, and as a white male, I have found the issue of tutoring students of different cultures and ethnicities intriguing. I say intriguing because the theories of post-modernism in regards to teaching students how to write have evolved to such an extent that it is now considered the norm to gather information about the student on a more personal level in order to be able to help that student with his or her particular writing “needs”. I for one, just naturally enjoy asking students about their background, their family history, their culture, even their social interests. I did this long before I started to read any theories on modernism and post-modernism. I have always found it helpful to learn about a person that I was tutoring, and I also found that by doing this, it also made the student much more at ease and showed him that I really did actually care about him as a person.

It actually wasn’t until I started discussing with other tutors, techniques on how to better help students with ESL writing problems that I became interested in how these particular students must feel about their own writing. I started to try to empathize with their problems and even imagined myself as a student who has difficulty communicating to English speaking individuals because of her heavy accent or incorrect use of verb tenses and articles. Most of us take speaking and writing for granted, but imagine yourself living in another country where English is not spoken and no one around, except maybe your family, speaks your language. You have been living in this foreign country for a few years and have picked up some of the language. Now imagine taking what little of that new language you have learned and apply it to a college setting in the same foreign country. It would be incredibly intimidating! You would be constantly questioning yourself about whether or not you are speaking and writing correctly. You would also be wondering if other people were thinking that you were not very intelligent. It would be very frustrating. I realized how privileged I am as a person who speaks and writes relatively well in an academic setting. I began to realize what I took for granted, that my ability to write in Standard English was really a key that unlocked many doors for me, my job as a tutor for one.

I read Nancy Maloney Grimm’s book and remembered a chapter that discussed how many tutors do not recognize the inherent lack of confidence that a student has who perceives herself as being a poor writer. This does not just pertain to immigrant students either. Students who have completely acclimated to American culture and society but, due to their race and/or ethnicity, feel the same inadequacies as an ESL student, most likely even more so because they do not have the “excuse” of having to learn a new culture and language as a reason for having poor writing
skills. Theirs is an even heavier burden of lack of confidence because they are Americans who are also completely immersed in their ethnic culture. In other words, their writing does not “fit” in the academic setting. In other words, they are not white, middle or upper class students who have learned the standards that are required to be successful in college. Of course, there are always minority students who speak and write very academically, but these students seem to be the “minority” of the minority. It should be noted that our surprise towards this, in and of itself, is inherently judgmental and could even be construed as racist, nevertheless, we are taken aback when this occurs.

I bring this up only to shed some light on the intrinsic nature that we bring with us as Writing Center tutors. For all the “good intentions” we have in wanting to help students become better at writing, we must look at our own prejudices of students who come at their writing with all of their cultural background. We should not be so quick to dismiss students’ writing abilities based solely on their lack of grammar control and perhaps look at their cultural background as a constructive and useful way of approaching their writing. This is very post-modern thinking and, some may say, very theoretical too. But imagine you are working with a minority student who is obviously lacking in academic writing skills. You yourself may be a minority tutor and feel that you can better relate to this particular student and the kinds of roadblocks that he or she will face in the classroom due to poor writing skills. But that is not the point. Remove yourself from where you are coming from, and put yourself in the student’s place. They are in a Writing Center because they need help with their writing. They are very aware of their inabilities when it comes to writing, and whether you are of their same ethnicity or come from the planet Pluto, they will see you as someone who sees them as someone who doesn’t write very well. It is not an empowering feeling to come into any tutoring environment to be given “special” help with college writing assignments. It is important to relay a sense of empathy with students by acknowledging their sense of vulnerability and possible frustration they may feel about simply having to recognize the fact that they need help.

Instead of dismissing the student’s cultural background, or worse, assuming that the student’s cultural background as to the reason for their writing deficiencies, you should embrace it, or at least try to understand it. A striking quote from Nancy Grimm’s book regarding why we dismiss a person’s culture when it comes to writing is because:

it is easy to excuse the fact that teachers privilege white middle-class discourse because schools promise that if one learns to think, talk, value, and write like the white middle class, then difference won’t matter. (105)

As tutors, we believe that our main goal is to get the student to write academically, or as Grimm puts it, like the white middle class, and this may be true. After all, we know and the student knows that the instructor requires a certain level of writing proficiency when evaluating and grading a paper. If we, as tutors, can get the student to write this way, then cultural differences won’t matter. But is this true?

Standard English grammar is a tool that can be taught. The better one learns how to use this tool, the better his or her grammar control skills will develop. But grammar is not the only objective when it comes to writing a well developed paper. The fact that we bring with us our own thoughts, beliefs, memories, culture, ethnicity, morals, ethics, and personal experiences
when we write a paper makes every person’s paper a reflection of that person. It carries with it our perspectives of the world in which we live. This is all well and good, but where the immigrant student, or the minority student, both known as the “underrepresented” student falls short is many times in the simple understanding of the assignment or “prompt” of the paper. As Grimm writes:

To the student, who grew up in a different literacy and with a different view of the social structure, the value of the reasons for [an] assignment may seem anything but obvious. Teachers may have rarely taken [the student’s] lived experience into account. [The student’s] difficulty getting started may not have anything to do with a lack of understanding or a lack of desire to do well but, …with the teacher’s failure (as well as previous teacher’s failures) to articulate the student’s representation of himself as a subject different from his teachers. (102)

This is where the enlightened tutor comes in. As one who knows what the expectations of the instructor are, and as one who has asked the right questions about the student to be better able to understand where the student is coming from, you can be the one that connects the two and orchestrates a meeting of the minds. By allowing yourself to really listen to students’ point of view and their background and experiences, you can use that information to motivate students to incorporate their own sense of who they are in every paper that they write. You can be the one that empowers them to think for themselves and to value their ethnicity as a way to approach their papers. Instead of these students feeling negatively about their writing, they can begin to see that it is because they have experienced different things and have a different attitude towards their surroundings and society that they can use their minority status as a mechanism to express themselves.

The grammar problems will still need to be addressed, and they will be addressed as the student writes more. It is getting the student to value his or her writing that is the key and the first step to getting the student to write more. It is a process that actually empowers both the student and the tutor. By understanding and accepting that it is the differences in each of us that make us unique, we can then approach academic writing in a fresh, new way.

The writing standards will always be the academic bar that college students must meet. Even though these “standards,” it could be argued, are from a white middle class perspective, it is a language that, as tutors, we understand. But it is not enough to simply expect everyone to conform or even to dismiss their own culture when it comes to writing, and as a white male tutor, I have to constantly remind myself of that. For it is too easy to sit back and expect the underrepresented student to always rise to the occasion and be the only one who is supposed to change his or her way of approaching a paper if it does not conform to our way or our perspective. So my advice to new tutors would be to be inquisitive, ask questions, be open-minded of your students’ background and understanding of their anxieties. Let them incorporate their own styles and differences into their writing at the same time guiding them to better understand the boundaries of academic writing. You may find a whole new approach in the way you communicate with people as a whole. Just remember, if you leave a tutoring session coming away with having learned something new about the student you are tutoring, then growth, learning, and communicating is taking place…for both of you.
Working with Multilingual Students:
Overcoming Challenges and Celebrating Diversity

One of the greatest challenges I encountered during my first semester as a tutor in the Writing Center was working with multilingual student writers. Having no experience with ESL tutoring, I found that I was not adequately prepared for the difficulties I was forced to confront. During my first week of tutoring, four of the six writers who sought my help were multilingual students. Each of them came to me, assignment in hand, ready and eager to work; however, when we sat down to review the prompts and discuss their first drafts, I found there to be many obstacles to overcome.

The first and most fundamental problem I experienced occurred on a conversational level. Two of the writers in particular displayed difficulty expressing themselves verbally; they stumbled over their words and seemed hesitant to discuss their ideas and describe their assignments. When I failed to establish a dialogue with these students, I turned to their papers, assuming that that would be the best place to begin. What I found was most discouraging: their work was riddled with grammatical errors and so disorganized that picking out a main idea or thesis was practically impossible. This did nothing to improve our rapport and served only to increase their hesitancy to converse, making them even more aware of their difficulties with the English language. I knew that if we were to make notable progress over the course of the semester, if I was to be able to help them improve their writing ability and increase their confidence, we would have to work together to devise some practical strategies to break through the language barrier and overcome our differences.

Establishing a Comfortable Atmosphere

After conducting some research, I came to believe that perhaps the first step in establishing a positive relationship with these students was to create a relaxed and non-threatening environment, one in which the student would feel comfortable and at ease to discuss his/her ideas openly. I felt strongly that developing a rapport between these students and myself would help them to begin to cultivate their own unique writing process. I began by asking them about their individual experiences with writing in the past. What did they find most difficult? What were their strengths? In what specific areas did they hope to most improve? I continued by trying to create a personal connection, asking them about their majors, their interests, their aspirations for the future. After taking the time to ask these few questions, I found them to be more willing to contribute to the discussion, to tell me about themselves and about their backgrounds.

Once we were able to communicate on a social level, I found them to be more ready to discuss and interpret their assignments, to hash out ideas and begin to organize their thoughts. This was the first step toward notable improvement, for now we had established a foundation upon which we could build.
Some Common Difficulties Among Multilingual Writers

Working with multilingual students can present some unique challenges. Perhaps one of the most notable difficulties one will encounter as a tutor is associated with the students’ incorrect use of grammar. Although our work in the Writing Center is primarily concerned with the content of a student’s paper, with the development of ideas and with effective organization, one may initially find it difficult to ignore the grammatical errors. Such mistakes can often be distracting, intimidating and frustrating for both student and tutor, and it may oftentimes feel like working through and revising a draft is impossible. But what eventually becomes evident is that “[s]ome of the errors of advanced, college-level ESL students are quite predictable and violate rule governed categories” (Leki 112). In my experience, I found these errors to be most predominantly associated with, as Leki suggests, the inability to identify the difference between countable and uncountable nouns, misused, misplaced or missing articles and the utilization of appropriate verb tense. However, once familiar with these common, surface level errors, it becomes possible to begin to work through them, to look past them and to possibly begin to acquaint students with the standard rules and regulations of grammar. One suggestion I made to my student writers that I found helpful, was to advise them to purchase a simple handbook which would help them to become familiar with certain basic practices.

Yet, one must always keep in mind that such struggles are not always easily overcome for multilingual students. For example, “[t]he article system . . . in English often presents problems for learners whose L1 does not have articles (such as Chinese or Japanese)” (Tseng 19). The question then becomes: How does one attempt to explain such a system? “In fact, there are many instances that cannot be explained by learning rules in grammar books. For example, we say that people eat rice (always in singular form) versus beans (always in plural form); people are in the car but on the bus, and people watch TV but see a movie” (Tseng 19). The fact of the matter is that tutors will often be forced to answer students’ questions, as Tseng writes, with an “it just is” remark, which can, at times, be somewhat frustrating and even discouraging. It is important for tutors to realize that, despite their tremendous efforts, grammar will likely remain a challenge for these students; it is not a difficulty that is easily overcome. It is important to not devote too much time and energy to correcting surface level mistakes. In order to do our best as tutors, it is crucial to spend only a brief period of time discussing such concerns before moving onto more important matters, such as the ideas and general content of a student’s paper.

Drafting and Revising: Some Thoughts and Suggestions

As I have stated, grammar can often pose a significant problem when reading through a multilingual student’s draft; however, I have found that there are some practical solutions to help alleviate frustrations and start focusing on a student’s ideas. “It is generally a good idea to start with a quick reading of the ESL writer’s text, focusing on what the writer is trying to communicate and how the paper is organized” (Matsuda 44). I have found that it is most helpful to have either the student or myself read the paper aloud. It seems that by listening to the sentences being read aloud, students are more apt to note mistakes and identify passages that are in need of revision. Due to the fact that many of the students I have worked with remain self-conscious of their work, as well as their ability to express themselves verbally, I tend to take on the responsibility of reading the draft. Sometimes, “[i]t may be more helpful for the ESL writer
to hear the tutor read the paper out loud – to note when the reader stumbles, pauses, fills in missing articles and modifiers, or reads smoothly” (Matsuda 44). In addition to simply reading the paper aloud, I am also sure to note passages I feel make significant points. Before we begin to work together to revise the draft, I make sure to praise their efforts and point to the strengths of their paper before proceeding to ask questions. I find that offering positive feedback, no matter how slight, helps to maintain an optimistic atmosphere, which also serves to foster and build upon a student’s confidence.

Asking questions is possibly the best way to establish a common ground upon which student and tutor can build. It is easy to fall into the trap of becoming an editor, of simply substituting your ideas for theirs based on the assumption that you understand what it is they are trying to say. I have learned from experience that I cannot make such assumptions, for I do not always understand the point they are trying to make. And so, I have come to realize the importance of asking questions, of coming to formulate an agreement of meaning between the writer and myself. I find certain questions to be most helpful in getting started: What is this term? Can you explain what you mean here? What is the main idea of this particular passage? I have also discovered the significance of not asking leading questions, for it is often the case that students will assume their tutors’ ideas are somehow more appropriate or correct than theirs. To be an effective tutor, one must always remember to listen and to never assume the answer, for learning is truly a collaborative process. I believe that “[t]he first key to collaborative tutoring sessions is talking; you must keep the lines of communication open with your writers and make sure that they not only feel comfortable talking, but also that they feel heard” (Dodge 170).

Establishing and maintaining a dialogue between writer and tutor is an effective way to make progress and to help student writers become more confident in their abilities. Casually conversing over ideas not only makes a writer feel comfortable, but also helps them to explore ideas in a non-threatening way, which will hopefully lead them to a new understanding of their work and of their writing process. This technique is particularly valuable when working with students who experience a high level of difficulty with writing. A tutor of multilingual students will likely, at some point, experience a situation in which the draft is so riddled with errors, so unorganized and unfocused that it seems impossible to know where to begin the revising process. In cases such as these, I have found it best to put the paper aside and simply discuss the objective at hand.

“One way to get the conversation started is to focus on the assignment. Most tutors have often had the experience of discovering at the end of the session that a student had completely misinterpreted the instructor’s directions” (Staben 71). Putting the draft aside and discussing the prompt before getting started eliminates this possibility for misunderstanding. After the objective is clear, both student and tutor are able to begin to focus on and develop the student’s ideas. Working together to brainstorm and develop an outline is one of the best ways, I have found, to generate and organize a student’s thoughts regarding a particular topic. “For a struggling writer, [brainstorming can] give them more confidence and provide them with the assistance they need” (Dodge 170). Brainstorming tends to take the stress out of the writing process. Students can feel free to openly explore their ideas without getting intimidated by structure and grammar. This stage of the writing process is also a time when students can receive feedback that seems less like criticism. “. . . ESL students often need feedback on what they’re saying – their ideas – and
not just how they’re saying it” (Staben 78). Once the student has developed a focus and discussed supporting ideas, I have discovered that it can be most beneficial to develop an outline or map which the student might work with, follow and/or build upon at home. Working together to brainstorm and outline a paper has proven, at least in my experience, to be the most effective way to help multilingual students write a clear, focused and well organized draft.

True, working with multilingual students to break through the language barrier and formulate an understanding can be a challenging task, for both writer and tutor, but by establishing a positive environment and working through difficulties to offer constructive yet non-threatening criticism, one will begin to note remarkable progress.

Some Final Thoughts

I have learned a great deal from these students and hope to continue to learn from them in the future. Through trial and error I have come to learn what strategies work and which do not and have above all come to recognize my efforts as a tutor to be a continuously evolving process. Although there are some shared characteristics one may observe when working with multilingual students in the Writing Center, one must remember that each student is unique. Each student has had a different experience with writing and will therefore require individual, writer specific attention.

What I have also come to acknowledge is that a disorganized and seriously flawed paper does not always accurately represent a student’s ability. I am learning to appreciate how capable these multilingual students truly are. Of all the students I have had the privilege of working with, multilingual students tend to be the most dedicated to achieving success and becoming proficient in written communication. These students are working diligently to overcome certain obstacles that many of us have never experienced and for that they deserve our respect. Each session spent working with these students reminds me that difference and diversity should be celebrated and admired. Instead of merely correcting mistakes and pointing to errors, we should strive to formulate an understanding of the student behind the paper, for it is then that we are truly able to make a difference and help multilingual students to become capable and confident writers.
Reading Out Loud: An Effective Strategy to Engage ESL Writers

How is writing like swimming? Give up? Answer: The psycholinguist Eric Lenneberg (1967) once noted, in a discussion of “species specific” human behavior that human beings universally learn to walk and to talk, but that swimming and writing are culturally specific, learned behaviors. We learn to swim if there is a body of water available and usually only if someone teaches us. We learn to write if we are members of a literate society, and usually only if someone teaches us (Brown 334).

I often felt that a similar statement could be made about tutoring: We learn to tutor if we are members of a community that values interaction, and usually only if we are able to learn from one another. I started this semester with many questions. Although I still have questions on what the best approaches to tutoring may be, this semester has been a success largely because writers I worked with shared their time and their ideas about writing. Each of them taught me something about what encourages good writing, even if sometimes we both learned the hard way. In particular, working with ESL writers taught me that while native and non-native English speakers have much in common when approaching writing, non-native speakers face unique challenges. I would like to describe some of those challenges, and an approach that we arrived at to make our sessions more effective.

Throughout the first few weeks of active tutoring, I tried hard to remember the guidelines for promoting good writing. Experiences in the Writing Center, discussions in the classroom, and readings from the texts emphasized active involvement. In Understanding ESL Writers, Leki asserts that “Feedback on the writing of both natives and non-natives is generally more effective if it is given when the students have the opportunity to incorporate the comments into their writing rather than if it appears on a dead, final text” (127). The advice was logical; the tough part was applying it to the best effect.

To begin with, discussions of whether or not to incorporate comments, or interaction of any kind seemed strained. Writers I met with were congenial, but many, especially those for whom English was not their primary language, seemed hesitant to say much. I was the only one interested in active conversation. Remembering good advice, particularly sections from The Tutoring Book on “Learning to Listen and to Question,” I tried to wait out our “loud” silent pauses. I could see we were both struggling. These were their words, why weren’t they eager to share their thoughts on writing? Realizing this was unproductive, I searched for ways to engage the writers. As our sessions progressed, the students (and I) relaxed a bit, and they began to respond with more than “OK,” or “I guess so.” From our conversations, I began to understand that their stoic behavior was really deference, or respect, shown to the “authority figures” (tutors) at the Writing Center.

Early in the semester, the reading material emphasized the importance of establishing a peer relationship, and collaboration during tutoring. I found that for some ESL students, this only adds to their tension and sense of awkwardness. Coming from family backgrounds or traditions in which teachers’ opinions should be accepted as spoken, raising questions or even offering a
A firm opinion might be seen as impolite. Contributing to an “authority image” is the fact that I am two to three decades older than most of the students. Although that was unlikely to change, I was determined to be more approachable and establish a collaborative atmosphere during our sessions.

Asking writers to read out loud proved to be a big step toward achieving this. It began as an experiment, asking a couple of writers to read their essays out loud to me. My goal was to test several ideas:

- Would writers feel more comfortable discussing their ideas with me?
- Would ESL writers catch more of their own errors?
- Would it keep me from talking too much?

At first, the writers I asked to read out loud were hesitant, but they obliged me. The sessions were actually very lively and resulted in an exchange of good ideas. Miele, from Laos, had been one of the shyest students. She told me that she had been brought up to not look adults in the eye; it would be disrespectful. She went on to say that reading made her “feel easy” and then talking about writing also came more naturally. Maybe we were on to something. The writers did appear more anxious to talk about their work; reading seemed to pull their thoughts into the present.

Once we had overcome this barrier, writers were eager to bring their drafts in and discuss strategies on how to proceed. They spent a lot of time searching for words and concepts in writing assignments, often frustrated that the finished document did not reflect what they really wanted to say. This is apparently common among ESL writers. Some I’ve worked with still create an initial outline in their primary language, as abstract thinking flows much more readily. “They may be missing the resonance of words in English, but they can apparently use the resonances which words in their native languages have for them as touchstones to spur their thinking along and to verify the exact meaning they intend” (Leki 80). All of this takes time. “To produce the number of words that they manage, L2 writers need considerably more time than native speakers need” (82). As tutors, we can make a genuine contribution by listening to their work, and encouraging their reading, oral, and comprehension skills. Leki cites a 1985 study by Raimes, in which she concludes “ESL students need more of everything: more time, more contact with English, more opportunity to read and write” (82).

As to the question of whether ESL learners would catch more errors through reading their work out loud, I have to say the results were mixed. Often students did consciously self-correct. Sometimes they spoke the correct tense/suffix/noun-verb agreement in spite of a written error, without noticing the error. Sometimes they neither spoke nor wrote anything resembling correct grammar usage. Research has been conducted on the question of whether writers will self-correct if asked to read out loud. Leki indicates studies have demonstrated its effectiveness with students for whom Standard English is a Second Dialect. However, she states that “this strategy is much less available to ESL students, who often seem barely to understand what they are reading out loud even though it is their own writing” (35).

