The Tutoring Book

Fall 2009 Edition

By the CSUS University Writing Center Tutors
2001-2009
The Tutoring Book – Fall 2009 Edition
By the Tutors of the University Writing Center, 2001-2009

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Expectations

Signing up for this class, I had no idea what I was getting into. I didn’t know what to expect from the writers, or what they expected from me. My first impression was “How hard could this be? We are just editing other people’s papers.” I didn’t know how wrong I was. Working in the Writing Center is more than just editing papers. “The tutor’s goal is not to fix the individual paper but to help the student become a better writer” (St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors 208). When I found out that this was what we were supposed to be doing, I felt overwhelmed and afraid. How could I live up to these expectations? Would I really be able to help someone become a better writer? Was I prepared or knowledgeable enough to actually tell other writers what was wrong with their writing? As these questions buzzed around my head, I became more afraid of how to help others become better writers. The future tutors of the Writing Center do not have to worry as much as I did. I will try to help you understand some of the expectations the Writing Center and student writers will have of you and I will provide you with some tips on how to be successful tutors.

Writing Center Expectations

In the writing center, tutors are expected to behave in a proper and professional manner. However, that doesn’t mean that they cannot be friends with their tutees. Talking and getting to know the tutee can actually help understand what problems they are having and how we can help them. I especially found this helpful with a tutee who was very shy and would take all my suggestions as the only correct way of writing something. I tried to make her understand that I was only asking her some questions and getting her to think differently about certain ideas. I was not saying that what she had written was wrong. When she understood this, she started to discuss her arguments with me and I was able to help her expand her arguments.

As I said before, in the Writing Center, it is all about creating better writers. So when you are in there, don’t focus on grammatical mistakes, which are called Lower Order Concerns or LOCs, as you will learn through your class readings. This is not at all what this Writing Center is about. Focus instead on the content, organization, development, and analysis of the paper. These things are called Higher Order Concerns or HOCs. This way, the writers can learn how write better for their next paper. There will be students who come in looking to have their papers edited for grammatical errors. And most of them will have more problems in their paper than just grammatical. In those situations, try to steer the student toward those HOCs rather than just the LOCs. The way to do this is to let them know from the beginning that the Writing Center does not edit papers and will only look at the content and organizational aspects of their papers.

One thing that the Writing Center does not expect is for you to be a miracle worker. You are not expected to magically know exactly what to do and how to do it. So take it easy and try to learn as you go along. You will not see results with most of the writers after the first time or
even the 5th time you see them. But don’t lose hope. There will be writers who will show improvement eventually. For example, I had a writer who I was seeing for half an hour each week since the beginning of the semester. She told me that she failed her English 1 class twice and is taking it for the third and final time. If she did not pass this time, she will be kicked out of school. When she told me this, I was afraid and felt it will be completely my fault is she did not pass. However, halfway through the semester, she started showing some improvements and began writing clearer and more organized essays. I realized then that although to me it did not seem as though I was much help, she was learning something from me to make her a better writer. So don’t lose hope. Just wait and see, there will be some improvements in the writers, not matter how minor. As for the writer you will only see once as drop-ins, there is only so much we can do in half or even a full hour. Just try your best to help them. That is all the Writing Center asks of you.

**Writer Expectations**

The writers are going to come to the Writing Center expecting certain things. First of all, most of them will come with the expectation that this is a magical place where someone will fix their final draft two hours before it’s due! Or that someone will correct all their grammatical mistakes in a jiffy. This has happened to me a few times, and it not only stressed me out because I didn’t know what I could do to help, but it also upset some of the writers because they did not receive the kind of help they were expecting. However, tutors should not stress out if this happens. Just let them know that there is only a limited time to work on the paper, and that you might not get to all the things they might need help with. Suggest that they come earlier in their writing process and more frequently in order to gain the full benefits of the tutors. And of course, inform them that we do not edit grammatical mistakes.

Another expectation that writers might come with is the misconception that the tutors know EVERYTHING! When a tutee asks you a question and you don’t know the answer, don’t panic! Just let them know that you don’t have the answer and will work with them to find it. As stated in the *Tutoring Writing* book, “the tutor is not the teacher in knowledge, power, or experience. The tutor typically stands between teacher and writer, creating in the tutorial a collaborative atmosphere that lets students take risks they wouldn’t attempt in the more charged atmosphere of a classroom” (McAndrew and Reigstad 71). So just do the best you can to help and try to use the exceptional resources in the Writing Center. There are many things in the Writing Center that can help you better assist the writers. Don’t be afraid to seek help.