Referring to the 1985 study by Raimes, Leki cautions that ESL students’ “language limitations may make it more problematic to write a lot, to sustain the effort of writing, and to
analyze the product in order to make changes” (82). Leki concludes, “Even advanced ESL students are much more likely to use bottom-up reading strategies, trying to guess the meaning of what they are reading from the graphemes on the page, rather than top-down strategies, using meaning to anticipate the words on the page; as a result, they are much less able to correct errors that appear there” (35). In spite of inconclusive results regarding error correction, I did see progress and believe it energizes the writers. The practice also sets a positive tone for a mutual exchange of ideas, “breaking the ice” by asking the student to speak first.

I found reading out loud to have additional benefits as well. I hear writers taking ownership of their own words and notice that they remain engaged throughout the session. This is important. While observing tutoring sessions around me, active give-and-take is the norm. Occasionally, however, I also see students staring off into space, looking bored while their tutor silently reads through their essay. By the time discussion begins, the silence is firmly in place and the tutor is only able to pull brief, non-committal remarks from the writer. I had experienced this also and, as mentioned before, in spite of knowing better I often filled the void by talking more than I needed to. When students begin sessions by reading to me, silence never sets in. The writers are already in the driver’s seat, controlling the flow of our discussion throughout the reading by asking questions and pointing out areas of concern to them. Reading out loud appears to be a powerful tool.

One issue that I struggled with throughout the semester was how much emphasis I should place on correcting the errors students missed while reading, particularly errors related to Lower Order Concerns (LOCs). Early on, I let minor and apparently random grammar errors slide by unmentioned, focusing instead on errors that repeated themselves. The next week the writer brought his corrected paper to our session. It was filled with red ink. The teacher’s notes indicated, “good ideas – but incorrect grammar impairs understanding.” We were both very disappointed. I felt as though I had somehow failed him.

Without the intuitive sense of “what sounds right” that is available to most native speakers, ESL writers often demand (and deserve) additional attention to the specifics of English grammar, and direction on common usage. The literature does contain support for more assertive strategies when discussing corrections with some ESL writers. In Tutoring Writing, McAndrew and Reigstad (2001) describe a direct approach offered by Judith Powers (1993). “Powers realized that tutors had to intervene more directly with ESL writers than with native English speakers” (97).

In this vein, McAndrew and Reigstad assert that “Tutors working with ESL writers must be ready to become more like traditional teachers and less like helpful collaborators” (97). But how to start? Again, in Tutoring Writing, McAndrew and Reigstad refer to Muriel Harris and Tony Silva. They recommend “plunging in – ESL writing often seems plagued by miscues at all levels. Tutors need to be reminded to maintain a hierarchy of concerns, [Higher Order Concerns] HOCs before LOCs; focus on one or just a few problems at a time, and explain to writers that miscues are a natural part of learning and using language, even for native speakers” (98). While on guard to not appropriate their material, I gave myself permission to guide ESL writers’ grammar a bit more firmly.
Still another benefit of reading out loud is that writers gain practice in correct pronunciation and inflection so critical to grasping the nuances of English structure. During one session I discovered that some ESL students’ primary opportunities to read and write English are connected to school. Growing up, parents in these households conversed in their native language. No English language newspapers or magazines were routinely available, and so the rhetorical conventions of English composition are literally foreign material. For those not familiar with composition and academic writing in their primary language, the difficulties can feel insurmountable. In Understanding ESL Writers, Leki notes that “it does seem intuitively clear that those who never learned effective writing strategies in L1 cannot employ them in L2 despite a great deal of fluency in L2” (78). With this in mind, it’s easy to see the value of the Writing Center. Students can practice unfamiliar concepts and work to get their ideas down on paper in a safe and supportive environment.

Although it’s true that writers we see have matriculated through the educational system in either this country or abroad, there is no guarantee they received the assistance needed to succeed at the college level. Vu, a sophomore born in Cambodia and a U.S. resident since grade school, told me that her high school teachers never mentioned that her writing ability or reading comprehension were lacking. Her parents spoke almost no English, so were not in a position to help or coach her. She was shocked when she enrolled at CSUS and her professors told her she lacked the writing skills to navigate through basic coursework. Time spent in the Learning Skills Center and in the Writing Center has paid off; she now enjoys working on the essays required in her classes. Vu was one of the first students who obliged me by agreeing to read her work out loud. As the semester progressed her confidence increased, and her self-correction of obvious errors improved also. During a session in late spring, she produced a paper that had been marked up – this time with an “A” and “Well Done!” written across the front. She beamed with pride, and I knew she was well on her way to success in college.

As the semester winds down, I have the opportunity to reflect on shared experiences at the Writing Center. I hope those with whom I worked found value in the sessions, and I am grateful to the writers and other tutors who shared their insights and thoughts on the process of writing with me.

Reading out loud is a practice that may not succeed in all tutoring situations, but I found that it has distinct advantages when working with some ESL students. Rapport seems to come more easily, students can’t disconnect as their work is being reviewed, and most importantly, it puts the writers and their words front and center in the tutoring session. If you’re struggling with some of the issues that I did, try it out and see if this approach can work for you.
Recognizing the "Good Girl" Syndrome in Composition: Suggestions for Empowering the Feminine Voice Within

If women believe themselves inferior writers, so it will be.
--Florence Howe, "Identity and Expression: A Writing Course for Women"

Within the sciences and more often than not within academic discourse, dichotomous, binary thinking is the "norm": whereby students and academicians, in an attempt to classify and categorize, often place both object and person within distinct groups. As my education has progressed, in particular, through my literary studies, I have developed a strong disdain for placing my ideas and views of others within specific alcoves, because I have felt that to do so is to place a label on others, which is not, at least for me, desirable.

How then have I come to conclude that the female writer is different, and that she, while as equally capable as her male counterpart, often has distinct, specific concerns with regard to her writing? However hesitant and ambivalent I may have been to categorize my writers, after working with several female students, I found that often, while particular concerns with regard to writing are universal, for example, having difficulties outlining and organizing one's thoughts, many of the female students I have tutored this semester, in a vigorous attempt to appease and satisfy their audience, unknowingly became victims of the "Good Girl" syndrome within academia.

What then, you may ask, is this "Good Girl" syndrome, and is it indeed as serious as it sounds? In her article "Teaching Griselda to Write" Joan Bolker defines academic good girls as those "Patient Griseldas," who, in learning how to be a "good girl" learn what pleases those around her, and, perhaps most unsettling, is her continual need to focus all of her attention on her audience, much to the extent that her own voice is stifled or suppressed altogether. Bolker suggests that this type of female writer "has no difficulty thinking about the reader of her writing--she always thinks about the reader, because she is used to thinking about others. She has a different problem: she thinks too little about the writer" (Bolker 50).

Initially, I did not discern that the "symptoms" my female tutees were displaying were anything other than "normal" writing concerns, as I, throughout the course of my academic career, shared similar anxieties. For example, akin to many female writers, I have been one who has always wished to know what the teacher "wants," rather than focusing on how I may infuse my own voice within my work. Indeed, Florence Howe, in her article "Identity and Expression: A Writing Course for Women" suggests that social conditioning has lead to a "Griselda Syndrome" in composition, whereby the "passivity and dependency of women students--characters [which] are of course not innate but socially conditioned in schools and the culture at large," have led to "passive-dependent patterns" in writing, where any deviation or act of independence is "terrifyingly traumatic" (Howe 34) for many female writers.
Indeed, one common trait I have observed within the thought processes and writing of female students is the ardent desire to refrain from offending her audience, and to attempt to please others with her writing, regardless of personal consequence. One student of mine in particular had extreme difficulty choosing a side for argumentative essays in her English 20 course. She wished to remain "neutral" so as not to offend her audience. She felt that in doing so, all possible conflict could be avoided--and this was a result that she genuinely desired. Florence Howe recognized the need for neutrality within her female students, and suggested, "typically, women students try to see both sides, possibly to avoid being part of some conflict," and that "it is safer to be neutral or open minded if you are a woman" (37). However, Howe warns that while safety within writing might be desirable for many female students, it is "difficult, if not impossible, to be a neutral writer" (37). In essence, writers must take a stance, but how to empower our female students to make the leap from that of passivity to one of purposeful action?

Learning to recognize the "symptoms" of the "Good Girl" syndrome is of course the first step in assisting female writers. Initially, it is difficult to discern any problematic issues in a student's writing other than superficial concerns. In particular, if that student is afraid to speak of her needs and anxieties with regard to style and intention, finding a method of beneficial assistance is often problematic. Often I have found that my female tutees desire to "please all and offend none," (Bolker 51) and in doing so are afraid to not only question their reading and writing, but in their fear have suppressed their own voice, so much so that their writing is often akin to "a neat package, tied with a ribbon" (51). Indeed, many of the female writers I have tutored this semester receive excellent grades on their essays; however, they continue to be uncomfortable and dissatisfied with their writing. It is all too easy and simplistic to suggest to one's writer that she be happy with her grade and move on to the next assignment, especially when to do so would ignore the individuality of that student, and I, through my own actions, would become nothing but an abettor to the "Good Girl," thus doing her a genuine disservice.

While initially frustrated with what I found to be "typical" and endemic concerns of my female writers, after researching scholarly journals and books dedicated to feminine composition, I found that many professors have had success in suggesting particular writing exercises to their female students. For example, Florence Howe suggests that her students write within personal journals daily, with "no corrections allowed," and in addition encourage "outrageous behavior" such as :

"[writing] fictional letters to enemies, telling them, in full color, how she would like to do them in; complaining letters; free writing, involving poetry, or playing with words, or even God help us, with obscenities" (51). Howe suggests that these exercises, while often balked at by female students, not only assist in developing one's writing style and diction, but also, through personal recognition, helps one "begin to listen to the demands of the inner world" (52).

While I do not claim that the above suggestions are "cures" in and of themselves, they are excellent exercises in developing one's voice--for all types of writers, from those struggling with organization, to the more advanced writers whose main concerns are those of style. Although it may appear that our roles as tutors must be dedicated to organizational issues and paragraph development, the voice of our writers must not be ignored. For as tutors and teachers we should
be concerned when student voices are being stifled, when one's ideas are not one's own, but rather reflective of audience needs and concerns, and that the goal of any writing assignment becomes an exercise in learning how to please others. Writing need not be an exercise in futility and frustration, but rather one in which ideas, free flowing and unobstructed, be shared fluently, so that the individual voice, rather than take a proverbial backseat, becomes dominant within one's writing assignments.
When students come into the Writing Center, we see them as writers. Usually, we do not know much about them; we may come to know their major and their year once they fill out the sign up slip or drop-in form. However, what is clear is that they are seeking help with their writing by entering the Writing Center door. As writers, students encounter all sorts of problems from writer’s block to a lack of analysis in their essays to becoming completely frustrated with a writing assignment. These are common problems for writers, but the writers themselves are not common. This semester I have been lucky to learn from writers with learning disabilities. Since their disabilities are not physiological, until they informed me of their learning process problems, I was unaware that talking and writing were not enough. Some writers need extra help, others need creative ways to learn how to formulate an essay, and others need explicit lessons on how to write an essay such as pre-writing, writing and revising. Regardless of the method of process and learning modes, the end result is, and should be, both a product and an effective method that facilitates learning and writing for student-writers.

As tutors, we are leading writers to assertiveness and independence in their writing skills. We want students to be confident in their process and finished products. Through collaboration, writers and tutors arrive at the style that will give writers the tools to be confident and able writers. But collaboration alone is not enough for some students. Through collaboration, we find that the relationship is give and take: the writer learns as does the tutor. Collaboration tends to decenter authority in the relationship between tutor and writer, but for some students, the decentering of authority does not enable them to achieve the tools they need to be successful writers. Occasionally, students who have challenges that require a more direct approach than collaboration come into the Writing Center for help.

This semester I have worked with several writers with learning disabilities, mainly auditory processing problems and short term memory problems. Learning disabilities are not physiological; moreover, the Learning Disabilities Act of 1968 defines them as “a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using spoken or written languages.” Learning disabilities are permanent, and throughout life they can range in “expression and severity” (Learning Disabilities Overview Handout). When I began to work with the writers who had auditory processing and memory problems, I was unaware of their disabilities until they disclosed them themselves; moreover, it is against the law to ask a writer if they have a learning disability and then to access information regarding the nature of the student’s disability. Had it not been for their honesty to try to explain some of the reasons why they struggled with writing, I would have assumed they were just students who had had bad experiences with writing in the past or simply did not like writing. Learning disabilities are not due to “low intelligence, social situations, or economic conditions” (Neff 379). Thus, since we cannot tell by looking at writers what kind of help all will need before we talk to them, as tutors we need to be open to different approaches when working with students.
In the Writing Center, we work on the principle of collaboration. As tutors, we do not want to co-opt the students’ work, so we create an environment in which working together, often in a non-directive way, students receive suggestions or advice on how to improve their writing. Collaboration assumes that we are all learners in this atmosphere, and hence, both parties contribute to the half an hour or hour session. However, as I got to know some of my writers, I realized that collaboration without some explicit information and ways to improve the writing was preventing the writers from moving forward. One writer, Mari (not writer’s real name) has an auditory processing problem and a short term memory problem; in class, she struggles to take notes because not only does she sometimes not understand what the instructor is saying, but she quickly forgets what she thinks she has heard in lecture. What this leads to is “understanding and memory fades” shortly after class ends, and later she struggles understanding the requirements of an assignment (Learning Disabilities Handbook 13). When Mari and I work together, we read over her assignments several times, and she takes notes on how she understands the assignment should be answered. Taking “good notes helps [Mari] later on take information from short-term memory and assists in rehearsing information until it is in long-term memory” (LDH 13); she needs to be able to turn to her notes or assignment in order to reflect on what her writing approach and answers will be.

With Mari, reading aloud is not helpful even if the Writing Center staff encourages it. Within minutes of reading the prompt or her own writing to her, Mari will ask to have it read again because she has not been able to process what she heard; in fact, Mari will only remember the first few ideas that she heard. Also, since, Mari needs time to develop long-term memory, she benefits from explicit instructions on how to approach writing and visual aids that she can use to organize and assimilate information: she requires tips on how to write a thesis statement, when and how to insert quotes or textual information, and even what assignment formats should look like. Mari took the time to teach me about her LDs, and the result was that I was able to teach her different ways to use pre-writing for her essays and writing assignments, and she was able to repeat these instructions back to me successfully and apply them to her writing assignments.

Most writers that come to the Writing Center for help know what they need to work on. The students, like Mari, who have learning disabilities who come in have lived with their LDs for a long time, yet they want and need the help to succeed in the academic setting. Most LD students are aware what techniques work for them; they know their strengths and weaknesses and know how they process information when they learn. Although they are aware of their learning processes, we, the tutors, may not be. Learning disability or no learning disability, writers face many common challenges when it comes to writing; learning techniques that may successfully turn writers with learning disabilities into assertive and competent writers may very useful to writers at all stages of learning. Here are some tips that may be useful when working with an LD student or a student who might need a new approach after a few sessions:

**Auditory processing problems**: Visual aids such as handouts, charts, Power Point presentations, overheads and for some computers work. They need the instructions or ideas explicitly written, not spoken for them, because they require time to commit information to memory.
Visual processing problems: Students here do not do well with visual aids alone. They work well with audio such as cassettes, videos, reading aloud to them, more discussion in the tutoring session, and a quiet space where the student can concentrate on what is being said during the tutoring session.

Short term memory problems: Students need to take thorough and accurate notes. Tutor should ask open-ended questions that are clear; the students then should write down the answers to these questions to be able to take another look at them later. The tutor should ask the writer to repeat back important information or points pertaining to the writing assignment, the comments on assignments, etc. Making flashcards also works well for these students. Tutors can suggest that students keep calendars or daily planners in which they write down important dates and information.

Dyslexia: Students with dyslexia benefit from structured lessons. Visual and hands on assignments work well for these students. Pre-writing exercises that are structured or visual such as clustering, webbing, cubing, or outlining help students stay focused. Flashcards also work well to write down important points. Worksheets with grammar formulas, for example how to correct subject-verb agreement errors also works for students with dyslexia. And another technique that works for some students is the use of color: color highlighters, color pens and pencils.

Many students benefit from the collaborative model of tutoring; as a matter of fact, LD students benefit greatly from this model. However, there comes a point in which LD students and other students that seek help from Writing Centers need a more explicit and direct method of tutoring. Collaboration benefits the writer and the tutor in the Writing Center, yet since the tutor is usually the more experienced writer, the tutor will be wise to use a more directive approach to help the student. Knowing when to step in with visual aids, open-ended questions, specific formulas for writing will only improve the chances for success of an LD student and of other students who enter into a tutoring relationship.

As I read more on learning disabilities, I became aware that they are “persistent condition[s] of presumed neurological dysfunction, which may exist with other disabling conditions” and these dysfunctions remain “despite instruction in standard conditions” (LD 5). Since students with LDs’ brains are structured differently and work differently, the classroom becomes a contact zone for them or a social space in which “cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 4). A contact zone for a student with an LD would “otherize” them because in traditional classroom settings their needs for processing information are not included. What we as tutors need to be aware of is that we do not create contact zones or environments in the Writing Center that are mirror images of the classroom. If we do, then we inhibit the student instead of helping the student become resourceful.
Responding To the Pen-Happy Professor

During my first semester at the Writing Center, I have encountered in many of my tutees' essays, a number of some rather awkward (awk.), fragmented (frag.), incoherent (incoh.) looking red-penned teacher markings that seemingly run-on (r-o) endlessly from paragraph (¶) to paragraph (¶) without any logic (log.) or organization (org.). Certainly, I think most individuals who have done a fair share of college, academic writing have had at least a run in or two with these infamous red-penned markings. I mean seriously, there is nothing more intimidating and ego deflating than having an essay (which you happened to slave over until the wee hours of the morning fueled exclusively by a Vivarin/caffeine high) maimed and butchered by a messy assortment of mysterious blood-red, hieroglyphic-looking markings detailing virtually every conceivable error you have so carelessly committed! Needless to say, the dreaded red-pen has been responsible for creating more than a few particularly acute cases of mind numbing “writers block” throughout the Sac State campus. Of course, as luck would have it, many of these students come to the Writing Center with their bloodied papers in hand, desperately seeking a cure for their affliction.

As you may have guessed, I am not a huge fan of the red pen! Perhaps my gripe with the red pen has nothing to do with the pen at all, but more about the manner in which professors respond to student writing. After tutoring at the writing center for a semester, I was disturbed by the number of students whose writing problems were, at least in part, attributed to their respective professor’s poor responding techniques. More specifically, a surprisingly significant amount of professors evaluate their students’ essays focusing their remarks and comments on criticism rather than praise. These pen-happy professors fanatical attraction to error only serves to break down the delicate psyche of a young writer. When an essay is returned with an overly disproportionate amount of criticism versus praise, it becomes dangerously easy for the student to stop regarding the criticism as being a medium for creative growth and improvement; instead, each little red marking becomes a glaring reminder of the student’s apparent deficiencies.

Subsequently, the student’s apprehension level Skyrockets while his confidence and motivation spirals downward. Oftentimes, I left the Writing Center wondering if these itchy-pen fingered professors needed some tutoring on how to respond to a student essays!!

Tutee W, a classic victim of the pen-happy professor

One of my semester-long tutees, Tutee W., a shy, but remarkably hardworking, self-proclaimed “borderline English 1/English 1A student” was a classic victim of the overzealous, comment-crazed professor. Her first essay in her 1A class was returned to her covered in an crimson-colored, ink-drenched sea of various indiscernible, morale-sucking red symbols complete with an oversized “D-” stamped boldly in the upper right hand corner. If that didn’t get you a little woozy, although her three-page essay had over thirty different teacher remarks, none of them happened to be even remotely positive or encouraging in nature! One particularly
ineffective and temper-swelling comment stated rather antagonistically, “Tutee W! You are not sticking to your thesis!!” I admit, even I was a little shaken by the noticeably harsh tone of her professor’s comment. I mean seriously, what was the deal with the exclamation marks? Her professor may as well have verbally chastised her instead. Without question, the greater majority of the professor’s criticisms were indeed valid; however, her essay was not without a handful of articulate, thoughtful, intriguing and well-written passages as well.

Seriously, is it really necessary for those pen-happy professors to make one of those peculiar looking, expletive-inducing, red eyesores for every single error a student makes? If a student makes twenty-five subject-verb agreement related errors in a single piece of composition, is it really necessary to meticulously cite the points of the error twenty five different times in order for the student to realize he may have a problem or two regarding subject-verb agreement? Probably not!! To complicate matters further, as noted in Donald A. Daiker’s article, “Learning To Praise” the problem for the anxiety-juiced, pen-shocked student is “circular” (106). More specifically, “Because they anticipate negative consequences, they avoid writing. Yet the avoidance of writing—the lack of practice—leads to further consequences: writing of poor quality that receives low grades and unfavorable comments”(106). After Tutee W. had her first two essays (which received grades of a D-, and a D+) returned to her, I noticed a considerable drop in her confidence not only as a writer, but also as a critical thinker, and student in general. She appeared apprehensive in stating her own independent ideas and arguments in fear that they may be interpreted as being vague, unclear, incoherent, awkward, or erroneous. Simply, she did not want to write! Relatively anxiety-free writing tasks such as picking a research paper topic, picking an essay title, writing a free-write journal entry, or writing a topic sentence became rather arduous, time-consuming, sweat-inducing, nerve-wracking experiences.

Now what?

So, the real question is, how does a tutor respond to, and treat a tutee that has been brutally demoralized by the ultra-sinister, pen-happy professor? From a tutor’s perspective, responding to those assorted, pesky little red-penned markings and various other cryptic, instructor-based remarks has proved to be an unsurprisingly arduous task. Obviously, when you are dealing with an anxiety-stricken tutee that has been almost ritualistically demoralized and humiliated by the dreaded red-pen, your job title ultimately changes, at least temporarily, from “tutor” to “motivator/tutor.” Being that many of these tutees come into the Writing Center with an extremely fragile confidence base (that is, if any confidence is left), it becomes increasingly important to respond to their writing and their teacher’s comments in a manner that does not further intensify their anxiety level. As a tutor, you want to respond their writing in a manner that promotes confidence, steady improvement, and encourages the tutee to continue writing. Praise and positive reinforcement is perhaps the only way a tutor can get a tutee to feel comfortable enough to get back in front of that old, archaic, modem-less hand-me-down computer. More specifically, these tutees may never experience success in academic writing, only if their writing is praised.
SOME SUGGESTIONS AND POINTERS

Focus on the positives--Praise First!

When you are making that initial reading of a tutee’s essay, resist the self-defeating, panic-inducing urge to violently scream and curse the ultra-critical, unsympathetic professor’s name in vain! Perhaps most importantly, absolutely do not focus in on those seemingly hypnotic, hallucinogenic, red teacher-markings. As a tutor, I admit, it is incredibly easy to get consumed by those so-called troublesome areas because, naturally enough, you want to address the source of the problems and begin working on their solutions as quickly as possible. Nevertheless, avoid this nasty habit! Instead, discipline yourself to look for the elements that are positive in the tutee’s essay. Please comment on the positives before delving into the negatives. Of course, for some particularly issue-heavy essays, this may be a seemingly impossible task, but in my own experience, with a little careful analysis, there is almost always something positive in virtually every essay. It might be something relatively unassuming such as cleverly worded title, a riotous, laugh-producing anecdote, a vivid, well-described image, a deliciously smooth transition, an obscure, but crafty utilization of a word--anything!!! Most importantly, let the tutees know each time you read something you like, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem. Let them know, contrary to their professor’s comments, there are elements within their essays that are, in fact, praiseworthy.

Simplify and sympathize

After your tutee has experienced a modest, but undoubtedly therapeutic prescription of praise, you and your tutee can begin a thorough examination of the various criticisms, comments and markings made by the professor. Oftentimes, these mysterious, mind-numbing, red-penned abbreviations and symbols can appear to be more intimidating than they actually are because a tutee may not clearly comprehend what those assorted abbreviations mean. When you are explaining the meaning of a particular piece of criticism, simplify the explanation as best as possible. Simply, eliminate the slightly snooty-sounding, but unmistakably foreign-sounding grammatical lingo, as it will only further accentuate the tutee’s confusion and anxiety level. Most importantly, sympathize with the tutee! Remind the tutee that many of the red markings that appear in his essays are the very same red markings that often clutter up your essays as well! Remind and reassure the tutee that these supposed “errors” are in no way insurmountable. Confiding about your own personal two-horned writing demons is a great way to build up a tutee’s morale, that is, at your expense! What’s more, by being honest about your own writing difficulties you are developing a camaraderie/trust with your tutee that ultimately makes it far easier to critique the weaker, more undeveloped areas of his essay.

Maintain a balance

As much as I vehemently despise those particular criticism-crazed professors who possess a rather ludicrous collection of red-inked, three-dollar gel pens in their office desk drawers, for the most part, their criticism and remarks are not without merit. Simply put, criticism is a necessary evil in composition. Although the creative thought-process of a young writer can be
overwhelmed and inhibited by too much of those pesky, red-penned eyesores, writers also crave a certain level of conscientious criticism as well. More specifically, nearly all of the student writers that I have tutored come to the Writing Center with the intention of improving and expanding their respective writing skills; thus, they view praise, feedback and criticism as being an essential element for their education as writers. I’ve been pleasantly surprised to learn that many of the students who come to the writing center are remarkably motivated and hardly content with just getting by. Consequently, a tutee wants to receive a relatively healthy, balanced dose of praise, feedback and criticism from their tutor so that they do not begin to feel as if their writing ability has become stagnant—that is, their writing is sort of stuck in a state of mediocrity. Simply, they want to get better and they need some guidance as to how to do it. The trick is to respond in a manner that promotes the tutee to continue writing.

When it is necessary to give a tutee some conscientious criticism regarding his writing, do so proportionately. More specifically, maintain a consistent balance between praise and criticism. If at all possible, sandwich your criticism between praise. Try to draw attention to the hidden potential in those particularly problematic areas. If there is a potentially intriguing passage in a Tutee’s essay that is somewhat underdeveloped, respond with something to the extent of, “I think you have the beginning of something with a lot of potential, maybe if you could elaborate a little more thoroughly on this you could have something really, really good.” If there is a sentence that utilizes a word that does is not really appropriate, state something to the extent of, “I totally get, and like what you’re trying to say here, but I think a different word here would make this even better.”

Patience, patience, patience

If there is one integral strategy for helping a tutee that has been demoralized by the dreaded red pen, it is patience. As frustrating and slow-moving as it may seem, keep in mind that it may take weeks, perhaps even an entire semester, before you can undo the damage done by a pen-happy professor. Be Patient. Offer praise whenever possible and make sure the tutee is well aware of the progress he is making, no matter how slow, or small it may be. Be Patient. **Good Luck!**
The Problem of Communication:
Teachers and Students

One of the major continuing issues I have been dealing with this semester in the Writing Center is communication— not communication between me and my writers, but communication between the writers and their professors. Communication is always an issue when one person has to perform to the specifications of another, but it seems as though many students are having trouble with their writing because they do not understand either what their teacher wants them to do (issues with prompts or instructions) or how to improve based on the teacher’s comments and criticisms. When dealing with these students, maintaining a professional manner in regards to the professor’s ideas is of paramount importance, as is sympathizing with the student; the tutor must walk a fine line between teacher bashing and losing the trust and confidence of their writer.

Writing an essay prompt is a very difficult process, as is all writing. Because all writing is a learning process, it would be absurd to expect perfect writing prompts from every teacher, every time. Prompts must be an intricate combination of creativity, to stir the students’ interest and direction, to show the students what is required of them.

A prompt that is too creative is often difficult to write on. A prompt that states simply, “Write a 3-5 page essay on the Industrial Revolution” may seem simple enough to follow, but giving a student an extremely broad topic often leaves them floundering in a sea of information, with no idea of how much to include. An essay on such a topic could include women’s rights, environmental concerns, a technological review of the innovations of that time, the emergence of Romanticism, or any number of other ideas, some more broad and all-inclusive, some much more narrow and focused. Yet writers who come in with prompts like this often try to cover all of that information in one paper and get frustrated by the impossibility of their task, without realizing that they need to be more selective. Their papers lack focus, which is exactly what their teacher would tell them— as they hand the graded essay back. If the teacher had either narrowed the topic, or more specifically directed the students to narrow their responses, in their prompt this frustration, poor grades, and wasted time could have been avoided.

On the other hand, prompts which go on for two or three pages, describing in great detail the exact paragraph structure, organization, and development the paper requires are just as difficult for a writer to respond to. When faced with such exacting demands, the writer will often respond with little more than a form essay, one that matches virtually all of his fellow students’ essays. These are neither enriching or true reflections of the writer’s ability: the writer has to do little to get a good grade other than follow directions. Even so, these long prompts have another danger. Many students get lost reading a several page long prompt. If they cannot get through the prompt, they cannot write their papers, or they will simply ignore the prompt and write the paper based on what they think they are supposed to do. This often has disastrous results. The papers will be handed back with comments that claim the paper is “off topic,” which is true, because the student has no idea what the topic really is.
But teachers must be shown sympathy. We cannot berate them for their vague or overly wordy prompts. We can only sympathize with the students about the difficulty of deciphering prompts and remember the difficulty the teacher faces when writing these prompts. As with all writing, prompt writing is difficult and requires trial and error. One of my fellow tutors, Trang, told me of an experience she had in her English 220A class, a class that teaches how to teach freshman composition. She and her fellow students were asked to write a prompt for an essay; they then switched prompts and wrote the first draft of the essay they were prompted to write. Many, if not most, of the essays were not what the prompt writer had intended, despite the time and care put into developing the prompt. Knowing this, tutors must be sympathetic to the difficulties of the writer, even if the writer in question is a teacher.

Unfortunately, all of my sympathy for the teacher’s problems with writing goes right out the window when I look at a paper that has been graded and commented upon. In the article, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” Stephen M. North comments that Writing Center employees “do . . . far too much work with writers whose writing has received caustic, hostile, or otherwise unconstructive writing” (40). When, as often happens, writers come into the Writing Center with overly corrected papers, they are confused by the sea of “red ink” and lose confidence in their ability to write. Another tutor, Audrey, told me about a student she tutored whose teacher had circled every grammar mistake in her paper. By focusing so intently on grammar issues, teachers may be “doing what they think is the right thing to do” (Dr. Smith, class notes 10-13) to help standardize their students’ academic writing. The student, however, feels picked on. As a tutor, I feel certain that the teacher could have minimized the negative impact by making one comment that reflected their grammar concerns, such as, “You really need to focus on spelling and subject/verb agreement when you’re proofreading,” and moving on to comment on the content of the paper.

On the other hand, students often see the comments written on their papers as inherently bad. They see that the paper has comments written all over it and assume that all of them refer to corrections the writer will have to make to improve the paper. Less than a week before one of my writer’s portfolio was due, she brought in a heavily commented upon paper. There were so many notations and comments that it was almost impossible to read the text of her paper. She was almost in tears because she thought that her paper, and therefore her portfolio, would never pass. However, once we looked beyond the sea of red ink and actually read the comments, we discovered that most of them were very positive and ran along the lines of, “This is a really interesting idea” with suggestions for further development. My writer was both relieved and surprised to read these words. Before she had come in, she had assumed that all of her teacher’s comments were negative because she had only ever received negative comments on her papers up to that point, and this made her afraid of her teacher’s reactions. Sometimes a tutor just has to explain to the writer that a teacher’s comments needn’t be something to fear and can actually reward them with praise, in addition to improving their writing. Of course, this is not always the case when teachers comment on student essays.

The teacher comments that I have the most difficulty dealing with are those that seem directly, or indirectly, to question the student’s values, ideals, and opinions. I have had two writers come in who each had comments on their paper which seemed much more combative
than most people would expect from a teacher. One student, having written an exploratory paper on politics, received a blistering page-long comment from her teacher that was focused not on the student’s writing, but on the lack of politically biased statements in the paper. That’s right, the lack of biased statements was the instructor’s concern. The comment berated the student for not expressing the same political views as the professor, views which were definitely biased to a far end of the political spectrum. This commentary brought the student to the Writing Center to find out two things. First, she wanted to know if this was a normal response for a teacher to give, and I informed her it was not, in my experience, but for that teacher it might be. Then she wanted to know if she should drop the class. Honestly, I didn’t know what to tell her. I knew that I would, in her position, stay in the class and use my writing to challenge the teacher’s ideas at every opportunity. But I am a very argumentative and strong willed person. For her, keeping her GPA sterling so that she could get into nursing school was more important than sticking it to her teacher, and she ended up dropping the class.

Another student, Anna, brought in a first draft whose thesis stated, “Sowell bases his argument primarily on tone.” The teacher’s response to this was “Really? I would have called it an emotional arg[ument], but whatever.” My writer was bewildered at this comment; she could not understand how the teacher could be so dismissive of her ideas. I sympathized with her confusion, but I couldn’t explain what would prompt a teacher to respond to a student’s ideas in such a blase manner. As a result, I tried to ensure that Anna knew what she needed to do to counter this attack. I explained that she needed to ensure that her argument was valid and complete to prove to her teacher that her thesis is correct. However, I also told her that she might want to include the teacher’s idea in her thesis to help flesh out her paper because she was having difficulty meeting the page requirement. I told her that if she truly didn’t like her teacher’s idea, she shouldn’t use it, but if she agreed with it, it might be a good idea to incorporate it into her paper. In all, these teachers’ comments seem to have a negative effect on the students’ writing ability, or at least on their desire to write, but I try to temper these effects with sympathy and more positive responses.

Sometimes it is hard to read comments that are overly critical or combative and feel anything but dislike or animosity toward the teacher and sympathy for the student. How horrible is it to have your hard work trashed by someone because you have grammar issues or because the teacher simply does not agree with you? I know that when I’ve dealt with the same problems from my own teachers, I feel inadequate as a writer, or even stupid. I have to force myself to remember that “we never evaluate or second-guess any teacher’s syllabus, assignments, comments, or grades” (North 40). Offering sympathy can easily turn into teacher-bashing. Beyond the simple comment that “teachers are human, too, and are subject to the same problems and faults as the rest of us,” I try, as all tutors should, to refrain from saying anything against a teacher. This is not to say that I haven’t had to bite my tongue (sometimes really hard) to keep my responses civil. I remind myself that I have no idea what is in teachers’ minds when they make their comments and assignments, so I have no way of judging whether they are truly valid, appropriate, or effective. Sometimes, all you can do is take a deep breath and tell students that any serious issues they have understanding their teacher should be addressed by meeting with their professor.
Tutoring, Student Grades, and How to Mesh the Two

Throughout school we are taught to study, do our homework, and we will get good grades. A’s and B’s are the best, C’s are average, and D’s and F’s are unacceptable. During my school career, I have learned this well and strived for the first two. D’s and F’s were not at all acceptable for me or even acquired because I worked hard to avoid them. My friends never got these types of grades either so I had no experience in dealing with D’s and F’s prior to starting work at the Writing Center.

When I first started my internship in the Writing Center, the thought that some of my students may get these grades on papers did enter my mind. However, I was not originally too concerned with it because we, as tutors, were constantly told that we were collaborators, not teachers, and the grades were not our responsibility. Instead, we were there to talk to students about their writing and show them strategies to improve. Turning out a perfect paper was not the main goal.

I took this idea to heart and low grades weren’t even a worry in the beginning since most of my students came in with papers that got somewhat high grades. Most of them just wanted to talk through their ideas before turning the papers in and make sure that what they wrote made sense and followed the assignment. That was until my first student, Jenny1, someone I had worked with twice a week, every week, came in with a 62, or a D, on her first English 1A paper toward the middle of the semester.

Entering the semester, I was nervous about tutoring but fairly optimistic about my ability to successfully help students work on their papers. Although I had never done actual tutoring before, I served as a newspaper editor for one year and had done numerous peer workshops in my undergraduate classes. Even with this modest experience though, I still felt confident in my ability to work as a writing tutor at the beginning of the semester because of my knowledge of writing and the collaboration process.

One of my first appointments was with Jenny, a first-time freshman majoring in criminal justice. When we met, she came into the writing center, immediately said hello and we sat down for some small talk. She was incredibly friendly and seemed to be happy in the writing center. The first thing we worked on was a paper for her English 1A course. It was supposed to be a reflection on what she thought students expect to get out of college and she was supposed to include what she thought the most important thing to get out of college was. In addition, she was to use several texts she read in class for support. We worked on the paper for the next week or so and when she felt that it was ready to turn in near the due date, we put the finishing touches on it and she handed it in.

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1 Student’s name has been changed.
A few weeks later, she got the grade back. In a journal entry of mine from October 15, 2007, I wrote:

Last week, my writer…came in with her first paper grade. She looked upset and was thumbing through what looked like an essay so I asked if everything was okay. She replied, ‘Yeah, I got my paper back and she didn’t like it.’ So I looked at what she turned in, saw a note from the teacher, and saw that the grade was a D.

I take the time to quote myself here because I wrote the entry soon after my meeting with Jenny and learning about the grade. I feel that it shows her emotions somewhat as she was not smiling and talkative that day. Instead, everything she said came out quietly, she was slumped in her chair, and she didn’t seem to look at me at all. As previously mentioned, she is usually a very happy person who seems to enjoy her time in the writing center.

On this day though, she was withdrawn and looked defeated. Her attitude then began to affect me and while I knew that I was not responsible for her grade, I began to feel like it was my fault somehow. I felt like a failure and started counting the minutes until our session was over because I did not want to think about the paper anymore at that time. Even when it was over though, I didn’t feel any better and there was a dark pall over my whole day. I felt like I had let her down and our sessions up until that point had been a waste of time. I even worried that she might have felt negatively about me and our sessions as well and not return for the rest of her appointments.

She did return though and the next week, we started working on revising the paper based on what her instructor’s comments were. Professor _____ claimed that the essay didn’t answer the prompt, didn’t adequately show the student’s opinion, and was not organized in the way she wanted.

In order to help Jenny get a better grade, I asked her to bring the assignment sheet to one of our meetings but she claimed she lost it and tried to explain the topic to me. Then based on that and the instructor’s comments, we outlined a new, more “professional” essay, which I felt addressed the areas that needed the most improvement. I then told her to go home and write it so we could talk about it the following week.

When Jenny returned, the revised essay was due the next day and after looking at it, I thought it was definitely an improvement. However, I told her that I thought she needed to work on analyzing quotes better and I showed her how to do that. She said she’d try it that night and then turn the paper in.

A few weeks later, she got it back with a C written on it. This time, the professor said the quotes were not used in the right context. This was upsetting because I hadn’t seen the readings and had just assumed that Jenny had used them properly. In the context of her essay, the use of the chosen quotes made perfect sense. Again, I felt frustrated and defeated because I am not one to be satisfied with a C. However, no more revision was allowed because that grade was considered “passing” and was the cut off for revision in Professor _____’s class.
This event changed mine and Jenny’s entire semester and as a writing center tutor, you will no doubt have such an experience at some point. Jenny no longer seemed to care about the sessions and acted like I could have done something else in order to help her grade. She was short with me and my questions and didn’t seem to care much about my suggestions. I have since wondered what I could have done differently and I have asked myself what went wrong many times. In doing so, I have come up with a guide to help new writing tutors, or anyone working with writing students for that matter, deal with this situation.

To handle such a devastating event, I recommend using three steps. They should be done on the first draft before a paper is ever handed in, but if that’s not possible or a student does not want to do it in the beginning, don’t fret. If they are allowed to revise, try again on the revision step of the writing process. Maybe that D or F will make them more receptive to advice on how to improve and they’ll learn not only for the current paper, but also those that they will have to write in future classes.

The steps are as follows:

- **Step 1**- This might seem self evident but always ask to see the assignment sheet yourself. Sometimes the student won’t offer to show it to you and instead they will paraphrase the assignment. Actually reading the sheet is better for their paper and their understanding than a simple paraphrase of what they’re supposed to be writing on. Once you have the sheet, go over it, pick it apart, and make an outline based off of that. I once had an instructor who told us to pick out all of the verbs in the assignment in order to figure out exactly what the essay should include and do. It helps in breaking up the assignment sheet and it is something that the student can do on his or her own after being shown how during a tutoring session. This step can also be done even if the student already has a first draft. Just go back and walk through the assignment sheet once again. Then apply it to the already written essay to make sure the student is doing what he or she should be doing.

- **Step 2**- Ask to see the student’s reading assignments. This comes from my experience in not knowing that the quotes used in Jenny’s essay were in the wrong context. In order to avoid this confusion, quickly skim over the readings to get a sense of what they’re about. Then have the student explain to you what they are and ask them some questions based on what you get from the quick read through of the texts. This way you get a sense of how the student views the works in relation to what they really are, thus making it easier to understand why they incorporate quotes the way they do. It’s also easier in this situation to point out where they are not using quotes properly or to offer suggestions for further analysis.

- **Step 3**- This one is for after the paper has been graded. Look at the instructor’s comments and try to make sense of them with the student. I know when I’ve felt disappointed over a grade; none of the comments seem to make sense and simply having someone to talk to about them helps. Read through the specific comments in the margins or at the end of the paper, talk about them with the student and if
possible, try to offer suggestions for improvement here. Also, if there aren’t many comments, go back to the assignment sheet if you have to in order to see what went wrong. Circle areas on the assignment sheet that are weak or not present in the essay, then use this and the instructor’s comments to make a revision plan. Have the student use this when re-writing the essay and if possible try to have one more revision session before the student turns the paper in again.