**Things that can help…**

There will always be certain situations that you will have trouble with. But for the most part, here are some things that can help. First of all, do all the readings for this class. The readings are very helpful and provide you with techniques and tips for working with writers. Secondly, don’t be afraid to admit you don’t know something. Other tutors or GACs, who have had more experience working with Tutees, are always around to help answer any questions you might have or your writers might have. You can always use the computer to look up something,
or find a book or worksheet that might help find a solution to the writer’s problem. The Writing Center website also offers many resources for Tutors as well as Tutees to use in order to gain help (http://www.csus.edu/writingcenter/). On this website, Tutors can find information about the Writing Center, writing workshops, and many other things. There are a lot of resources in the Writing Center so don’t hesitate to use them. Another thing that might help is just getting to know the person you are helping. I have found that sometimes the writers are just afraid, shy or embarrassed of what they need help with. Many times, I just started out by asking the writers about their day, what major they are in and what they like to do in order to get them to talk. By getting to know the writer, you can make them more comfortable with you. This way, they are more likely to open up about the type of things they need help with. There will be some questions that you will not be able to help students with. With things such as unclear prompts or vague comments from the professors, you will probably want to refer the student back to the teacher for some clarification. In the end, there is no right or wrong way to tutor. Just follow your instincts and have fun. You will learn a lot from this experience.
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 Melissa 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.
“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 in to 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:
Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uine rvtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are aneagrdr, 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 stil 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.”
Drop-ins Can Be Fun!

The ideal tutoring session occurs when students sign up of their own volition; schedule the appointment in advance; supply the course, department, and instructor’s name; and provide a clue as to what they want to work on during their visit. In these situations, the tutor can be completely prepared, at ease, knowing what to expect.

And then there are the drop-ins.

The majority of my tutoring experience has been with drop-ins. It goes a little something like this: the GAC walks in and says, “I have a drop-in. Are you available?” You, of course, reply in the affirmative. The GAC points them out, gives you a name, and away you go. More often than not, the papers the drop-ins hold are due that day and the drop-ins don’t have the prompt with them. Sometimes, they don’t even have a printed copy. You have to read the paper from their laptop.

Isn’t this fun?

Well, yes it is, if you like a challenging and rewarding half-hour. The students know that they have dropped out of the sky. Generally, they don’t expect miracles. Usually, they want proofreading, but often they want help understanding teacher’s comments or help organizing the paper. So, what is a tutor to do when faced with a drop in? It depends. What does your drop-in want: proofreading, understanding, or help with organization? These are the most common requests.

This article will provide some insight into these types of tutoring sessions. In the meantime, let me give you a quick list of tips on how to start a drop-in session.

1. Introduce yourself.
2. Shake hands. Many pooh-pooh this idea, but I believe that it lends an air of professionalism to the session.
3. Find out what the expectation is. I just ask, “So what do we have here today?” Usually, the student will tell you everything you need to know, but there are a couple of important questions you need answered before you can move onto their paper.
4. Which class is this for?
5. What is the prompt?
6. What is the due date, or time?
7. Which draft is this?
8. How long is the paper supposed to be?

With any luck, that took less than five minutes, because now you only have 25 minutes left to address the rest of their expectations, but don’t worry: they know they are drop-ins. They know they only have so much of your time.

Proofreading

This is the most common reason for a drop-in to the Writing Center. They just finished their paper, it is due that day, and they only want you to tell them that the paper is perfect, except for that comma splice on page 2, paragraph 3. Don't worry: these students need help and you are
their last stop on the A-train. They have complete faith in you; otherwise, they wouldn’t have shown up with only a half-hour to go.

Good will goes a long way.

Do your duty: explain the policy of the Writing Center to the student. Mention that what you are about to do is not what the Writing Center is designed to do. Tell the student that the services provided are really for brainstorming, organization, paragraph development, and such. Then, help them out.

- Read the paper. Use this as an opportunity to teach the student how to recognize their own errors.
- Give mini-lessons on the proper use of commas, semi-colons, and other punctuation.
- Talk about grammar while you explain parallel structure and the importance of matching nouns and verbs.
- Remind the student that tutors are always available to help at any point in the writing process.
- Wish the student good luck.