By using these steps, you, as a writing center tutor, will be able to keep the discussion focused on the student’s work but also incorporate the student's own ideas in a more effective manner. The discussion can also be kept focused on the text instead of on the poor grade, on giving tips for future writing assignments, and show them how to revise papers if need be- all of which are important skills for any student to have. To rephrase what I was told in the beginning of the semester though, failing a paper is a devastating event for some students, but in the end, only the student is responsible for the grades; you are not. I’m not saying to completely give up on the tutoring process but this is an important idea to keep in mind because oftentimes, you can do everything right as a tutor and if the student doesn’t put in the necessary amount of work, the grade will reflect that.
Here’s a Story

I still remember when Maria and Truong came storming in to my dorm room after English class our freshmen year: they were upset. Shaking essays in my face, they complained that the professor had told them they had “ESL issues” and even asked the loaded question, “Is English your first language?” Maria and Truong were angry because English was their primary language, they saw themselves as average American, English speaking eighteen year olds that just happened to have Spanish and Asian surnames. While they did speak second languages fairly well, they couldn’t write in them and couldn’t figure out why their writing would seem “accented”—it just seemed normal to them and it was normal, just not “standard.” What they hadn’t realized and what their professor didn’t know, was that they spoke and wrote in non-SAE dialects that were structurally influenced by their parents’ primary languages of Vietnamese and Spanish; consequently, these two students felt a sense of cultural betrayal by being labeled, essentially, as linguistic outsiders.

It is important to distinguish students like Maria and Truong, who write in non-SAE dialects from those students who truly write in English as their second language because they have different needs—this is not always easy though. As tutors and teachers, we are generally taught about African American dialects of English as well as regional dialects, but rarely do we discuss the emerging English dialects that borrow structural features from the languages of growing, initially immigrant, populations. For example, students like Maria and Truong are generally discussed as “ESL” students rather than students who speak or write in alternate dialects of English—it’s just been easier to do this instead of taking the time to address the needs of writers of all the variants of English.

Passive Bilingualism & SSL Speakers

It is difficult to explain how or why the many variants of English exist and emerge, except to acknowledge that English, like all other languages, is constantly changing to meet the needs of its speakers. When English comes into contact with another language, or when people who speak other languages begin to speak primarily in English, the possibility of creating new dialects of English is present. The United States, being a unique mecca of language contact, has developed many dialects of English. For example, in California, where there is a large and growing Latino population, Chicano English or ChE is an important dialect to be aware of when tutoring and teaching.

Linguists Victoria Fromkin and Robert Rodman, describe ChE as “a distinct dialect of American English...which is the native language of hundreds of thousands, if not millions of Americans (1998, 419). These linguists also say that ChE is heavily influenced by Spanish and differs both systemically and phonologically from SAE (1998, 419). ChE most likely emerged as a natural English language development that began when bilingual Spanish and English
speakers began code-switching—a process where bilingual speakers use both of their languages within a single phrase or sentence (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, 418). And while no one can tell for certain, it is safe to say that ChE is becoming more common in part, because of passive bilingualism and the growing numbers of Spanish as a Second Language speakers.

Like other immigrant groups and Native American groups, Chicanos/as and Mexican Americans have historically been pressured to assimilate into the “dominant culture.” Who in California hasn’t heard a story about someone who was reprimanded in school for speaking Spanish? The social pressure to abandon Spanish, and legislative legal moves towards English Only laws (see Crawford, Perea & Moran), have led to more passive bilingualism. Passive bilingualism refers to people who can speak a non-English language, but make the political choice not to. Most often passive bilinguals are parents who feel their kids will be better off if they only teach them English. This impacts ChE in two ways: first, passive bilinguals are often ChE speakers and so, their children learn ChE as a first language; secondly, children who are kept from learning Spanish may try to learn ChE or cling to it as their only linguistic link to their ancestry.

On a more positive note, plenty of Chicanos/as, Mexican Americans and others are maintaining or learning Spanish as a second language. This means that more people are able to code-switch, and consequently, can understand and pick up on the syntactic and systemic features of ChE. So, SSL speakers may also normally or naturally write or speak in ChE, as it is the dialect of English that is most in-line with their linguistic make-up. SSL speakers of ChE are also important to note because, while they do speak Spanish, they may not have the grammar skills in Spanish that we sometimes assume they have. Many Chicano/a or Mexican American Spanish speakers speak a North American dialect of Spanish that follows several regional and archaic usage rules that are not standard in Mexican Spanish (Anzaldua, 1999, 79). Therefore, it’s probably not going to aid them in understanding a non-standard English usage error by saying, “how would you say this in Spanish?” or by trying to figure out what Spanish usage rule they may be applying.

Some Common Characteristics of ChE

**Spelling Notes:** While English has eleven stressed vowel phonemes, Spanish only has five (i, e, u, o, a), so in both speech and writing, words like read and rid may sound and be written the same way (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, 419). This means that when ChE writers attempt phonetic spelling in SAE, they may have some difficulty seeing or hearing the difference between their spelling and the standard spelling of a word. ChE spelling and speech may also use *ch* and *sh* interchangeably, resulting in words like chow for show and share for chair. The same is true of the letters *b* and *v* and *c*, *s*, and *z* (1998, 419). Another spelling difference between ChE and SAE that you may see, is called word-final consonant simplification, where past tense suffixes are deleted, for example, *I star school at 2pm* or *she marry him yesterday* (1998, 420). The words *for to* may also be used instead of only *for* or *to* since in Spanish they are more often strung together. An example of this would be a phrase like, *we are ready for to go on the trip.*

**Syntactic Differences:** Fromkin and Rodman note that “in Spanish, a negative sentence includes a negative morpheme before the verb even if another negative appears; thus negative
concord is a regular rule of ChE syntax” (1998, 420). The written and spoken result of this rule may be sentences like I don have no more or he don know nothin. These linguists also point out that there is a regular difference between the “use of comparative more to mean more often and the preposition out from to mean away from. The resulting ChE sentences may look like I want to get out from my apartment or She uses cilantro more (1998, 420). Something else that may appear in ChE writing is a habitual use of the words the, that and to. Since in Spanish masculine or feminine markers usually precede nouns, ChE writers may insert the, that or to to compensate for the lack of SAE markers. For example, a sentence may read In that book, The Awakening the mother to commit suicide drown herself.

Approaching ChE Writers

Probably the most important suggestion I can make about approaching ChE writers is to treat them as non-SAE speakers rather than as ESL students. The main reason I say this is because ChE students are not learning English, they know English, but they may still need to learn how to translate their writing into SAE for the sake of completing academic papers. Dialect translation is not an easy skill to learn, but it can be encouraged by asking ChE writers to work on editing their own work, comparing their sentence structure to the SAE version of the same sentence, and by identifying and naming their individual usage trends so that they can learn to identify their own. The main goal should be to address their usage trends in the context of their writing rather than as singular grammar problems to be attacked through drills and endless usage jargon ala “you’re devoicing your consonants”.

A final suggestion I will make about ChE writers is on how to identify them and differentiate them from ESL students. These are not iron-clad rules, but consider the possibility that you are working with a ChE writer if:

- He doesn’t speak Spanish
- He can’t write in Spanish
- While he knows Spanish and even if it is his first language, most of his schooling happened in the United States
- She grew up in an enclave where ChE is a dominant dialect of English.
Reflections on Working with a Hmong Student

Overall, I would say that my tutoring experience has proved very rewarding. With most of my regular students I developed a good rapport, gave specific feedback, and saw their writing change throughout the semester. However, one student challenged my approach to tutoring. Lia was a polite, quiet freshman student. Like most young writers she was unconfident about her writing. She was also reluctant to talk about herself. As the semester wore on, I expected her shell to crack and some of her shyness to fade. As it turned out, even late in the semester Lia still said, “I don’t know” to many of my questions. Even when I tried to reword my questions or change my approach, Lia still seemed hesitant to share her perspective. Most of our sessions became brainstorming sessions where I spent the majority of my time trying to discover what she thought about a given topic. At times it felt like my attempts to get Lia to talk openly and critically about “society” failed. I could not discern whether it was my tutoring style, Lia’s personality, or her cultural background that led to the circular pattern of our conversations.

At first it did not occur to me that the topics she was being assigned in and of themselves were biased towards Western thought. Her first assignment in her freshman writing class asked Lia to analyze how the clothing she wore “packaged herself” to society. While Lia kept saying that she liked to wear jeans and sweatshirts to feel comfortable, she was hesitant to speculate how the rest of her society may view this “packaging.” Lia did not seem to want to take a stand. Later, she showed me the comments from her teacher. He noted that though she had a thesis in the beginning of her paper, it appeared that she did not seem sure of what she wanted to say in the rest of her essay. Reading Nancy Grimm’s book Good Intentions I was struck by her statement, “when students cannot find ways to integrate their nonmainstream perspectives, academic writing becomes a lifeless performance, and they construct writing positions they do not believe in” (57). This comment rang particularly true for my experience with Lia. She seemed to recognize the influence of family, but had a more difficult time making generalizations about society.

For another writing assignment, Lia’s teacher asked her to consider how society had influenced its young population through the use of childhood games and toys such as “Barbie” and “G.I. Joe.” During our brainstorming it became clear that while Lia had some experience with Barbie dolls this was not important to her. Lia was able to tell me about how she and her relatives grew up playing make-believe “house.” She told me how the females would stay in the tree house while the males would hunt animals to bring them back for the young girls to clean and cook. During our discussion I asked Lia to consider how this game of make believe had supported important family roles. Using her experience as a base and comparing it with the childhood of her mother, who had grown up in Laos, and the other neighborhood kids who played with “Barbie” and “G.I. Joe” provided a rich comparative. I was delighted that Lia was willing to share her personal experience to explore cultural differences within society.

After talking to Professor Smith, I decided that it would be helpful to do some research on the Hmong culture. The following is some of what I learned.
A Brief History of the Hmong People

The Hmong have a long history of living in China, despite the Chinese attempt to suppress their culture through repressive and sometimes violent tactics. The Hmong rebelled many times against Chinese rule and eventually retreated into the mountains. According to Anne Fadiman about five million Hmong still live in China today (17). The Chinese have called the Hmong “Miao” or “Meo.” These words have negative connotations which could be translated as “barbarians” (Fadiman 14). However, in the Hmong language the word “Hmong” actually means “free men” (Fadiman 14). In the 19th century many Hmong left China to migrate to the southeastern countries of Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand. The Hmong primarily relied on farming rice, corn, potatoes, peanuts, and sugar cane as their food source. For a cash crop they cultivated and sold opium. The Hmong would used a slash and burn technique for their crops. This technique increased the soil production temporarily, but then would render the soil unusable after about ten years. Therefore, the Hmong would often move to find new areas to farm. Whatever country they have lived in they have remained an independent people and resisted foreign rule (Fadiman 17).

Because the United States had supported the Hmong living in Laos with military training, weapons, and airplanes in the “Quiet War” against the communist North Vietnamese, the Hmong people were targeted by the communists for “extermination” in the spring of 1975 (Fadiman 138). Many Hmong fled to Thailand and then later to the United States as refugees. According to the report conducted by Bruce Downing and Douglas Olney, while immigration encouraged the Hmong to disperse all over the country, they primarily settled in the states of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California (233).

Writing of the Hmong People

In my research I learned that the Hmong people have a rich oral tradition. It is believed that the Hmong once had a written language many centuries ago, but it had been lost. In 1959, Shong Lue Yang, a farmer unable to read and write himself, developed the Pahawh Hmong writing system through divine intervention (Smalley 21). He became a messianic figure who was referred to as “Saviour of the People” and the “Mother of Writing” (Smalley 15). He had many followers who, like himself, taught the Hmong people how to write. The Romanized Practical Alphabet was devised to match the sounds of the language with the letters of the Roman alphabet. Because the authorities of the surrounding countries feared Shong Lue’s influence to lead the Hmong people into another revolt, he and his family were assassinated in 1971 (Smalley 37). Some families who arrived in the United States, like Lia’s, were not literate in the Hmong language. Lia told me that while her dad could write in Hmong, her mother could not. Consequently, Lia’s brothers and sisters never learned to write in Hmong, although they spoke Hmong to their parents and extended relatives.

Some differences between Hmong and English

I discovered that the Hmong language has the same SVO (subject, verb, and object) order as English. However, modifiers and adjectives follow rather than precede the nouns (Downing et al 60). Rather than use intonation or change the word order to form questions in English, Hmong
forms questions by adding question words (Downing et al 60). The most important language
difference between Hmong and English is that the Hmong language lacks inflected words
(Downing et al 60). Affixes such as re-, un-, -ly, and -ation do not exist in the Hmong language.

Sharon Dwyer conducted a study of Hmong college students’ speech and written English in
1982. According to the results, the “most frequent errors involved using the base form of the
verb instead of the appropriate inflected present or past tense forms” (Downing et al 61). In the
study, the errors that accounted for more than 50% were the following:

There is; There are (omitted)- 71%
present perfect- 62%
be + verb + ing- 61%
passive- 60%
present tense (uninflected)- 52%

It was noted that the errors found in this study were all in the use of verb forms (Downing et al
61). Dwyer concluded that “Hmong learners share many of the most frequent errors with learners
of many other native language backgrounds” (61). I had noticed that Lia had difficulties with
verb tense, but until reading this study I would not have assumed it was due to her language
background.

**Implications**

Although Lia had been raised and educated in California, Hmong had been her first
language. Lia’s exposure to oral language could explain why she might have been more
comfortable with listening to our discussion over taking notes. It may have also been the reason
why she admitted that she “hated writing.”

Upon conducting my research I was surprised to learn how much I did not know about the
history and background of Hmong culture. As tutors working in a Writing Center in the state of
California, which has the largest Hmong population in the United States, it is important for us to
keep in mind that the Hmong written language has only been around for less than 50 years. I
think this experience taught me how important it was to be aware of cultural differences that may
impact individual tutoring sessions. For anyone interested in learning more about Hmong culture,
I highly recommend the book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman.
Speaking the Same Language: Interactions between Multilingual Tutors and Writers in the CSUS Writing Center

I watched nervously as my former Animal Rights colleague awaited the next question. The local network affiliate had invited her to debate the ethics of urban deer “management” with the head of a large East Coast hunting lobby. “Are you a vegetarian?” the hunter asked defiantly. “That’s irrelevant!” snapped my colleague. Though a staunch vegetarian, she knew better than to take the hunter’s *ad hominem* bait. Yet, I had always wondered, why *should* it be irrelevant?

Now I find myself in the Writing Center plagued by an analogous question. No, I’m not secretly wondering whether the other tutors are vegetarians or not. Rather, I’m wondering why, with so many multilingual students coming to the Writing Center, a tutor’s fluency in any language other than English appears to be irrelevant. Of course, this question never would have occurred to me had it not been for the two multilingual students I’m tutoring this semester.

“Lily,” a native of Laos, speaks English fluently and can recite English grammar rules better than I. However, when Lily writes in English, “…[t]hings fall apart; the centre cannot hold…” (Yeats 60). And I have no idea why. On the other hand, when “Maria,” a native of Puerto Rico, makes grammatical errors, I almost always understand why. Although I don’t speak Spanish, my knowledge of French, another Romance language, gives me insights into Maria’s errors that are simply unavailable to me with Lily. When Maria eventually began to show significant progress, I wondered whether my knowledge of French had played some role in her success.

To my surprise, I was unable to find any published research on the interactions between tutors and writers who share a language other than English.¹ So I decided to explore this issue in another way: I would ask the Writing Center’s own multilingual tutors, among other things, to give their most useful advice for monolingual tutors working with non-native English and bilingual speakers.²

Although I had hoped to engage more multilingual tutors for this inquiry, the only tutors with applicable experience who responded to my request to be interviewed were Spanish speakers. The six questions I asked these tutors covered the Fall 2001 and Spring 2002 semesters (See Appendix A). I discuss only those questions, which, I believe, elicited the most revealing responses.

The Inquiry

The three tutors I interviewed identified themselves as follows:

| Tutor A:   | Bilingual – English/Spanish “English is my dominant language.” |
| Tutor B:   | L1 – Spanish           L2 - English                      |
| Tutor C:   | L1- Spanish            L2 – English            L3 – French    |
Question: What is the most useful advice that you can give to a monolingual tutor who is tutoring a native Spanish or bilingual Spanish/English speaker?

Tutor A

Tutor A’s most useful advice was “not to assume that the student has a grammatical background in Spanish.” She also advised “not to assume that when things are phrased in nonstandard usage that this is always because of transfer error. [This is because of] dialect, [which] the tutor must approach . . . differently.”

Leki reminds us here that dialects of English are closer to “Standard Written English” than are other languages. Therefore, it may be linguistically more difficult to change dialects than to change languages. “Standard English as a Second Dialect” students may not even be aware of differences between their dialect and “Standard Written English” because the dialects have similar elements and are more or less mutually understandable (29).

Stressing the importance of conversation, Tutor A advised monolingual tutors to “ask [students] more questions about [their] writing.” To stimulate such conversation with one student, a native of Mexico, I brought a newspaper article to one of our sessions. The article, written by an Argentinean reporter, had been published in one of Spain’s larger newspapers. “This writing is amazing!” the student exclaimed. “It’s highly descriptive and not like any [Spanish writing] I’ve ever seen.” Her reaction taught me not to assume that all Spanish writing reflects the stylized nature so often associated with Romance languages. It follows that not all Spanish speakers are necessarily capable of transferring such characteristics into written English.

Tutor B

Tutor B’s most useful advice was “to go slowly,” which no doubt applies to all tutors working with multilingual students. Tutor B also offered his own take on the ESL student who “surrender[s] authority over her text” by responding to the teacher’s request without understanding it (123). Tutor B remarked: “[Spanish-speaking students] may not want to seem stupid. Many will nod, but I can tell they don’t [understand]. When I ask them in Spanish, then they admit they don’t [understand].”

Tutor B said that when a student persistently makes a grammatical error, he likes to “pick up the pen,” make the same type of error in his own impromptu sentence, then ask the student to correct it. If the student struggles, Tutor B often will say the incorrect sentence—just as incorrectly—in Spanish. “Then they hear [the error].”

Recalling his own experience learning English, Tutor B noted that some Spanish-speaking students might have difficulty recognizing questions in written text. Spanish, unlike English, places the question mark at the beginning of the sentence. “[In Spanish] I always knew when it was a question. In English, I had to wait till I got to the end of the sentence.” Here, Tutor B suggested going over the words that introduce questions, e.g., who, which, why, etc., with the student.
**Tutor C**

When I asked Tutor C for her most useful advice, she hesitated. While weighing her response, she stressed the importance of mastering “writing related concepts” in English. This may be particularly challenging for Spanish speakers not educated here. For example, Tutor C noted that in her native country, the word “thesis” refers *solely* to “the research work you do after you graduate,” not to the main idea of an essay.

Tutor C recalled one student who tried to translate something literally from Spanish into English. “It [didn’t] make sense, but I knew why.” Based on her own experience learning English, Tutor C believes that her ability to explain to students *why* they make such errors allows them “to retain it better.” Hardly the detached observer, I immediately told Tutor C about my similar experience with Maria, the student from Puerto Rico. Tutor C, after all, had just explained what I had suspected, but could not articulate, about Maria’s progress.

Ultimately Tutor C’s most useful advice was to be aware of the different “educational backgrounds” of Spanish speakers who are not born in this country. This, of course, is consistent with Tutor A’s observations on the variability of students’ backgrounds in Spanish grammar. Applying this to my own experience, I must consider that Maria is the product an educational system that the United States imposed on Puerto Rico (Kaplan 291). Therefore, her native instruction in writing may have also contributed to her ultimate progress in English.

**Question: When, if at all, do you use your native language in tutoring?**

The multilingual tutors differed significantly in the extent to which they used Spanish while tutoring. Tutor A used Spanish “rarely . . . only for certain words or phrases,” while Tutor B used Spanish “to explain rules of grammar and thesis development.” Tutor C stated that between her two Spanish-speaking students, she tends to speak Spanish with one, but not with the other. Tutor C also noted that “neither [Spanish-speaking student] is completely fluent in Spanish,” again, calling attention to an assumption that a monolingual tutor might be likely to make.

**Parting Thoughts**

The multilingual tutors offer persuasive evidence that fluency in Spanish is relevant in helping native and bilingual Spanish/English speakers to become better writers in English. Whether this evidence can be extrapolated to tutors fluent in other non-English languages, I cannot say. However, it would be difficult to argue that the ability to explain concepts—particularly complex concepts—in a student’s native or dominant language is of no consequence. Similarly, how many monolingual tutors can truly appreciate the linguistic complexities of English dialects and their implications on writing in “Standard Written English”? Perhaps the most convincing evidence lies in the various tutoring techniques that the multilingual tutors have derived from their own experiences learning English.

Noah Webster, writing in 1789, reminds us of how far we have come as a linguistic nation:
As an independent nation, our honor requires us to have a system of our own in language as well as government . . . It must be considered further, that the English is the common root or stock from which our national language will be derived. All others will gradually waste away—and within a century and a half, North America will be peopled with a hundred millions of men, all speaking the same language. (20-21).

Y qué lejos tenemos que ir! (And how far we have to go!)

Notes

1 Professor Marie Helt, personal interview; 1 May 2002; literature search conducted on INFOTRAC – Expanded Academic, 1 May 2002.

2 While I realize that many “monolingual” tutors may be proficient in non-English languages, I limited my inquiry to “multilingual” tutors, i.e., tutors who identified themselves as fluent in any language other than English.

Appendix A

1. Please identify your native language (L1) and any other languages in which you are fluent:

   L1__________  L2__________  L3__________
   L4__________  L5__________  Bilingual__________

2. How many non-native English speakers have you tutored as a credit tutor (or as a paid tutor) in the CSUS Writing Center? Of these, how many share your native language?

3. When, if at all, do you use your native language in tutoring?

4. What is the most useful advice that you can give to a monolingual (English) tutor who is tutoring a native Spanish speaker or a bilingual (Spanish/English) speaker? Please be specific.

5. What is the most useful advice that you can give to a monolingual (English) tutor who is tutoring a non-native English speaker whose native language is not Spanish? Please be specific.

6. Is there anything else you’d like to say about your experience tutoring non-native English speakers in the Writing Center?
**What is Success in the Writing Center?**

“Postmodern conditions challenge us to live with tensions and to be open to transformation” (Grimm 48).

**Introduction**

As a person who both succeeds within the constrains of academia and simultaneously questions the validity and value of those constrains, I’m concerned about what it means to succeed—as a tutor and a writer—in the writing center. Although it may seem reasonable to say that, by helping students meet the demands of their writing prompts and by helping them improve their grades, we are succeeding, I’m hesitant to agree. While the following portrait shows how one writer improved her ability to write at the university, I think it also reflects the precariousness of avenues for sanctioned success. In order to see herself as successful, she must walk the margins Nancy Grimm describes as characteristic of academia in the postmodern world. She has to see herself as a subject with little control over the things required of her, and yet at the same time see herself as an agent with choices and power. Paulo Freire describes true knowledge as something “built up in the relations between human beings and the world, relations of transformation [that] perfects itself in the critical problematization of these relations.” He explains that to acquire a critical literacy is to separate oneself from what is natural, to develop ‘a stance of intervention in one’s context’” (Grimm 47). As writing center workers, our true power lies in helping students become aware of their subjectivity in the university. They can then use this awareness to navigate the system toward their goals.

**One writer**

Diane has lived in the United States since birth, and is an L2 speaker and writer. She learned English through immersion in a kindergarten classroom with a teacher who spoke no Spanish. Diane is a working mother with two school-aged boys and is a senior in early childhood education. She came in each week with a piece of writing or an assignment prompt in hand, and she set goals for her sessions. She was quick to question and was comfortable speaking her mind. Our tutoring sessions were lively, friendly and honest. My friendship with and admiration for Diane grew over the course of the semester.

**How tutoring might work**

One of the two classes Diane came to see me for was Japanese history. This was a class she admitted found difficult; she struggled with the tests and received a “D” on the first paper. After hearing her ideas for the second paper, I expressed that what she said made sense, but that it didn’t seem to answer the writing prompt. I also said that the prompt wasn’t as clear as it could be, but that I was able to predict where the teacher intended students to take it based on my experience. I explained that some of the words in her teacher’s prompt were codes for the type of writing and thinking he expected. We talked for a while about this, but I wasn’t able to verbally
bridge the gap between what she knew and what the teacher wanted. We were both on the same page, so to speak, but the discussion wasn’t getting us anywhere. Finally, I took what Diane said and wrote a thesis that, from my perspective, seemed to meet the expectations of the teacher.

Some might consider this technique as appropriating her thoughts, stifling her voice, or doing the work for her. And, until I was comfortable in the writing center, I didn’t dare conduct direct instruction of this kind for fear that staff tutors would smack my hand with an MLA Handbook. But, as a tutor, direct instruction is sometimes needed—even though much of the scholarship on tutoring seems to support a more hands off approach. When she read the thesis I wrote with her ideas, it was as if a light went on for her. By being upfront and explaining what I was doing and why, I allowed her to see a possibility that was unavailable to her before. The simple act of shaping her language and ideas into academic discourse showed, in a concrete way, the difference between what she wanted to write and what the teacher seemed to expect. And, she now had a place to begin. She was free, as per our established pattern of interaction, to disagree with me. Her agency was not compromised as it might have been with a different student because she had a sense of who she was and what she wanted to say. She just wasn’t sure how to say it. I didn’t play that game tutors sometimes play where they question students in coy and pointed ways to try to hint at the “right” way of doing it. The there-is-only-one-way-but-you-must-guess method of tutoring would have, in my opinion, increased the distance between her efforts and her goals. Her knowledge was sufficient and her writing decent. Yet, she wasn’t conforming to standard, academic ways of expressing ideas and writing papers because she (1) didn’t know all of the ways in which she was supposed to be standard, and (2) wasn’t practiced at the craft of standardization. (As much as writing the university is a game, it is also a craft. You have to know the conventions and expectations and you have to apply them with a certain amount of ease and proficiency.) Diane immediately took this sample thesis and began to modify it according to what she knew she could write about. I believe that instead of appropriating her voice or doing her work for her, we were actually collaborating. We thought, talked, negotiated, wrote and revised. Diane knew that a large part of scholarly success is playing a game with vague and largely hidden rules. I gave her access to how an insider might approach the assignment, and she took that knowledge and worked it into her own style and approach. Diane saw how to write a thesis for this prompt, and her paper was more focused because of it. One of her strengths as a writer was that of referring back to her thesis as she wrote, so getting the thesis right was very important to her process and important to her access to success.

Various Dynamics of Success

The other class that Diane came to the writing center for help with was an upper division English literature class. Writing essay papers was foreign enough for Diane, but writing a literary analysis was only slightly less difficult than learning a third language. Each week we spent a lot of time talking about literature and ways to write about it. Diane lacked the literary vocabulary—protagonist, character, conflict—with which to share her ideas; she needed methods for unpacking quotes and using them to support her ideas; she had to test out how literal to take or make a metaphor. All of these nebulous skills, quite necessary for writing a literary analysis, required something we do a lot of in the writing center: talking. For most people, writing the university requires more than just sticking fully formed thoughts and ideas on the page.
Writing—a report, an essay, a poem—involves some combination of things writers do at a variety of levels in a variety of ways. Each person writing is working with the internal and external resources available to them. The process of writing may include reading, worrying, subject knowledge, language/usage knowledge, stressing, thinking, talking, typing or handwriting. It’s mental, physical, emotional and social. For some, writing requires walking or listening to music or cleaning out the closet. It starts and stalls, goes well and sucks; it is reflexive, recursive, re-visionary and re-stressful. There are many recommended practices and no one way. Writing is rarely easy, even when all of the necessary parts work well together. It’s tremendously difficult when parts of the writing process don’t go so well. And, to complicate it further, by saying there is a writing process, we are often suggesting to students that the process can be mastered, and that when all of its parts are mastered, all of their challenges will fall away and leave a perfect product. This is almost never the case, regardless of the skill of the writer or their mastery of the process. This idea is reflected in the ways we teach writing, in the ways teachers respond to writing assignments and in the ways students talk about their writing problems. I hear them say things like, “I need more practice to learn grammar and that will make it better.” Well, if they are able to improve their grammar, it may result in fewer red marks on their papers, but it won’t necessarily create seamless, perfect papers that were produced in seamless, perfect ways. This is one of the many places we as tutors can work to help writers problematize their situations. Too often a student’s sense of identity as a writer is confused by their—and their teachers’—misconceptions about writing. We tutors can illuminate some of those dynamics at work in their education and guide them through the tenuous and shaky foundations of the writing process. We don’t need to take it on for them, but can offer a sort of lighthouse as they navigate academic tasks. If they can see the shore, moving in the water isn’t so treacherous.

Diane’s Process

At the beginning of the semester, Diane did her assignments seriously and sufficiently, but somehow as if from a distance. As I watched her, I could almost see her physically—and with some difficulty—removing an idea from her brain, and then very separately from thinking the thought, writing it on the page. By mid-semester, this began to change. Our conversations generated some momentum that Diane was able to use to move through her assignments with less difficulty and more flow. Momentum and flow are words rarely applied to academic writing (and are generally scoffed at as whims only for creative writers who are touched by the muse), and yet I think the terms are just as applicable to those writing academic papers. When Diane not only understood the literature, but also understood the ways in which she was supposed to be talking and writing about literature, she became excited and engaged. This provided her momentum to move through the process. Instead of false starts and early stalls, she couldn’t stop coming up with ideas for her challenging paper topic. She worked on this paper well in advance and significantly revised early, middle and late drafts. What happened as Diane made a shift from unknowledgeable, frustrated academic writer, to informed and engaged academic writer, is that other challenges arose. The more she dealt with the subject of literature and her ideas about it, the more frustrated she became by the limitations of the way she normally wrote. Her short, detached sentences were not effective tools for expressing the complex ideas she was grappling with. And, the longer her sentences became, the more comma splices there were. The more ideas
she had, the more fragments that appeared. With each step toward the HOC of literary analysis, she made LO steps away from “Standard” English. Success, it turns out, is a messy business.

What became the reality for her was that even though she felt an improved ability to express complex ideas in her writing, she wasn’t necessarily pleased with the final product. And, her grades didn’t reflect the degree to which her writing had improved. It reflected how well her current writing compared to the myth of the ideal paper her teacher held. Both teachers’ comments during the time I worked with her largely focused on usage issues and both remarked they may have given her higher grades had she not had so many errors. Usage errors still meant lower grades even though the papers reflected HO improvements. Yet, she was pleased with her engagement in the process. The process of writing—the experience of shaping her ideas and feelings into written words—became meaningful and satisfying in itself. She engaged in unquantifiable learning—learning she experienced while fully aware of her subjectivity, of her position in the academy, of her L2 limitations. Fortunately for Diane, recognition of her subjectivity allowed her a certain amount of emotional distance from the letter grades and comments she received, and thus she was able to view the experiences of writing this semester as positive.

But what does this experience do for Diane and our other students who grow and learn and yet don’t succeed in sanctioned ways? What is the quality of her education if her efforts are not acknowledged, if, as we know all too well, meritocracy is a sleepy, neglectful beast? If she was rewarded with negative remarks and disappointment as so many students are, what then? Who wins in this scenario? The system? Administrators? Teachers? The middle class gate-keepers? My gut tells me that, no matter how much I think there should be university-wide standards, when standards are enforced—blindly and objectively—across the board, no one wins. I’m arguing that, at the very least, hard work in the writing classroom should be acknowledged and appreciated. A compromise between the prevailing conventions and expectations (error-free papers in SE) and the current academic landscape (unquantifiable and richly diverse) would be that grades in the writing classroom—and in classrooms where extended writing projects are required—need to reflect effort, growth and content as much as they reflect distance from ideal texts. In this scenario, grades do retain their somewhat arbitrary nature, but transform ever so slightly to incorporate the realities of real writers, real students. In the writing center, we can ever so slightly bridge this distance.

Just as how grades are determined must reflect the human realities and qualities of the populations being graded, our understanding of what types and amounts of learning are required needs to reflect the world in which we live. In the early 21st century we simply can’t, nor do we need to, know how to do everything. It’s true. As grad students, do-gooders and literacy promoters, we like to believe and perpetuate the idea that writing and reading well matters greatly—that those skills will get you somewhere if done well and keep you back if not. This is true to a certain extent, although it’s not an exact equation. In the current reality of the global job market, writing well is only one skill in a large pool of skills that one might need or use to be successful. It seems obvious to state that writing well in the university doesn’t necessarily translate into functioning/working/living well outside the university. But continuing to privilege academic discourse the way we do without also suggesting there are perfectly valid reasons to do it other ways, doesn’t acknowledge or make room for the reality of other success narratives,
ability sets, or modes of discourse. To continue this line of thinking, we don’t expect everyone to be able to paint a portrait, write a computer program, or fix a clogged sink. There is no particular or wide-spread shame in being inept at math. How often have you heard the statement “I can’t balance my checkbook” without thinking twice about it? It’s not shameful to suck at chemistry or astronomy or botany. Failure to change a flat tire isn’t usually or systematically a shame inducing experience. Other subject areas in the academy fail to illicit the same sense of distain on the part of the franchised and shame on behalf of the disenfranchised as does writing. Indeed, other subject areas take on the banner of writing standards as well, and are apt to exclude from their own ranks on the basis of how well a student does at writing in the academy regardless of their knowledge of individual subjects.

Those interested in teaching or tutoring writing already know these things, so why rehash them? Because if we, as tutors and teachers, truly, honestly and sincerely begin to behave as if not everyone needs to know how to do everything well—specifically that not everyone needs to know how to write the university well—then we begin to chip away at this system of oppression and shame. If we say to ourselves and to our students: “writing is a game with arbitrary rules. Yes, it matters, but lots of other things matter, too.” If we make obvious the tensions inherent in the postmodern world in which we live, then we can remove, if ever so slowly, some of the stigma, shame and anxiety created by insisting that everyone meet the same arbitrary and falsely objective standards of writing. By believing and teaching that we all have varied capacities, ways of knowing, and modes of expression, and that that is not a basis to call people illiterate or make them feel bad or deny them opportunities, we just might create a new quality of education for future students: an education based more on quality interactions than on quantities of conformity.

Students—to be successful in this postmodern economy—will need to be able to move in and out of multiple realities, various modes of communication and many discourse communities, and yet maintain an integrated, whole identity as they do so. That they be able to position and reposition themselves according to the personal and rhetorical situations in which they find themselves is the necessary skill. Nancy Grimm describes the postmodern skills set as:

the ability to simultaneously maintain multiple viewpoints, to make quick shifts in discourse orientation, to handle rapid changes in information technology, to work elbow to elbow with people differently positioned in the university hierarchy, to negotiate cultural and social differences, to handle the inevitable blurring of authorial boundaries, and to regularly renegotiate issues of knowledge, power, and ownership. This ability to work the border between tradition and change, to simultaneously entertain multiple—often conflicting—perspectives is a valuable survival skill for the turn of the century (2).

What Grimm describes here has always been a valuable and necessary survival skill for those living and working at the margins. It’s an accurate description of what education looks like for many students who find their way to the writing center, and it’s indicative of why success is difficult to define and acknowledge.
Forward thinking

Diane returned with graded papers in hand. Her grades were good; she met and exceeded her own expectations. But she was most thrilled by how her perception and experience of herself as a writer changed. Before she told me what her grades were, she shared one of her teacher’s comments made to her literature class regarding the papers in general. As a whole, her teacher felt the students hadn’t done as well as they could have. He thought they had spent a lot of time going over the assignment in class, and he expected better work from the group. Diane said that the whole time he talked her stomach was tied in knots and she feared the worst. She wasn’t ready to let go of her pleasure in the experience of writing and she wasn’t ready to accept defeat in her first attempts to write in a completely new style. Then, her teacher read a paragraph out loud from a paper that he thought worked well. Diane was shocked—and pleased—that he read from her paper. She said that that was the first time anyone ever publicly recognized her as a “good” writer. The first time her ideas in her written words were legitimately considered “good” writing. More than anything, the recognition of her hard work and improvement—in institutionally legitimate (meaning not by her tutor or family or friends) ways—was her moment of success this semester. This is the only success she’ll carry forward with her. Long after grade reports have been mailed and graduation gowns worn and packed away, she’ll remember the sense of success she felt writing this semester. She was thrilled by the experience, and I have been celebrating with and for her since.
An Awkward Situation: Plagiarism in the Writing Center

When I first started tutoring as the writing center I envisioned myself walking into my first session to see my writer slumped over in the chair. Looking up at me with a glimmer of hope in his eyes the writer would ask me if I can help with the paper, and inspirational music would flood the background as we began to talk about the paper. The writer would explain all of these wonderfully insightful ideas and the paper would materialize in front of us. A week later the writer would come back in with the graded paper in hand. And I would stand there smiling as my writer announced that he had received an A on a paper, the first ever.

Wouldn’t it be great if life actually worked like this? Unfortunately very few sessions will turn out like this, and that is ok. Many writers are looking for A’s that’s true, but many will also be happy just to have someone to help them. Some writers will come in wanting help verbalizing their ideas, while others just want you to “fix” their paper, all of which are normal requests. But what do you do if a writer comes in with a paper that is not entirely her own? It is inevitable that at some point during the semester at least one person will encounter a writer who makes this mistake intentionally or accidentally. This article will hopefully give you some advice on how to deal with this situation.

Plagiarism, or Academic Dishonesty, is something that I had never thought I would see in the Writing Center. And while you may never think of plagiarizing when you sit down to write a paper, I can almost guarantee that one of the writers at the Writing Center has. Plagiarism is a very serious offense that can result in the plagiarizer getting expelled from the university. This is a very touchy subject for most people, especially for the writer if he gets caught plagiarizing.

My Story

I had my own run in with “The Plagiarizer” when I was an intern. I had been working at the Writing Center for about two weeks or so and I was finally starting to be comfortable in my “tutoring skin.” I walked in for my hour that day and saw that I would be seeing a new writer that day. I picked up his folder and saw that both Cathy and Crissey had tutored him before. I thought, “Well that’s odd, I guess they just don’t have enough time to tutor him.” I was slightly nervous to meet this writer because he had been working with both the Writing Center Coordinator and a Graduate Assistant Coordinator, and here I was just a little intern who was still unsure of her ability. I did not even think to look in his tutor log.

This session started like any other, with a nice introduction and some small talk. But when I focused my attention on the paper I noticed right away that something was off. “The Plagiarizer” told be that he wanted to focus on the comments his teacher had made on the paper and then he excused himself for a drink of water. And it’s a good thing he did because after I read his teacher’s first comment, “Your introduction looks surprisingly like your group mate’s. Please see me about this.” I almost fell out of my chair. We had never been told how to deal with someone who was plagiarizing! It wasn’t in our tutor book, and we had certainly not talked about
it in class. I didn’t know what to do. When my writer came back in I immediately directed his attention to the introductory paragraph by asking him what he thought of the comment and if he had worked on an alternate paragraph. His response was, “I’m not concerned with that.” I tried to explain to him that what he was doing was considered stealing and that if he didn’t take steps to correct it he could potentially be kicked out of school. “The Plagiarizer” assured me that his professor wasn’t concerned with plagiarizing and tried to convince me that because he is ELL it doesn’t matter if he plagiarizes. He then tried to call my attention to the other comments on the paper. I had no idea what else to say so I just continued to read the paper.

While I read through the next part of the essay I noticed that “The plagiarizer” had struck again. Only this time he had not cited any of the sources he used. At this point I was pretty sure that he did not understand the consequences of what he was doing. But rather than try to explain those again I decided to go the route of explaining MLA citations. I asked him if he needed me to go over how to use parenthetical citations, and I pointed out all the places where he needed to include them. Again he told me, “I’m not concerned with that; we are going to focus on organization instead.” Wow, ok. Now not only is he completely ignoring the issue, but he’s deciding what we are going to do next. It took me a few minutes to figure out what to tell him. But eventually I told him that his paper was fine and I would see him next week.

After he left I went to the desk to talk to the Graduate Assistant Coordinator that was working that day. I asked her about this writer and what the policy was for switching him to another tutor. I just did not think that I could work with him. He was really intense; he really knew what he wanted in a session but was very intimidating in how he went about telling you. I explained that it looked like he had plagiarized parts of his paper and that I had tried to explain it to him. I looked inside his tutoring log and noticed that both Cathy and Crissey and written down that they had tried to work with him on the plagiarism issue. So as it turns out he had been coming in with this sort of work for three weeks already. At this point I asked what our policy for dealing with people like this was. As it turns out all we can really do is point out the Academic Dishonesty policy and hope that they fix it.

The Policy

The school policy on Academic Dishonesty is zero tolerance. If a professor catches someone plagiarizing any work they can turn it into Academic Affairs who will then decide if the student will be expelled from school. This is a very high price to pay for such an avoidable offense.

In this particular case the writer’s intense personality prompted the Graduate Assistant Coordinators to inform the Coordinator of the situation, after which she made a point to be his tutor for the next week and to make sure that he was aware of the problem. While doing so he was told that if he did not want to take steps to avoid plagiarism he would not be allowed to come back to the Writing Center.

Conclusion

The point is that at not time do you, as a Writing Center tutor, have to deal with anyone who takes part in this sort of activity. It is a very uncomfortable situation to be put in. And at
anytime that you feel uncomfortable in dealing with a writer it is perfectly ok to ask the Graduate Assistant Coordinator how you should handle it.

Plagiarism is unfortunately as much of a reality in the Writing Center as it is in your classes. You may be lucky enough to go a whole semester without dealing with it, but eventually someone will have to. The important thing to remember is that the school policy is to expel people who commit this offense. If explaining this to the writer is not enough to stop the activity then maybe the writer needs to have a talk with the person behind the desk.
Have you heard of the Students’ Right to Their Own Language? If you are anything like me, most likely you have not, for I only happened upon it by chance while doing research last semester. First, let me give you some of the background information and important concepts underlying the Students’ Right before explaining how it will be relevant to your experience as a tutor in the writing center (and believe me, it is relevant).

In 1972, the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication declared its support for students to speak the dialect – standard or not – of their choosing in the classroom; in a special 1974 issue of CCC members detailed the linguistic and social grounds in support of this proclamation. Thirty years later, I find myself grappling with many of the questions this movement raised. For example, why is “standard” English the standard? “[W]ould we accomplish more, both educationally and ethically, if we shifted the emphasis [on uniformity in speech and writing] to precise, effective, and appropriate communication in diverse ways, whatever the dialect?” (“Students’ Right” 2, emphasis added).