Generally, that is about all you have time for – if you can get that much done. Some students may demand more, but there is only so much you can do in a half-hour with someone whom you have never met. If the student becomes belligerent, you can always get a GAC involved.

Understanding Teacher Comments

In my experience, the need to discuss teacher comments is the second most common reason for dropping into the Writing Center. Predictably, the student wants a sympathetic ear, and there will be a lot of listening involved.

- Read the endnote first. This is a good practice to teach the student. Reading margin comments first can give a negative impression. See what the overall view of the teacher is.
- Ask questions about the teacher’s comments. What do you think the teacher means here? Do you feel that way?
- Notice paragraphs that are not marked. Point these out to the student, and ask why those paragraphs did so well. What did the student do right?
- Suggest visiting the teacher during office hours. This is a good practice for students. They may be intimidated. They may not realize that visiting teachers during office hours is encouraged at the college level.

Most teachers give thoughtful, thorough comments. If I don’t understand or if I question the validity of a comment, I gently mention my opinion. However, I never disparage the teacher. I don’t know what has come before this comment. In this type of tutoring session, I am a drop-in, too.
Organization

If the student is here for help with organization, it usually means that the student is open to different ideas and approaches. The trick is to figure out what approach works best for the student. There are many ways to organize thoughts, so explain them to the student. (Most of these techniques also apply to brainstorming.)

- Free write – Get the student’s head out of the paper to see where the passion lies.
- Bubbles – Place the main idea of the paper into a bubble, surrounded by bubbles with the main idea of each of the paragraphs.
- Flowchart – Put the thesis into a box at the top and put each paragraph into a box flowing from the thesis. Each paragraph must fit in a box.
- Spreadsheet – Use rows and columns to place paragraphs into the supporting topics of the thesis. This works well for papers that are more technical, and those without a thesis statement.
- Columns – Make two columns and put ideas into one or the other. The student spits out their ideas and feelings as fast as they can, while the tutor puts them into one column or the other. This works very well for compare/contrast papers.
- Numbering – Write a summary statement (not a sentence) that explains each paragraph. The student numbers each paragraph in the paper. The tutor, on a separate sheet of paper, writes down what the student says is the summary of the paragraph. See if the order makes sense. This works well for papers that are choppy or meandering.

Regardless of the reason for the drop-in, it is a fun and challenging experience that should not be missed. Good luck.
Apply What You Know: Tutoring Judgment Calls Based on Class Readings and Gut Feelings

When I first walked in the door of the writing center, I was completely nervous about tutoring. First of all, I never had experience before talking one on one with someone about their paper, second, it was my first time stepping in the writing center, and lastly, I was forgetting everything I had learned from the readings that was supposed to prepare me for all of this. I nervously moved for my first tutee; my mind completely blank. I approached her at the computer, shook her hand, and asked her what she needed help with.

The writer was very aware of what she wanted out of this session, so she explained her concerns about organization and transitioning between paragraphs. As she spoke, I struggled with what would be the best method from the readings that would help her most. However, as I read her paper, explaining to her what worked and didn’t work turned out much more successful and less time consuming than going through my internal database for methods that I wasn’t familiar with. It was from this experience that I realized that I don’t always have to apply what the class gives me to use.

Finding the Balance

The articles and texts that you read in class act as a guide for when you have nothing left. Tutoring should be as natural as conversing with the tutee and telling him or her how you feel about the paper and what needs to be improved. What a tutee needs help in can be simply shown by explanation and pointing out the specific parts of the paper that needs improvement. On the other hand, more complicated help is where knowledge from the class readings would be most useful.

Although some of your classmates will think the best way to tutor is to converse with the tutee, sometimes just talking can be too much information and the tutee may be overwhelmed by it all. Trying to explain everything all the time also leaves the tutee out of the conversation and listening the whole time may cause the student to become confused. Conversely, using the strategies and methods mentioned in class can be time-consuming and too complicated depending on how immense a problem in the tutee’s paper could be. A balance between explanation and methods from the class readings is the best way to utilize our knowledge and give the tutee the full advantage of our time. Making those judgment calls will surely pay off when your tutees leaves the session feeling confident from having a competent tutor who has a lot to offer. Otherwise, a tutor who is hesitant and indecisive of how to help the tutee would make the tutee feel like the session was a waste of time.