It is important to understand that the writers of SR and other advocates of dialect-diversity “do not condone ill-organized, imprecise, undefined, inappropriate writing in any dialect” (8). They are not, in other words, suggesting that academic standards should be relaxed but are instead calling for those standards to be reassessed, challenged, and ultimately, broadened in order to reflect the growing diversity of the student body. Writers of SR convincingly argue that standard English holds no linguistic superiority over non standard dialects. Dialects themselves are neither good nor bad, and prestige, rather, is “externally imposed” upon them (5). Often times the more power and influence a speaker is thought to have, the more prestige is afforded to his or her dialect (5). Proponents of SR point out that speaking a nonstandard dialect impairs neither the ability to read (6-8), write (8), think (9), nor communicate meaning.

On the other hand, there are many who argue that learning the “dominant” discourse benefits students. For one thing, it allows them to participate in the academic conversation. Learning the conventions of academic discourse may, some argue, actually facilitate a change in one’s thought process and often times one’s world view. I should point out that this process (of adopting the “academic” world view) can be extremely confusing and difficult, especially for students whose home world views may be markedly different than or conflict with that of the university. Many students come to the university strictly to get a degree so that they will have a better chance of getting a job, and, whether it is fair or not, employers usually expect a person (especially someone who has been educated at a university) to speak and write in a certain way, i.e., in standard English.

Not helping students achieve at least some level of proficiency in standard English may very well disadvantage them because other students will have these skills. Students need tools
and strategies to better negotiate the system, a system which, I might add, is not likely to change overnight. Lisa Delpit argues the importance of explicitly teaching students the rules of what she calls “the culture of power” (85). While affirming the validity of nonstandard dialects, Delpit also explains to students “that there is a power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play” (95).

At this point, you may very well be wondering what any of this has to do with you, a future tutor of writing. After all, while in 1974 such statements as those professed in the Students’ Right to Their Own Language were fairly radical, three decades have passed since then. Higher education is no longer what it once was, and the face of the university, so to speak, is changing. There are now students of many different races, ethnicities, cultures, ages, and socio-economic classes attending college; this is especially true of a university like CSUS Mendota, where one has only to look around the campus to appreciate the changes which have occurred in the span of thirty years.

The language of the academy, however, is progressing at a slower pace. While students who attend the university are diverse, the academic discourse they are expected to master is static and allows for very little variation. Although students are expected to join the academic conversation going on around them, many of them are not sure how to speak the language. Instead of questioning why they must learn this new language, most students (understandably) simply want to know how to do so. For some students learning the language will be a major adjustment, while others, typically those whose home discourses are similar to the discourse privileged at the university, will find the adjustment somewhat easier. Nonetheless, most student-writers, whatever their background, are unsure of what an academic essay “should” look like, what constitutes evidence and examples in scholarly writing, or if they are “allowed” to use “I” (this is a very common one, it seems). Often times this is compounded by the fact that the writer’s first language is not English (everyone in my class worked with at least one ESL student). Therefore, one of your tasks as a tutor will be to help writers to become familiar with the kind of writing that is expected at the university.

So how do we help these writers? After all, you have no control over the kinds of assignments the students must confront and, unfortunately, you do not have the power to single-handedly change the university, either. I have to agree with Nancy Grimm’s assertion that postmodern writing center work is often very sticky. It is a Catch-22, for, on the one hand, you do not want to perpetuate the notion that standard English is superior to other dialects, but, on the other hand, you will certainly not be helping – but rather hurting – your writers if you suggest to them that they disregard academic conventions in favor of the dialect of their choosing. You want your writers to do well in their classes so that they can move on and accomplish whatever goals they have come to college to achieve (which may have absolutely nothing to do with passing 1A).

But in order to do well, students’ writing must conform to the standards of academic writing, which is frustrating for you as a tutor because you realize that the university’s standards are arbitrary and that linguistically speaking one dialect is not superior to another. Often it seems that how something is said matters more than what is being said. It is difficult not to become angry or disheartened when your writer gets a near failing grade because his or her paper
contains grammatical “errors.” You have witnessed firsthand the time and effort that he or she has devoted to the assignment, and it is you to whom the writer expresses his or her frustration and confusion. We need to realize that because an individual’s language is inextricably linked to who he or she is, if students feel as though their dialects are not “good enough” for the university, they are likely to feel badly about themselves – this is neither easy nor inconsequential work that we are doing.

In the writing center, we have the unique opportunity of helping students learn to feel more comfortable with the language of the university without feeling as though the different languages and dialects they speak at home or in their communities are lesser. In all honesty, however, I am not sure how we are to best accomplish this. I have a suspicion that it is something with which most tutors and teachers continuously struggle. Nevertheless, in what follows I will at least offer a few suggestions.

One of my writers was told that in order to receive a higher grade on an essay, she needed to use more “academic” language. When I asked her if she knew what the professor meant by this, she replied hesitantly, “I think so.” Clearly, she was aware of the fact that she needed to change something. What she did not know was where to start or how to go about it, nor was I sure how to help her. You will find that many students think that their work can become more “academic” by simply adding words like “therefore” and “moreover” to what they already have written. Some students are thesaurus happy and replace their own words with more “academic” variations. Can we blame them? There are no courses to teach students how to speak the language of the university. Though I have learned how to write academic discourse and I know what academic language looks like when I see it, trying to explain the concept to someone else proves rather difficult. It is much the same as trying to describe the color blue or define a concept like love. I suggest that before you begin to tutor, think about how you might best describe the language of the academy to your writers.

Though there is no all-encompassing definition to be had, you can explain to your writers what academic writing typically values, or, if it is easier, what it does not. This is especially important for ESL students whose cultural conceptions of what constitutes “good” writing may be very different than those prided at the university (Ilona Leki specifically addresses this issue in chapter eight of her book Understanding ESL Writers). Telling our writers the expectations of the system does not necessarily mean that we agree with these conventions. In fact, often one must learn the dominant discourse in order to someday subvert the status quo; people such as Frederick Douglass and Dr. Martin Luther King have done just this in their attempts to bring about racial equality. Whenever possible, try and talk to your writers about the conventions of academic discourse. How is the writing that they are expected to produce in English 1A different than the language that they speak at home or to their friends? Why are there different expectations at the university? How is writing in college different than other writing they have done in the past? Questions such as these can possibly lead to discussions which will benefit both you and your writer. Be aware, however, that some of your students will not want to engage in such conversations and will instead give you a look that silently screams, “How is anything you are saying going to help me here and now with this paper!?” Often times, you will find yourself dispelling myths for the students about what academic writing is or is not. Your
writers will constantly bombard you with questions like, “Is it okay to say this?”; “Should I do this?”; “Can I use this as an example?”

With the student who was advised to make her paper more “academic,” I tried to help her strengthen parts of the essay. For example, she had many undefined terms, so we spent most of the session discussing how she could make her ideas more explicit. I suggest that you focus on one concept at a time – for example, ask your writer what he or she means by a certain key word or phrase, for often they are unsure how much information to provide to the reader or what, for that matter, counts as “common knowledge” at the university; I found that rarely did my writers provide too much information. Also, do not be afraid to compliment your writers when they do something well. They often hear from professors what they are doing wrong, so try reminding them that they are doing a lot of things right, too. Furthermore, reiterate to your writers that writing is difficult and that their feelings of frustration are justified – that you, too, had and still have trouble with academic writing and that everyone must learn the conventions of academic discourse because no one speaks in such a way at home.

While I agree with the men and women who wrote the Students’ Right to Their Own Language that we would accomplish more if we focused on “precise, effective, and appropriate communication” (2) instead of dialect, as tutors we are, unfortunately, not in a position to do much about this. Because you have decided to become a writing center tutor, chances are you enjoy and are good at writing yourself. You have also had to conform to the standards of the academy. Sadly, in order to become a “successful” student, this is what one must do. Perhaps, however, you have not previously questioned the extent to which you have privileged academic discourse and standard English. It is my hope that in addition to helping your writers learn to negotiate academia, you will give some thought to your own assumptions before you begin tutoring.

Notes

1 As a result of the open admissions movement at the City College of New York (or CUNY) during the early 1970s, the “typical” college student – heretofore a white, middle-class male – was becoming increasingly difficult to define because many of the students entering the university did not look, speak, or write like those who had come before them; if these students wished to remain and/or achieve academic success, they were expected to conform to the university’s standards. This is the climate in which the Students’ Right to Their Own Language was conceived.

2 In Fall, 2004, 44% of CSUS students identified themselves as Caucasian, 17% as Asian, 14% Hispanic, 6% African American, 1% as Native American, 3% as Foreign, and 16% as Other. 59% of CSUS students are women. While ages ranged from 13-84 years, the median age was 23 years of age. See “Institutional Research” in list of works cited.
Revisiting Schema Theory: Embracing Grimm as Part of Literacy’s Social Model

Michigan Technological University Professor Nancy Grimm argues in her book, *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*, that literacy problems within writing centers stem from the tutee’s personal incapacities, thus returning to the autonomous model of literacy; here, the tutee is held accountable as an individual who is not fully literate in the eyes of academic institutions and their expectations. Grimm’s solution to, “stop locating literacy problems in individuals and instead locate them in cultural constructions,” makes significant strides toward pinpointing differences in literacy levels within academic multicultural environments but solely emphasizes culture which is one component of literacy’s social model (29). In response to Grimm, I propose examining literacy’s social model within schema theory which examines cultural and social origins the tutee writes from. Examining the context in which the tutee writes is important in evaluating how the tutor’s schemas play a direct role in reshaping the schema, and how the tutee’s literacy undergoes transformations which will better connect her writing to a particular social community. Here, the tutor’s relationship to the tutee is extremely powerful in the sense that the tutor struggles to open the tutee’s schema without changing the tutee’s writing to reflect the tutor’s own understanding of a particular subject.

Although there is “no fixed formal definition of a schema,” English psychologist, Frederic Charles Bartlett, in the 1930s describes it as representations of objects and actions in relationship to experiences (Arbib 50). Here is Bartlett’s definition: “An active organization of past reactions, or past experiences. A structured area of knowledge held in memory which can be activated in comprehending a text, supplying inferences, helping construct a mental model or textual world” (Bothamley 475). Bartlett sought to analyze schema theory, which was once identified only with neurological studies, through the lens of experimental psychology. In doing so, Bartlett’s definition, while refined later in the 1970s by sociocultural theorists, acknowledges that people perceive the world around them through discriminating schemas: “People do not passively remember stories verbatim but rather actively code them in terms of their schemas and then recount the stories by retranslating their schema assemblages into words” (Arbib 44). I am interested in how the writer codes a particular experience through schemas that are influenced greatly by cultural, social, and internal literacies of a particular academic discipline.

Before she assumes the role of the tutee in the writing center, the writer already posses an embodied literacy of what she must write about; although her literacy may be underdeveloped, she has some connection to the subject matter she must analyze. Here, I should note that I am not interested in measuring the writer’s literacy against what academic institutions classify as “within range” or “below range.” Academia’s concern with literacy levels adheres to the autonomous model by measuring literacy as “a set of neutral, measurable, asocial technical skills” (Brewster 46). Instead, I am interested in how familiar the writer is with the subject she must write about. Familiarity, or literacy of the subject, extends from personal experiences as well as from the acquired experiences of others in the writer’s learning environment. In other words, the writer is not writing from a body of knowledge or experience that is all her own.
Within the social model, illiteracy is not associated with the individual but rather which differences in how one’s literacy is shaped by one’s schema:

Literacy acquisition and use takes place in context and unless we take into account the influences of context on literacy practices, we are ignoring an important dimension for the understanding of literacy. (46)

The fact that literacy is not solely learned at home or in isolation but within a social setting suggests that the writer has a blended perspective from which to write. The writer has what is termed a "sociocultural schema perception" which shapes literacy of a particular discipline.

Now, when the writer seeks other external schemas, perhaps unconsciously, with a visit to the writing center, the social model of literacy is further expanded. Here, the writer assumes the role of the tutee and interacts with tutors whose schemas are also adapted from their own literacy experiences. The tutee’s schemas are then placed beside new schemas received from the tutor as well as new schemas that are formulated in collaborative conversation between tutee and tutor. Here, the tutee confronts her power to engage in the transmission of new schema by rejecting, accepting, or modifying new perspectives that are cultivated: “talk ‘enables students [and tutors] to represent to themselves what they currently understand and then if necessary criticize and change it’” (McAndrew 4). With open dialogue, a new sense of the tutee’s writing assignment emerges from the schemas of the tutor. The tutor may not, in fact, be close to the subject but he can express his experience or inexperience to produce an interest in further literacy. As the tutor explores his relationship to the subject, he creates a new voice within the social community or schema context that permits the fusion of schemas: for he writes, “‘The world’ is altered in the interaction with the schemas of other individuals” (Arbib 59). Merging schemas in turn prompt more questions from both the tutee and the tutor who within a collaborative setting are opening their own viewpoint to acknowledge others. Questions such as “Why do you think this rather than that? What elements are missing in this perception that are found in others? How do these two perspectives speak to each other?” generate a need for more information which ultimately adds to a developing literacy.

Although a writing center creates an environment where schema can in fact reshape the tutee and the tutor’s relationship to something larger, the writing center does not force schema on the writer. Writers come to the center seeking to be open to new ideas, but may retain their original perceptions. In fact, one goal for a writing center is that “Writers should explore their own ideas and find their own ways to express them, without unwelcome intrusions from the tutor” (McAndrew 19). If the tutor “holds the tutee’s hand” or pulls the tutee’s writing away from the writer's understanding of the subject matter to fit that of the tutor’s understanding, then the writing no longer belongs to the writer. Although the writing serves then as a false representation of the tutee’s relationship to the subject matter, what is also of consequence is that the writing center’s focus would change from that of expanding the tutee’s viewpoints. Shifting the focus from the writer to the writing disrupts the possibility of learning from interaction with a social model of literacy: “In a writing center the object is to make sure that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction” (North 37). To broaden the tutee’s schema the social environment, meaning the writing center itself, the discipline, and the tutee interact. The writer engages in a collaborative relationship with the tutor which ultimately
enlightens her own writing context; thus, it is this tutee-tutor relationship that allows for the growing, altering, and fusing of schemas which present the writing center as a place of social literacy discovery and not a place for correcting perceived individual illiteracies.
Explicit Collaboration: Embracing Honest Conversation in the Writing Center

As a beginning tutor, there will be a number of obstacles that you will encounter when conversing one-on-one with students. Many of these obstacles will become manageable as you gain experience, and eventually, as you learn to problem-solve how to overcome these obstacles, they will also become somewhat exciting. Personally, there was one obstacle that I encountered more than once in the Writing Center that I had a particularly difficult time with. Let me relate my difficulty in a story.

On my first day working as a tutor in the Writing Center, I have to admit that I was a little too comfortable when thinking about sitting down with my first student. Initially, I felt that because I am the writing “expert,” I am generally easy to get along with, and the students that I would speak to would be ready and willing to collaborate with me so that they could improve their writing, I would have minimal problems collaborating and communicating with them. This, of course, was not the case at all. Shallow as it may sound, I had somehow forgotten that I was going to be dealing with human beings, which meant that I would be encountering a variety of personalities and moods embedded in a variety of cultural and social backgrounds. Not only would I have to tutor, but I would have to tutor through a contextual window, and a dirty, thick window it proved to be.

My prospects as an immediately successful tutor were deflated from the very start. The first person that I sat down with to tutor – we will call her Jill – was highly frustrated about her writing, about the class that she was in, and about her need to visit a tutor in the Writing Center.
“Hi,” I said cheerfully, sitting down. “I’m Chris.”
She did not smile.
“Jill.” She replied. “I don’t really think that I need to be here, but my teacher says that I need help, so I’m getting help. Here’s my paper.” Jill pushed her paper in front of me and said nothing, but glared at my smiling face, my immediately nervous eyes, and my faltering ability to tutor.

It was initially difficult for me to work with Jill and I felt that I had to make a strong attempt at reading her non-verbal cues in order to get her to respond in a positive way to my tutoring. I would compliment her frequently as the weeks passed, but I soon learned that she felt I was giving her false compliments, and once, when I decided that a topic sentence should be changed after we had worked on a paragraph for about ten minutes, she replied with frustration, “So, I have to change the whole paragraph now? Why didn’t you just tell me to do that in the first place?”

I soon felt that I was stepping on eggshells during our meetings and this seriously inhibited progressive collaboration. I would think about how I could approach her differently – what body language I should be using, how I should position myself as a tutor, how I should be responding to her paper. I discussed how I should present myself with fellow tutors. However,
nothing seemed to work. At the pinnacle of my frustration concerning this situation, I realized that the answer was actually very simple: *I would talk to her explicitly about the ways we communicate and what we should expect from one another.*

The next time that we met, I told her that I felt that our tutoring sessions were becoming unproductive and I felt that we should discuss exactly what we expect from one another during our tutoring sessions. I attempted to make my approach to this conversation as non-threatening as possible, and surprisingly, she responded very well to my inquiry. After some hesitation, she told me that she needed to be more honest in my praise-giving and that she wanted to hear the “brutal truth” about her writing. She also felt that I would sometimes lead her astray in her writing – that I would contradict myself at times, or that I would work with her on something and then turn around and have her re-write what we had been working on (for example, the paragraph incident above).

In response to this I told her that I would honestly try to only give her genuine praise from then on and that I would tell her the “brutal truth” whenever possible. However, I mentioned that I could only give her the “brutal truth” in a constructive manner – in a way that would help her to overcome her writing obstacles – and that she must agree to put 100% into fixing these problems. I also mentioned that although I’m a tutor, I am also human, and I will contradict myself at times, and I reminded her that tutoring is a process in which we might have to work on a paragraph and develop it in order to understand that it needs to finally be re-written. I made very clear that I was not attempting to undermine her writing ability, nor was I attempting to be dishonest with her.

Although I still experience a few difficulties from time to time with Jill, our relationship and trust for one another within the tutor/student context had greatly improved due to our conversation. Through collaborative discussion in which we both made clear our expectations during the tutoring session, we were able to establish a form of communication that we could both understand.

When reading theory concerning how to work with students and their writing, we generally, at worst, assume that the students that we are working with will cooperate one hundred percent, will give thoughtful responses to our questions, and will intuitively understand and follow the unspoken rules that they are supposed to assimilate to in the Writing Center. At best, we believe that through the proper application of praxis, we as tutors can learn how to create the best tutoring environment possible for the wide spectrum of cultural, social, and discourse-based diversities that we encounter in the students who sit down with us.

Although I do somewhat believe that tutors can become experienced enough to gauge their students, and develop a model of tutoring that fits an individual student, there will still be those times when breakdowns are going to occur. These breakdowns – moments in the tutoring process when some sort of communicative “block” is keeping the tutor from working effectively with the student (as I experienced above with Jill) - will occur, and they must be dealt with so that progressive collaboration can once again take precedence.
In order to (help) overcome these blocks, I have embraced what I will call explicit collaboration. Explicit Collaboration is an “explicit” negotiation with a student in which the tutor and the student outline exactly what “rules” are expected to be adhered by during the tutoring process. Generally, collaboration with students during the tutoring process is implicit—that is, students and tutors negotiate how each is to interact with the other through verbal and non-verbal clues that they pick up on—for instance, my encouragement of a student’s behavior might tell the student that she should behave that way more often.

However, this form of non-explicit communication, although valuable because it supports and encourages the myriad of non-verbal rules that we use to negotiate with one another, does not completely bridge the gap of understanding that the tutor and student both expect during the tutoring process. I might send the signal time and time again, with no response and/or confusion from the student about what I’m trying to imply. Explicit collaboration, or an explicit establishing of rules and expectations before tutoring, can bring the tutor and student closer to an understanding of what each expects of the other.

Let me mention that although explicit collaboration is a useful technique to employ when working with students in the Writing Center, it is not something that the tutor should always employ. First, Ida Shunk’s essay outlines an important preliminary step in tutoring. When complication is constantly arising, Shunk asserts that we must examine our own actions: “You have to ask yourself not just ‘what am I doing wrong?’ but also ‘why am I doing it wrong?’” (56). Before you make demands of a student, and before you ask a student to make demands of you, you must know how you tutor—your strengths, weaknesses, etc., and how to work with them. Explicit collaboration should come as a last-resort action—only after you are sure that your development will not help the situation.

Second, you should only engage in explicit collaboration with a student if the student is going to be sticking around for more than a week. To spend ten minutes discussing expectations with a drop-in student who is never going to return is pointless and will get in the way of an in-depth tutoring session. However, if the student will be with you for the remainder of the semester, it is beneficial to spend ten minutes figuring out how you will interact with the student during that period of time.

Third, I have found that it is probably pointless to begin a conversation in which expectations are communicated unless you find that there is a block in progressive collaboration in the first place. If you feel (and you believe the student feels) confident and progressive during tutoring sessions, then explicit collaboration might hinder writer/tutor communication because expectations (and rules) will be placed on conversation that is going well. However, as Carolynn Rosales notes, “There is a degree of attachment that may prove to be detrimental to tutoring sessions if you as a tutor are unable to set boundaries and redirect sessions to focus on writing” (3). I agree—if you are chatting casually with the student for a large portion of the time, this is not effective, and explicit collaboration might be needed.