Trial and Error

At first, our judgment calls won’t come as quickly. Sometimes you just have to experiment with what could work. Even if nothing works to help the tutee, no time is wasted. While the tutee wasn’t able to get much out of the session with you, the tutee is going back to working on the paper with many strategies and thoughts in mind to consider upon revision.
These different strategies will give the tutee many perspectives on how the paper can be changed. If anything you do doesn’t work out, keep moving. As I mentioned previously, not giving anything for the tutee to work with makes him or her feel that the session was a waste of time. Keep trying different things and continue that shift between what you think you should do and what the class readings can offer.

I had a tutee that was very defensive about her paper. Although the paper didn’t need a thesis (a paper on why she should be accepted into a program), I felt there needed to be a common theme that strung the paper along. From what I read, the paper seemed like a random collection of events and explanations and the tutee took this to offense and began to explain her reasoning for each point in her paper. Instead of trying to argue, I told the tutee to outline the main points of her paper to me (usually good for helping tutees with transitions). When she did this for me, she realized how dissimilar each point. When she asked how to fix that, I suggested better transitions. After a couple of minutes of trying different transitions, I thought the problem laid with her purpose for her paper, so I engaged the tutee in conversation on what she wanted her audience to get out of her narrative. She said she wanted to let her audience know that she was ready to take risks. We looked back in her paper and realized that she talks about taking risks a lot. I told her that if she connected her points with taking risks, the paper would have a stronger hold on the audience. The tutee left the session confident in her understanding of what she needed to do.

By trying different things, I was able to help my tutee see my point of view rather than engaging into pointless argument on what I thought about her paper. Since I was also aware of my tutee’s attitude, I was able to redirect her focus on getting mad at me to focusing on the help that she needed. Although some of methods worked and others didn’t (or took too long to work), I made the judgment call to move on to something different while still tackling the issue. Sometimes when working on one problem for the paper, you discover solutions for other problems.

Read Your Tutee

As I explained above, I was able to identify the kind of attitude that my tutee had. Based on the background that the paper was for the tutee’s application into a program and that this application was due later in the week, I made the assumption that this tutee was already frustrated with the paper and would only get irritated if I said anything bad about her paper. From this awareness, I made sure to check back on her body language as I explained my comments on her paper. With this method of “reading the tutee” plus using trial and error, I was able to give this tutee a successful session.

Remember, the session is for the tutee and if you use the session against the tutee where you think you’re helping, it would only push him or her to the brink of paper burnout. Read your tutee and try to understand what the tutee is going through. You will get many kinds of writers with different feelings about their writing. As a tutor, you should be able to use your social skills to break through to the tutee to get them out of his or her self-consciousness and into a productive writing process. Encourage the tutee to reach out beyond what they think or feel.

Although Tutoring Writing suggests strongly against cheerleading, it is based on the idea that we’d be giving the tutee “false praise”. However, sometimes cheerleading is what some of our tutees need. When I think of cheerleading, I think of using phrases such as “Do your best!” or “There is a lot of work to do, but I believe you can pull through”. You can even throw in an
advertisement for the writing center: “This will be a good paper. A little more help from a few more sessions here at the writing center and you’ll be on your way to an A paper!” Okay, so maybe that is a little manipulative, but cheerleading doesn’t have to be bad as long as you encourage the tutee to do his or her best.

A Few Pieces of Advice

The more you know, the better. If you’re just like me where your mind blanks at the crucial moment, have no fear. In the beginning weeks of the semester, all the information you gain is overwhelming, but don’t give in to that feeling. As the semester progresses, review what you’ve learned and contemplate on what you’ve experienced. Take it in at your pace and as you get more comfortable with the knowledge you’ve been gaining, everything that you learn in class will come to you as naturally as conversation with the tutee.

The best session includes collaboration with the tutee. Never leave the tutee out of his or her own writing process. The more knowledge you gain in helping the tutee, the more you can play with and mold into the best help for all of your tutees.

Enjoy the time you have at the writing center. There will be good times and bad times there, but the staff and your fellow interns will be the best support system to get you through it all. Make friends with those people and don’t ever regret taking this class.

Have a great semester and good luck!
The Collaborative Advantage

If you are about to embark upon your first experience as a tutor, then, in all likelihood, you are filled with apprehension regarding your ability to perform in such a role. This was the primary concern in my class because the vast majority of us were experiencing similar levels of self-doubt. As an undergraduate participating in the Tutoring Internship course, I felt that even more pressure was placed on me to adequately fulfill my obligations as a new tutor at the Writing Center. I devoured the texts on research and application of various tutoring methods during the first two weeks of class, but I was left with a host of unanswered questions. What I quickly realized after I actually began tutoring, however, is that interns are thrown right into the mix with student writers because we need to actually do the activity in order to fully understand it. Through the practice of tutoring, I also came to terms with the fact that I am not required to be an expert. The good news: If you are comfortable with writing and sincerely want to help writers improve – you are ready to start tutoring! The bad news: As tutors, we have a lot to learn about assisting students with academic discourse and that process, much like writing itself, is never-ending. This brief article will address the advantages that tutors should be aware of, and capitalize on, in order to advance the mission of the CSUS Writing Center to promote academic scholarship through collaborative learning.

Building a Relationship with Student Writers

One of the greatest assets of the Writing Center is that it provides student writers with an individualized approach to learning academic discourse. Tutors can be more effective by taking into consideration the diverse cultural and academic backgrounds of students at the university who are utilizing the Writing Center. Both tutor and tutee are active in determining, and negotiating, what issues will be addressed during each session, which is an important distinction between tutoring versus teaching methods. As we relate to a writer, and work with him or her on a one-on-one basis, we can quickly assess the situation and tailor our tutoring strategy to match that student’s specific needs. The Writing Center allows students to voice their concerns, receive personalized feedback and relate with others as their skill sets continue to grow. By relating to one another as individuals first, I found the tutorial sessions to be incredibly productive and a learning experience for all parties involved. As a tutor outside of a standard classroom, I am able to act as an intermediary authority, or peer advisor, building relationships with students that enable them to achieve the next level of success in their academic writing. Developing a positive rapport with student writers also encourages them to openly share their thoughts and written work.

Providing Support as a Peer Advisor

The Writing Center also offers a comfortable forum for writers to gain further knowledge about the writing process. Many students harbor inhibitions about expressing their ideas in a written context and could benefit from an alternative space where academic discourse can be addressed in a more relaxed fashion. The Writing Center is a place where a little encouragement
can go a long way. Student writers using these services may have been negatively sanctioned in the past, which can lead to a false association between writing and personal weakness. As tutors, we can assist writers in overcoming these obstacles, even after years of being told that they are “wrong,” through an alternate approach to academic learning, free of grading rubrics or biased standards. Through my experience working the Writing Center this semester, I found that tutoring sessions offer unique opportunities for students to collaborate with tutors, improving as academic writers in an open, non-judgmental setting.

The Benefits of Working Together

Student writers improve more rapidly when participating in active discussion sessions and collaborative learning. Academic discourse can be an intimidating pursuit for many students, which can lead to avoiding their writing assignments instead of taking on the challenge by themselves. Interactive learning activities, such as peer tutoring sessions, can offset this anxiety by removing the daunting task of grappling with academic writing in isolation. If the tutor does not know the answer to the tutee’s question – they will find it together. The Writing Center offers a comfortable space for tutees to make inquiries without worry of embarrassment or not meeting an authority’s expectations. While working at the Writing Center, I discovered that many student writers simply need positive reinforcement, or reassurance, as they take their first steps towards developing an argument on paper. Once the process is initiated, I found that the majority of student writers take off on their own, requiring minimal guidance after they overcome the first hurdle. By interacting with students throughout the drafting process, they become more adept at critically analyzing their own work. They gain confidence, and begin to self-edit issues in their papers, such as: formality of language, clarity, organization, and proper supporting evidence.