A Few Other Suggestions

1. Build a Bond of Trust (And Stick to the Agreement)
Trust is, of course, very important. Natasha Stanford writes, “Getting to know each other, in a general sense, is the first step in establishing trust between a tutor and tutee” (58). Trust should, however, work on two axis: personal trust (as Stanford explains) and professional trust. Friendly conversation is necessary, but will not establish trust on its own – an explicit insight into what the student needs is also necessary. When communicating mutual expectations, make sure that you fully understand and are prepared to follow what the student expects of you. This will not only help the student to trust you as a professional, but will also give you leeway to enforce your own expectations. Many tutors have so many students, that it is hard to sometimes remember names, let alone a conversation that you had with a student a week ago. If you think that this will be a problem, write down the points of agreement and place them in your binder. Always make the effort to follow your end of the bargain. After all, this is explicit collaboration.

2. Constantly Reinforce Your Agreement (And Theirs)

After having a conversation, you might find that, after a few sessions, the student is leaning back toward the same habits, as if the explicit conversation had never taken place. This isn’t the fault of the student; they are as busy as you are. The best way to keep your agreement with the student in place is to constantly reinforce it by friendly reminders. This will keep things on task and will keep the student focused.

3. During Explicit Collaboration, Focus on Their Needs, Not Yours

Although your needs are important, you are ultimately there for the students, and if they are happy, you will ultimately be happy as well. Of course, tutoring must be productive and you might need to set some ground rules as well, especially if something is driving you absolutely insane. Just remember, this isn’t tutoring boot camp and you are ultimately there for the student.

4. If It Isn’t A Good Fit, Let It Go!

One of the great things about explicit collaboration is that once everything is out on the table, you know whether you will be able to come to an agreement with the student that will lead you to successfully tutor, and lead the student to successfully become a better writer. When student and tutor do not communicate, an entire semester can be wasted on difficult communication. If you feel that the student you are with is not a good match, find somebody else to tutor the student – the most important thing is that the student work successfully while in the Writing Center.
The Value of Collaboration in the Writing Center

Collaborate—“To work together, especially in a joint intellectual effort.”

The Writing Center seemed intimidating to me near the beginning of the semester because I was somewhat unsure of my role as an informed tutor. I often found myself particularly worried that I wasn’t adequately prepared for a session or that I might not provide the best explanations or advice for a writer’s individual concerns. It didn’t take long, however, to figure out that the Writing Center is much different than a classroom, and my job is quite unlike a teacher’s. I quickly discovered that many students struggle with their writing simply because they never get a chance to talk about their ideas, frustrations, and goals in a casual academic setting. Over time, my tutorials grew to resemble focused but informal discussions, and as I began to switch attention from myself to our interaction, they became more comfortable and, ultimately, more productive. The Writing Center provides a unique space for just this—a place where students can come to develop their ideas and skills by talking through them. With this in mind, one of the most important lessons for a tutor to learn is how to collaborate.

Conversation

Conversation is the most important element of collaboration in the Writing Center, and it’s also the least complicated. One of the best ways to break down an immensely convoluted subject like writing is to talk about it using natural language and comprehensible terms. Writing is a skill that is too often associated with overall intelligence, so when students feel they lack this skill, they’re often reluctant to talk about it, much less eager to develop it. A tutor’s job should be to provide a safe and inviting place for discouraged students to talk with a peer and let their “intellectual guard” down. Unthreatening conversation is often easy for tutors to facilitate, and it can become a major channel for trust, encouragement, and motivation.

Organic Atmosphere

Writing Center collaboration also allows tutors and writers to create a distinctive environment for “organic” learning, learning which occurs naturally, without rigid guidelines and expectations. Education itself is essentially the sharing of ideas, and the classroom often serves as a beneficial forum for this type of exchange. In the Writing Center, however, tutors and writers may construct their own guidelines for a successful learning experience. Because this work is personal and individually-based, writers may focus on the issues they consider most pertinent, and tutors become guides instead of experts. Writer Andrea Lunsford believes that centers which foreground collaboration operate “on the notion of knowledge as always contextually bound, as always socially-constructed” (97). Indeed, a writer will not always know where to start or how to continue and will surely require a tutor’s help, but overall, this organic atmosphere places much more emphasis on the individual student than on the traditional system in which he or she exists.
Lack of Hierarchy

Another important characteristic of collaborative learning is the relatively level playing field between writer and tutor. Although a tutor may hold a wealth of information about writing, the conversational style of interaction will allow the writer to generate his or her own ideas. Talking one-on-one with a professor can be an intimidating experience, especially if a writer has received harsh criticism in the past. But continued meetings with a well-informed fellow student may help bridge the gap between the solitary writer and the expectant teacher. I have met many writers with a broad range of background skills and creativity, and nearly all of them, regardless of their confidence level, seemed to seek the simple reassurance that other students share the same struggles as them. It was easy for me to relate to beginners and graduate students alike because we all are striving for the same things in our writing—clarity, coherence, and a passing grade.

Listening

In most traditional learning experiences, students often fall into the passive role of listener. Although lectures and group exercises encourage active critical thinking and opinion development, they also require a certain level of information-absorption which contrasts a writer’s obligation to express his or her ideas on paper. The Writing Center counteracts this standard, encouraging writers to discuss their thoughts as they arise. When the tutor takes on the responsibility of the listener, a writer may apply his or her thoughts to a work in progress more actively. Writer Stephen North believes “Nearly everyone who writes likes—and needs—to talk about his or her writing, preferably to someone who will really listen, who knows how to listen …A writing center is an institutional response to this need” (71). The opportunity to articulate one’s ideas allows for feedback and suggestions which can help a writer refine his or her product. Some writers seem much more eager than others to have an attentive listener present, but I’ve found that even timid or quiet writers are often surprised by the ideas they didn’t even know they had.

A Chance to Speak

By listening to a tutee’s ideas and prioritizing his or her point of view, the tutor also gives the writer a much needed chance to speak. Aside from acting as a great tool for proofreading and revision, speaking aloud can help a writer transfer thoughts from mental image to print, giving writers an opportunity to voice perspectives to someone who’s interested and has the time to listen. I’ve worked with many students who accept the idea that most published writing in academia represents total truth, so it often seems appropriate to conform their ideas to match those of scholars. When students believe that their own views are not valid or worth expressing, they often keep their mouths shut. However, a short period of collaboration may help writers realize they do have personal judgment and they are in the company of many other students who might share their perspectives. By informally asking questions like, “What did you really think of the article?” tutors can encourage students to voice their true ideas as opposed to the “acceptable” thoughts they should bring to a writing experience. And the development of these candid opinions can often set writers apart from the herd.

Building Community
Collaboration in the Writing Center allows students the opportunity to support each other through the challenging, and often difficult, processes of acquiring knowledge and achieving goals. Sac State’s Writing Center is truly an organization run by students for students, and this structure promotes solidarity and cooperation within the university community. Writers from all disciplines and academic backgrounds come together daily to share ideas and improve each other’s work, and in the process, a network of mutual respect and unity forms between students. Writers need not feel alone in their frustrations or disappointments if they witness other students, even their tutors, struggling with the same problems. This collaborative atmosphere is something which tutors can feel proud to be a part of and excited about perpetuating.

**Opinions Matter**

In a student-centered environment like the Writing Center, a writer’s opinions matter, and part of a tutor’s job is to make sure this fact is apparent. As previously mentioned, it can become easy to dismiss our ideas when they are overshadowed by the sophisticated writing of others; furthermore, many opinions seem worth discarding purely due to lack of development or appreciation. Tutors should never feel obligated to fabricate approval or interest in a student’s writing if it falls far short of college standards or originality. Constructive criticism and sincerity are always better than the bestowal of false hope (Walker 321-22). Luckily, however, collaboration serves as a fundamental and easily-accessible tool for tutors to use in situations like this. Through conversation, tutors can help writers expand on their opinions, develop a solid foundation to support them, and even create new ideas along the way. More importantly, tutors can utilize this discussion time to demonstrate various ways to record opinions, bringing writers one step closer to a satisfactory expression of their ideas. And overall, this process of collaborative conversation can, in some cases, be informal and nearly effortless.

**Relaxed Academic Discourse**

College composition undoubtedly requires a certain level of written academic discourse in which many writers feel uncomfortable about participating. I have encountered many writers who believe that their professors bypass their ideas and focus excessively on their grammar or punctuation. Even more writers have expressed concerns like “I know what I want to say . . . I just don’t know how to say it!” Although underdeveloped organizational or structural writing skills often play a huge role, much of this irritation seems to stem from a commonly shared misunderstanding of or unfamiliarity with standard academic language. It can be helpful for tutors to remind writers that the language of a scholarly essay differs greatly from the discourse of a newspaper article, a television script, or a spoken discussion. In her article “Are Writing Centers Ethical?” Irene Clark discusses the legitimacy of imitation as an instructional tool in the learning process (251). By modeling language which is standard for college composition, tutors can help encourage writers to acquire and use similar language in their papers. It is somewhat paradoxical to claim that the casual language of a tutorial could lead writers to use more “conventional” English in their papers, but I think that regular, weekly exposure to relaxed, but involved, conversations about accepted academic discourse can also prove advantageous for a writer’s work. Because writing can often seem like such an isolating task, talking about writing with a peer can make a singular chore more like a joint undertaking.

**Team Effort**
To collaborate in any academic setting is to combine individual efforts and work together toward a common goal. In the Writing Center, a major objective is to encourage students to engage in this collective discussion about writing—a subject which is endlessly illusive yet entirely critical for the propagation of knowledge. Many scholars seem to share the common misconception that writing is and should remain an independent activity. Writer Dave Healy suggests that “getting feedback on one’s writing does not constitute a state of deprivation that the developing writer will eventually outgrow” (3). This “feedback” is something that all writers require, even at the professional level. Feedback can help refine a piece of writing and provide an outside perspective to ensure that the chosen words on the page match a writer’s original intentions. By collaborating with the writer, the tutor is able to facilitate the necessary steps of any individual’s writing process and to work with the writer toward a desired end.

As a tutor, I can confidently say that not all of my sessions with writers have flowed productively as a result of natural and comfortable conversation. Oftentimes, it can be difficult to reach a meeting of minds between vastly different individuals with largely disparate priorities. Nonetheless, collaboration does provide a means for a great number of people to break away from the awkward and even infuriating process of writing for long enough to realize that composition can be a communal form of expression. The Writing Center validates and enables this collective experience, and I’m glad to have been able to join in the discussion.
Avoiding W.P.E Writing Anxiety – Be Prepared

I will never forget my own W.P.E. anxieties. Will I pass? Will my paper make sense? If I don’t pass, everyone including myself, will think that I am a bad writer. These were a few of my thoughts and anxieties before I took the exam. It didn’t help any of my preconceived notions when on my first tour of the campus the English department tour guide mentioned, “Don’t worry about the exam, even English majors fail it.” Well, I thought I’d fail for sure when she made that statement. I refused to give up, so I instead decided to seek information on how to prepare for this event. My motto had become, “To be forearmed is to be forewarned.” I went to the workshop offered by the WPE office and followed what they recommended to pass the exam. Of course, much to my surprise I passed with flying colors! The key to my success was in the preparation and organization of writing a timed exam. These WPE writing strategies I would like to share with you. Basically, good writing involves planning, drafting, and revising. Throughout the semester, I have implemented these ideas and the WPE strategies as a tool to help students organize their writing not only for timed exams, but also for the writing of their assignments. We begin with the advice that I have given to many students that I have tutored over the semester.

1) Relax! Realize that this exam is not a measure of you as a writer. It is only measuring how you write this particular exam. Have confidence in yourself because you will have a plan, and you will write an organized paper. Make sure that you have plenty of rest the night before and eat a good breakfast the morning of the exam. Leave early to allow for parking and finding your seat. Now, you are ready to get into the “flow” of the writing process.

2) Have a time-management plan of how many minutes to spend on each task. The exam is 2 ½ hours long. An idea would be to spend:
   - 5 minutes reading the question
   - 25 minutes reading the passage
   - 90 minutes to write the draft
   - 30 minutes to edit

3) Focus on the question. (5 minutes) Ask yourself: What is being asked of me?
   Is it to analyze, compare, contrast, discuss, or explain?

   I pause here and make sure that the student fully understands the meaning of these commands. For example, discuss or explain means to take a position. Throughout my tutoring sessions I have discovered that some students do not understand the meanings of the commands and are too embarrassed to admit it. We spend some time discussing the definition of these words. I recommend that they underline important words in the question such as what is being asked of the student.

4) Read the passage carefully annotating as you read. (25 minutes) Underline important words or sentences and write comments or words in the margins.
5) Start writing (60 minutes) by brainstorming ideas either by free writing or by listing: Ask yourself what do I believe and why? I suggest for the WPE to make a list with pros on one side and cons on the opposite side. Whatever technique the student uses, the goal is to generate ideas.

6) Take a firm and clear position. Form a tentative thesis sentence, which will help the writer stay focused. This sentence is the central idea; an idea preparing the reader for the supporting details that will follow. Don’t worry about writing a perfect thesis sentence, as you can change the wording as you are writing the draft, or during the editing process.

7) To cluster your ideas, write the thesis in the center, draw a circle around it, and surround that with related ideas from your list with arrows to the thesis statement. Each idea surrounded by the thesis is the supportive reason or evidence telling the reader why you are taking this stance.

8) Develop the topic sentences for each supporting paragraph from the cluster.

9) Begin the draft with the introduction. The introduction will tell the reader what the paper is about. Begin with a few sentences that will engage the reader and conclude it with the thesis statement. Ideally, the sentences leading to the thesis should hook the reader, perhaps with one of the following techniques:
   - A question
   - A description or vivid example
   - An unusual fact or a startling statistic

10) Write each body paragraph starting with the topic sentence, which will help to keep the thesis in focus. These paragraphs are the support for the thesis.

11) Write the conclusion, which should echo the main idea, without repeating it. It simply drives home your ideas and perhaps poses a question, offers advice, or proposes a course of action. To bring readers full circle, consider including an example, a quotation, or a detail from the reading. Whatever strategies you use avoid new ideas in the conclusion.

12) Spend 30 minutes editing to correct spelling and grammar errors.
7 EASY STEPS TO W.P.E. SUCCESS

Manage your time

First, read the question

5 minutes

Read and annotate the passage
(25 minutes)

Begin writing by brainstorming ideas--take a stand
Take a position – Develop a thesis and topic sentences
Write your essay
(60 minutes)

Proof read your essay, checking for errors
In spelling and grammar
(30 minutes)
Confessions of a WPE Specialist

I never asked for the title, but rest assured tutor novices, you never know what the fates have in store for you in the Writing Center. Like magic, little bits of paper will show up in your mailbox, and each one represents a student with his or her own unique problems and desires. It is possible that your sessions will reflect the various activities that tutees will bring to the table. But in my case, (although I also saw a glimpse of the spectrum) those little pieces of paper kept showing up with a desperate circle around the “Yes” next to the “Are you here for WPE assistance” question. So I never asked to become a WPE specialist, in fact, it is the one area that I did not even try to plan for in advance (yes, you will try to run example scenarios in your head the week before tutoring begins, and no, those scenarios will be nothing like what actually happens). But, as evidenced by the very presence of that question on a tutee’s sign-up sheet, people will show up in droves to seek assistance for the test so frightening and intimidating that they have to refer to it by acronym. Perhaps you might not meet the sheer number of WPE takers that I did, but surely you will encounter a few. I offer these insights—insights from a man who now believes that helping someone prepare for the WPE is the best job going in the Writing Center. I also hope to explain how it can be the most rewarding.

That said, it is important for you to first understand how ridiculous, foolish, stupid, and almost utterly useless the WPE actually is (hey, college is suppose to make you opinionated). In metaphorical terms, it’s what we like to call “a mere hoop to jump through.” Although this claim is ultimately a matter of opinion, I challenge you to find a couple people (even the faculty on this campus…no, really, try) who will sing the praises of this venture. No matter how you decide to define “good” writing, I’d like to think we could all agree that it takes time to cultivate. What benefit can there be in taking a student body largely disinterested in writing (grand generalizations, I know) and forcing them to produce perfection—that can not be revised—in only two and a half hours? If this is arguably the most important writing task ever in the eyes of non-English majors, what kind of message is our department sending? Writing is a do or die situation, pass or fail, and must be done in an uncomfortable situation? But let’s speak no more of it. Perhaps some day the writing proficiency requirement will be fulfilled by some sort of draft or portfolio project that makes a bit more sense and reflects the true act of composition.

Until that day comes, we are stuck with the WPE itself and the punishments that come along with it. Punishments, you ask? Well what else would you call an entire class that must be taken (on top of the regular undergraduate requirements) if someone fails the test twice? The class is called English 109, and many of your tutees will be enrolled and working on portfolio papers to redeem themselves for failing to write under asinine conditions. There are informative handouts in the Writing Center filing cabinet, and I recommend you brief them to understand the logistics of the test itself. Questions of a technical and logistic nature will surely be a first-time test taker’s initial concerns. Save time by knowing the answers in advance, and come across to your tutee as someone knowledgeable in the area. This knowledge will put them at the ease needed to slip into the more important concerns. By the way, if you agree the test is stupid, by all
means tell your tutee this. The kids love to hear someone in a position of authority (and they will view you that way) talking smack against “the man.”

As I mentioned earlier, you will know before you sit down with someone for the first time that they are there for the WPE. Depending on the length of your first session, I suggest you treat it as an interview and information gathering venture. Your first question should be whether they’ve taken the test before and failed or if this will be their first time. The first timer will have more logistical concerns, and this is where those WPE info handouts come in handy. If your tutee has failed once already, he or she will come with a different attitude – often one of defeat and fear – so moderate your tone and suggestions accordingly. If they’re not aware that they only have one more chance, for Pete’s sake go ahead and scare them with the reality of the situation. I find you’re doing them no favors by acting like they’re not under the gun, and if a little fear motivates them, so be it. Talk with the second-timers about their first test experience. Ask them what they found difficult and where they think they might have gone wrong. Take careful notes of these answers in the tutor log; you will be using them in subsequent sessions to tailor your “lessons.” You’re also going to ask when they plan on taking the test. The WPE is usually offered early and late in a semester. Students often sign up for the early one (probably wanting to put the horror behind them as soon as possible) when they really should wait and prepare.

I had a tutee named Steve who demonstrates this tendency perfectly. I tutored Steve for two sessions then realized he was due to take the test in a few weeks. Based on samples of his writing and a few exercises we’d performed, it was my opinion that he would not pass the test. Considering he’d already failed once, I wanted to set him up with the best chance possible. I asked Steve why he wanted to take the test so soon. He replied that he wished to take an Advanced Study course over the summer (the prerequisite being a passing score on the WPE) and if he took the late test he wouldn’t have the results before the class started. Fine, but this seemed like a poor reason to me. If you’re hesitant to make these kinds of judgment calls about other people, you’re going to have trouble with WPE tutees. If you’re basing your decisions on the writing and skills demonstrated by your tutee, you have to trust your own knowledge of writing. I told Steve (very tactfully) that I didn’t think his reason was the greatest, and he would benefit from preparing all semester long. The Advanced Study class could wait. Luckily, Steve agreed and re-signed up for the later test. But remember, the tutee is ultimately the boss concerning time schedules. If they resist, you merely have to work with the time you have.

Assessing the amount of available time is important (and this is the best part about tutoring the WPE) because I suggest a regimented program for each potential test taker. When you realize how free form and entirely random tutoring sessions can be, you just might appreciate having some structure in your life. What follows are a description of the main areas and techniques that have worked for me after countless WPE sessions. The order seems pretty logical, but it’s your job to assess each student and figure out how much time needs to be spent in each area. This process works best if you’re going to have a number of regular sessions with a student. Obviously, you may need to pick and choose from this advice if you are dealing with a WPE drop-in or an attendance flaky tutee.
THE PROMPT—IT’S THE LIFELINE, YOU KNOW?

Many WPE problems arise from students not understanding how to interpret and use the writing prompt. Since the prompt truly is the “lifeline” in this situation, getting the tutee comfortable with its mechanics is key to putting them at ease. You should first explain how the question will always be one of a highly debatable nature. I used to tell my tutees that the question would never be anything too controversial, but then the next test dealt with euthanasia, and I felt that topic made me eat my words. Still, stress that there will always be two sides to the issue (in this crazy postmodern world there are more sides of course, but why confuse them) and that there is no expected or “right” answer. If you’ve forgotten, go to that file cabinet again (see a pattern here?) and pull out some sample prompts to familiarize yourself with the range of topics. Grab a few, you’ll be using them in each session.

Encourage the tutee to read the question and the entire supporting text once before deciding on their position. Deciding which side to take is often a gut feeling that comes from either previous involvement with the topic or preconceived notions. Depending on the intellectual development of your tutee, you can suggest that sometimes it’s easier to argue the side you don’t agree with (I’m sure we’ve all experienced this in a speech class). Be careful though, because frankly some students just aren’t ready to process that idea. Once they’ve decided which side to take, have them read the prompt again while underlining all the statements that seem to agree with their stand. Non-observant students are often shocked to discover that the prompt’s text will contain information that could support either side of the issue. Failing to realize this leads them to waste valuable time trying to figure out what position they think the prompt is forcing them to take.

THE CLASSICAL ARGUMENT STRUCTURE—SOME WOULD CALL IT MAGIC

Surely as part of your interview you will ask the tutee about their pre-writing strategies. You may even be surprised to find that most of them don’t have any to speak of. Additionally, if they’ve never used pre-writing before, you’re fighting an uphill battle to convince them it’s time to start. After all, the ticking clock on test day is a very real threat in their minds. How you convince them of pre-writing’s value will ultimately depend on how much you value it yourself and your powers of persuasion. Typically, most students are successful with understanding the prompt and picking their position/thesis. It’s the process of choosing their supporting reasons that often trips them up.

Before discussing how to ease that process, we have to deal with the tricky issue of formula. In a perfect world, we wouldn’t teach a WPE formula to the students, especially since doing so directly contradicts everything we stress in this department about not writing formulaically. Hopefully these students’ English 1A classes broke them out of the five paragraph essay mold, and now you as a tutor are going to ask them to slip back into one (it actually ends up being seven, but it’s just as formulaic). But let’s face the facts. Most of the people coming in for help will be the poorer writers (by academic standards), and you don’t have the time to teach them beautiful, polished, and original organization style. Your job is to get them through the hoop of the WPE with as little pain as possible. This is why I suggest the Classical Argument format that is explained in detail in Tina Royer’s essay “A Magical Formula for Passing the WPE,” found
elsewhere in this tutor book. Take a moment to familiarize yourself with the structure before returning back to this essay. Go ahead, I’ll wait.

Ah, you’re back. As you can see, Royer’s formula only calls for two supporting reasons and I suggest three if the tutee can write enough in the allotted time. Otherwise, this formula works perfectly, and trust me, most students will offer to name their first child after you for showing it to them.

THE OUTLINE—OR TRUST ME, KID, THIS IS GONNA HELP YOU

I leave it to your own style in offering advice on how to write an introduction, acknowledgement, and conclusion. However, when it comes to forming those tricky (and most crucial) body paragraphs, I have found the following process of outlining is an effective pre-writing tool.

When you had the tutee underline on the prompt the statements that agreed with their stand, the reason was connected to those inevitable quotes that WPE graders will be expecting. A look at the prompt also reveals that students are allowed to use personal examples to make their points. There’s no fast and hard rule of how many to have. I tell my tutees that in their three body paragraphs, two should contain a quote and one should have a personal story. Consider this a bare minimum. Anyone can throw in a story, but it takes more skill to insert a quote and relevantly analyze it—hence my suggestion.

Remember to tell your tutees that the personal stories they use to support their points don’t have to be true. At the very least, the stories can be partially true but molded and tweaked to fit the needs of the essay. Just warn them that if their BS skills (you know what I mean) are poor, the worst thing they can do is fabricate a story that reeks of falsehood. Keep the story realistic and grounded is a good rule of thumb. The prompt’s about the dangers of second hand smoke? Create a grandpa who died of lung cancer (there’s no time to worry about being heartless, we’re trying to pass the WPE here). The prompt’s about personal privacy? You probably don’t want to write about the time you discovered a hidden camera watching you while you tried on jeans at Wal-Mart.

Sometimes a tutee can form a supporting reason or topic sentence with ease. However, when they get stuck, remind them that they need a quote somewhere in the paragraph that needs to support the point they’re trying to prove. Therefore, starting backwards with the quote will often give them the supporting idea that they couldn’t think of. For example, while Steve and I were working on an outline for a sample prompt, he could not think of a third supporting reason. His argument was that individual schools should not be instituted to separate boys from girls. One of the prompt lines he underlined dealt with the risk of resources not being divided equally between the two schools, and therefore one gender getting the short end of the stick. I asked Steve if this quote could help him give a reason to support his thesis. After some conversation, he figured out that the quote implied there was a lack of resources in general and that there was probably a financial reason for that situation (gotta love business majors). Further analysis led him to conclude that separate schools probably meant building more schools, and if there’s no money for books, how’s there going to be enough money for construction? By working
backwards from a quote, Steve was able to find his third supporting reason. Before any writing begins, I suggest to my tutees that the entire Classical Argument outline be filled out. They should have a couple words to help guide their introductions and background paragraphs. For the three body paragraphs they should compose their topic sentences, identify which quotes will go in which paragraphs and finally jot down a few words to guide the personal story. If they’ve done this with time to spare (usually determined by their comfort level) they may even want to identify a quote that disagrees with them for their acknowledgement paragraph. There’s no magic formula for how long the prompt reading and outlining should take, but I often suggest at least a half hour. Results will vary.

SETTING YOUR CALENDAR OR TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE

The following is all dependant on which areas your tutee is least developed in and how many hours you have to spend with him or her before the test. After that initial interview session, it’s time to move straight into prompt issues. Go over a few prompts with your tutee, and ask for their initial feelings and understanding of the topic. Next, move into analysis of sample prompts. Have your tutee read, reread, take a position, and underline the pertinent sections of the prompts. Once they are comfortable with this, work on making outlines where quotes and personal stories are selected and slotted into their desired places. Depending on the student’s skill level and the amount of time you meet with them, this process can take anywhere from two sessions to four. Any more and I fear you will be emphasizing the prompt too much.

At some point you will need to assign “homework.” Since you’re not a teacher you may feel awkward doing this at first. Strangely, I have found that potential WPE takers don’t mind if you give them outside session work. They’re pretty desperate to pass at all costs, so if your madness seems to have a method, they’ll play along. I like to assign the first homework once I’ve gone over a number of sample prompts with the tutee. The homework simply involves them taking a prompt home to work on themselves, allowing you the entire next session to discuss how they performed. At some point towards the middle of your time together, you’re going to want to see how their actual writing style looks. Give them a prompt (it’s fine to use one they’ve already outlined and actually preferable) and have them write the essay at home. Tell them not to worry about time restraints, but to concentrate on making it the best essay they can. The next session you can look over the essay and most likely (sorry to break it to you folks) start to address and plan for a variety of new issues. Someone can create the most beautiful outline in the world, and it doesn’t mean they will translate it well to an essay. The final step involves giving them a fresh prompt and letting them do it at home under simulated WPE conditions. Tell them to set a clock and adhere to it. If they don’t finish that’s fine, because seeing how far they got will help you decide which parts of the process may be streamlined. A useful tool in this decision involves asking them to keep a log while working on the essay at home, noting how long it took to read the prompt, make the outline, write the essay, and revise.

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There’s no way to explain the emotional aspect of tutoring WPE tutees, but I think you’ll eventually agree it’s the best job going in the Writing Center. Helping people with random essays is rewarding and all, but working towards the common goal of passing this abysmal test is a whole new level. As each week passes you can feel their fear being replaced with the
anticipation to test their new skills…or at least you sense their fear waning a bit. If your tutee takes the early test they will almost always come back and tell you the results. If they pass you won’t believe the amount of gratitude they’ll show you (one guy offered to take me out for a beer). If they fail…well, I didn’t have that happen. Hey, not to be arrogant or anything, but the technique works. Just a few confessions…from a WPE specialist.
The WPE: The Pressure to Perform

When I learned I was going to help a writer try to pass the infamous Writing Proficiency exam, I was very nervous and doubtful of my abilities. Unlike my other writers, this writer who needed to pass the WPE did not have papers to examine, but was depending on me to provide her with strategies for receiving a passing score on the exam. She was in a desperate situation. She was in her last semester of school, hoping to receive a passing score on the WPE so she would not have to attend one more semester to take the WPE class and pay the expensive fees for being an international student. I did not know how I could be able to help someone take an exam that I barely managed to pass myself. On top of that, considering that timed writing tests are my weakest writing areas, I was not even sure how I managed to pass the test the first time around. How was I going to help my writer pass the WPE when I did not feel confident in my own capabilities?

It is ironic that the feelings I had in tutoring a writer for the WPE matched those felt by students who have taken or are going to take the WPE. The WPE is a frightening exam for many students at CSU Sacramento, especially for graduating seniors who are preparing to exit the academic world and enter the working world. Their many years of academic study and the path to that diploma all of a sudden become based on writing a decent and coherent argumentative essay within a timed limit. Not only is the WPE a timed writing test, the test requires students to take and pass the test with a passing score in order to graduate. For these reasons, many students run to the Writing Center to obtain preparation and planning in order to pass the WPE.

I then felt that there was not only a heavy pressure put on writers, but on me as well. The writers are pressured to meet a graduation requirement. As a tutor, I felt pressured, regardless of whether or not I felt capable, to assist my writer in meeting that graduation requirement. Running away and quitting, which posed as favorable options, seemed out of the question. These uncomfortable feelings of pressure have led me to explore and find resolutions to these feelings for my writers to learn from. The following points that are listed have helped me to assist my writers in their WPE endeavors.

*Ask Others for Help

You are not alone in the Writing Center. There are many fellow tutors who have gone through similar experiences feeling the same way as you. Ask these tutors for help and advice to situations that pose questions and concerns. Because they are tutors like you, they are sympathetic to your cause and they are willing to lend a helping hand. They provide many points of view that can be helpful and beneficial for your writers who come from a variety of backgrounds. My biggest mistake was thinking that the difficulties I had in tutoring were unique only to me. I did not think that other tutors could understand what I was feeling and going through in my tutoring sessions. As a result, I did not consult with other tutors for the first few weeks, and I relied solely on myself to resolve problems I encountered in my sessions. Naturally, I was always feeling a heavy burden to perform with perfection, displacing concern from the
writer, where it should have been, onto me. A variety of tutors provide abundant sources of information to enrich your tutoring sessions.

**Dispel WPE Myths**

Don’t keep the exam a secret. Ask your writers what they know about the exam. Even though many writers know of the exam and know they must take it, they do not know why they must take it. The test may seem to many writers who have already completed their English graduation requirements as an excuse by evil and greedy administrators to punish them while extorting money from them as well. Explain to your writers the history and background behind the WPE. Also, allow your writers to expel any fears and other accompanying emotions in taking this infamous exam. To some writers who are not proficient at writing essays, the WPE may appear to them as a “sink or swim” situation, in which knowing how to receive a passing score is a vague and abstract idea. As a result, your writers may have a negative or frightened attitude towards the exam. It may also be helpful to acknowledge any similar fears or nightmares that you had about the exam to show your writers that they are not abnormal in feeling this way. Give your writers the encouragement and confidence to produce the skills to overcome the WPE. When given more knowledge about the exam, your writers may become more comfortable and confident in beating the WPE.

**Discover Strengths and Weaknesses**

Uncover your writers’ strengths and weaknesses so that you can plan sessions and strategies that will emphasize their strengths and transform their weaknesses into strengths. Considering that the WPE is a timed test, ask your writers how much experience they have had with timed writing tests. Explore whether or not their experiences with such tests have been positive or negative. Obviously, the type of reaction from your writers will determine how you will frame your sessions. If a writer, for example, has had continuous negative or nerve-wracking experiences with timed writing tests, the student may need more encouragement and study skills than one who has had better experiences. Also, learning about your writers’ strengths and weaknesses can assist you and your writers in preparing a timed schedule for the test which fits them best, enabling your writers to work around any weaknesses and focus turning them into strengths. My writer came to me and informed me that she spent too much time creating a satisfactory introduction while writing her WPE essay. As a result, we created a timed schedule in which she could spend a majority of her time preparing a suitable introduction while still having enough time to write out the rest of her essay (See Attachment 1). The more you learn about your student writers, the more strategies and connections you can prepare that will benefit each of your writers’ individual personalities.

**Engage the Writer in Writing**

Engage the writer to write as much as possible in the Writing Center and at home. Writing will produce a practiced skill that most students do not receive outside of their English courses. Such writing practice may even lessen the anxiety felt upon taking the WPE. However, since the WPE is not an exam that many students can prepare an essay for beforehand, it would not be as beneficial for the writer to do research on the topic and write a paper that you or your writer may
not know a lot about. To save your writers time from thinking of a topic and doing research, create a mock WPE session by using sample WPE articles available in the Writing Center. These articles can be given to your writers to take home where they can time themselves in writing an essay response to the article. The essay response can then be analyzed and corrected in the following tutoring session. If given enough time, the tutoring session can also be transformed into a mock WPE exam period. The advantages of spending the period conducting a mock WPE is that you can take the exam along with your writers, as well as identify and analyze how your writers act in such a situation. These writing sessions are important to give your writers preparatory skills in writing under pressure.

**Practice Reading Aloud**

If your writers have written an essay response to an article, have them read the response aloud. Reading their own responses may help them to identify and correct mistakes that they had not noticed the first time in writing their papers. Not only will some writers pick out grammar mistakes, they may be able to correct and see their own thought processes in action when they read their papers aloud. This will then leave them to independently take control of their own papers as well as mentally prepare them to overcome any anxieties and problems that the writing process may pose for them. This strategy of having your writers read their papers aloud may help make the editing process a much easier task for your writers when they realize that they are able to pick out their own errors. This reading activity will allow your writers to own their written text and gain the confidence and control in their writing skills.

**Discuss the Elements of Failure**

There is the possibility that your writer may not pass the WPE. Writing under pressure is a skill that may not magically come to writers within a semester. This does not mean your writers or you are any less intelligent or worthy. As a matter of fact, this exam is not a reflection of your writers’ writing ability or your writers’ intelligence. Reveal to your writers that this exam only evaluates what they can get done in 2 1/2 hours. Whether or not your writers will fail the exam once or twice or even take a class to pass the WPE, your writers will eventually pass. At this time, your writers need encouragement and the confidence to not give up on writing. Express the positive out of a negative situation, explaining that even though they may have to retake the exam, they will simultaneously be improving their writing skills.

**Provide Continuous Encouragement**

Encouragement is a natural enhancer for confidence. Even though we must point out problems and concerns in writers’ work, do not forget to point out areas where the writer performed well or what the writer is strong in. Writing can be a difficult challenge, especially for those students who have not had practice in the subject or who have been told they are bad writers. This pressure to communicate is then emphasized when they are told to write within a time limit. The challenge may appear to your writers as a permanent obstacle that will keep them from graduating. Writers then need to be continuously acknowledged for not only their writing skills, but for the insightful and thoughtful comments that they write about.
A Writer’s Example of a Timed Schedule for the WPE

**Introduction** (30 - 40 min.)
--Introduction
Relevant history/background information

**Body** (1 hr. and 5 min. – 1 hr and 10 min.)
--Reason 1 stated as topic sentence
  *example (from article or from personal experience)
  *example (from article or from personal experience)
--Reason 2 stated as topic sentence
  *example (from article or from personal experience)
  *example (from article or from personal experience)
--Acknowledge that reasonable people could disagree with you
  *defend your position

**Conclusion** (15 – 20 min.)
--Conclusion/Editing

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It was a brief, but intense relationship. Then I was abandoned, without as much as a goodbye. No, I’m not talking about a one night stand, I’m talking about my writer who passed the WPE and then left me! I tutored her for several weeks, reviewing essays from her English 109 class, helping her revise them for her portfolio, giving her all the tips that I knew for taking the WPE, even encouraging her emotionally – and then came that fateful Saturday when my writer (I’ll call her Sara) took the exam and passed. I was elated, but my happiness was short-lived. What I thought would continue to be a successful and fruitful tutor/writer relationship turned out to be nothing more than a means to an end, as far as Sara saw the situation. As a tutor who invested too much of herself, I felt used and disappointed. I’d like to share my story of angst and offer support to any tutor who endures what I suffered, call it what you will: empty nest syndrome, used—“tutoritis”, or even post–WPE depression.

When I began working with Sara, as with any other writer, I had certain hopes and goals for what each of us would get out of our weekly meetings. I wanted to help Sara improve her writing as much as I could. In doing so, I could prepare her for the WPE, which was only a few weeks away when we began our tutoring sessions. I zoned in on the major problems with her writing, which could possibly keep her from passing this exam she was dreading so much. In Sara’s case, while her structure was fairly good, it was generally her grammar that had kept her from passing on previous WPE attempts. Her misuse of tenses, jumbled number agreement, and lack of articles throughout her paper would trip up even the most interpretive reader. Her instructor would return her papers with more red ink on them than there is white on rice. When she didn’t understand why a sentence had been marked as incorrect, I patiently explained to her which grammatical rule she was violating. I was happy to help her with her grammar problems because I truly wanted Sara to take the WPE with confidence and squash it like a grape. I wanted her to succeed! As tutors in the Writing Center, how can we not cheer for our writers and take pride in their accomplishments and improvements?

However, maybe Sara came to the Writing Center with a similar goal, but a different agenda. As a computer science major, Sara was working on her senior project. Having already failed the WPE twice, she was taking it for the third time. She had also previously failed English 109. As if that was not enough pressure, if Sara did not pass the WPE this third time around, she would be dropped from her senior project in which she had already invested a lot of time and work. Sara was, in a word, desperate—desperate to pass this exam by whatever means necessary. Sara may have lacked writing expertise, but this girl did not lack strategy. She came to me with a plan.

The first time I read one of Sara’s papers, not only were there grammatical problems, but the essay totally lacked structure. When I politely asked her where her thesis was she frankly told me that she didn’t have one, and she had intentionally made the paper pretty bad because she figured that if she wrote poorly at the beginning of the course, and then “improved” as she went
along, she would pass English 109 this second time around based on the progress she showed in her portfolio. While at first I was disgusted by this deceitful plot, I choked back my personal feelings and instead realized exactly how determined Sara was to pass the class and thereby pass the WPE. I looked at it from her point of view; she was a woman on a mission.

When you love to write, as we English majors generally do, it’s hard to sometimes relate to people who see writing as nothing more than a chore or even a dreaded activity. Whereas the writing center to us may seem like a safe haven of syntactical sublimity, to some students a place that is centered around writing could be as uncomfortable to them as one of Dante’s circles. And the WPE, which most of us probably breezed through, could seem as treacherous to them as a calculus exam would seem to us! Most of us probably did not think twice about taking and passing the WPE, let alone contemplate having to take it more than once. It’s difficult to put yourself into the shoes of someone like Sara, for whom passing the WPE was a huge obstacle. To help our writers the best we can, I think we have to begin to understand what it must be like for them in their shoes. As non-English majors and people who would even go so far as to say they hate writing, it must be near nightmarish to have to take a writing exam like the WPE.

Soon enough, it was that special time of the semester for the WPE to descend upon Sac State. The time had come for Sara to take the WPE for the third time, and I thought that her grammar had really improved. Once I saw a demonstration of her true structural writing capabilities, I believed that they were up to WPE par. After giving her as much advice as I could on what the WPE graders are looking for in a passing essay, an idea about how to budget the four hours she was given as an ESL student to take the exam, and some friendly, encouraging words, the time had come for the exam. Saturday morning, while I was at home eating my cereal, I thought of Sara taking the exam at that moment. As I munched away, I said a little prayer: “Please, O Divine Goddess of WPE Fate, let Sara pass the WPE and not be dropped from her senior project. If not for her sake, for mine, for I am the deserving tutor who through many tedious hours of tutoring has earned the right to see my hard work come to fruition.”

I knew that as an English 109 student, Sara would find out the results of her exam within a week or so. Sure enough, when the following Friday rolled around, in walked Sara with a smile on her face. “I passed!” she exclaimed with a sigh of relief and I breathed a sigh of relief right along with her. I gave her a high-five and asked her excitedly if she was going to keep coming to the Writing Center. I wanted to see her writing improve even more; the sky was the limit! “Sure,” she said with a smile, “See you later.” But to my sad surprise, later never came. I soon found the drop form in my box, cold and resounding as a death warrant. Sara no longer wanted any part of the Writing Center, or me, for that matter. She didn’t care about writing, she didn’t care about grammar, and she certainly didn’t care about what I thought was a pretty special tutor/writer relationship! The Writing Center was a stepping-stone for her, and sure enough, I felt stepped on.

But like someone getting over a bad breakup, I moved on. I had learned the pain of putting too much emphasis on the tutor/writer bond, and the disappointment of staking myself emotionally in their success only to later be cast aside like an old shoe. It was nice that I had cared enough to invest myself emotionally in Sara’s plight to fulfill this pesky CSU writing requirement, but I could not let myself get upset or take it personally. After all she was a

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computer science major, cold and calculating, not all sensitive and emotional like we English majors. I should have known she would desert me.

As tutors in the Writing Center, we have to care enough about our writers to give them the best help we can, but not care so much that we feel bad when they drop us. Because drop us they will, and they won’t think twice to use us for our tutoring skills. Give your writers your best, and don’t expect anything in return except the satisfaction of knowing that you helped them a little along the way. And to Sara, wherever she is out there in computer science land, I wish her congratulations on passing the WPE and getting on with her life – no hard feelings – not many, anyway.
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