Reality Check

Most students come into the Writing Center to become better writers. Most. Those who have worked as tutors, however, can attest to the fact that, occasionally, a case will arise where an individual is unwilling to put forth personal effort. Though tutoring is a collaborative process, it is imperative that the agency, and subsequent writing choices, remain with the student. Tutees must come to the Writing Center with a willingness to try in order to reap benefits from the process. By communicating the policies of the Writing Center, and the reasoning behind them, we can persuade many students to take responsibility for their own writing and engage in constructive interaction. However, if you encounter students who are indignant towards your position and simply want you to write their paper, please do not be discouraged. As tutors, we are sometimes placed in the middle of a multitude of opposing forces. For instance, our position can be challenging to navigate when the university, the professors, the students and the Writing Center all have a different set of expectations. If in doubt, remember to follow the general guidelines set by the Writing Center and try not to internalize anyone’s dissatisfaction with the Writing Center policies as a personal insult, or failure on your part to perform as an effective tutor.
Throw Yourself to the Writers

Fortunately, the majority of your tutoring experiences will be enriching and boost your confidence as you to continue to assist others in their academic careers. If I haven’t abused enough catchphrases at this point, let me add another, which sums up one of the most important points I came away with this semester. The Writing Center’s core motto, in my opinion, can be described as: *practice makes progress* – not perfection. During tutorial sessions, the tutors as well as the tutees are growing from the collaborative learning experience taking place. Since the strength lies in the interaction between two willing participants with a common goal, most proficient writers are already well-equipped to begin tutoring as a peer advisor at the Writing Center. So, go ahead. Dive-in, and don’t let the worrying get to you. I realized quickly after beginning to work at the Writing Center that collaborative tutorial sessions are a rewarding team effort to look forward to – not to fear. The more you actively engage with student writers as they improve within an academic context, the more your ability to assist other writers with diverse needs will increase as well. I encourage you to look forward to the experience ahead and to enjoy the endless process as it unfolds.
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 the Risky Business of Text Appropriation

My semester working in the writing center has been filled with numerous and often surprising experiences that have enabled me to critically self reflect on my own abilities as a writing center tutor. Besides learning to listen to the tutee more, and talking less, attempts (not always successful) at putting theory into practice, and trying to explain grammar rules I don’t always understand, I have noted the challenge of not appropriating the tutee’s text as one of the most significant and ongoing issues a tutor can face particularly while tutoring during the constraints of a thirty- minute or drop-in session. In an effort to maximize the time working with your tutee, it is all too easy to commandeer a student’s text by making overreaching recommendations about the paper’s organization, over editing mechanical errors, or suggesting a more prescriptive way to re-word a particular sentence. Finding a balance between making suggestions on ways in which the tutee can strengthen their paper must be moderated with a collaborative dialogue that emphasizes the process of writing and learning over the product the student is creating.

How do we as tutors, particularly new tutors with little to no experience mentoring avoid appropriating a student’s paper during the constraints of a short tutoring session, difficult student writing assignments, or during the tutee’s last push of revising for portfolio deadlines? Some potential answers can be found with a multi-faceted approach that utilizes aspects from theories on problem posing, group collaboration, minimalist tutoring, and reading out loud, supplemented with my own experiences of avoiding the trap of appropriating a text during a session. By being aware of the signs of potential text appropriation coupled with critical self reflection, tutors can better prepare themselves to ensure that the student writer remains the primary agent in the tutoring session.

Signs of text appropriation:

During my semester of tutoring, I began to notice specific signs that would often lead to a session where I started to slip into text appropriation. Often, such sessions would begin with a lack of focus, where I had failed to ask the student to be very specific about what they wanted to work on that day. In the case of large papers and a short half hour session, it became obvious that I would often take over a student’s text when I tried to tackle the paper as a whole in an effort to cover as much of the paper as possible within the limited time constraints. This type of situation often led me to dominate the session verbally, making overreaching suggestions on as many issues as I could find in an effort to help the student “fix” their paper. Other instances that led to taking over agency of a text began with a student’s persistent urging to simply have their text edited, or their sentence structure analyzed. In circumstances like these, I found myself in a situation where I was asked to be an editor, and no interaction between me and the tutee was occurring because I was asked only to make grammatical corrections throughout the student’s paper. In all of these cases, a similar pattern seemed to emerge: the lack of a student determined and student led focus for that tutoring session that centered on important aspects of writing such as organization, structure, or creating a strong thesis statement.
Starting off a session: Problem-Posing and the rewards of open ended questions:

In order to combat a session that could easily slip into tutor led decision making, I suggest beginning each session with some problem posing questions. Problem-posing is a method developed by the theorist Paolo Freire that enables a teacher to ask open ended questions of their students using who, what, when, where, why, and how as the starting point to the question. This type of open ended questioning becomes a means of enabling the student to learn through creating their own answers through active problem solving and critical analysis. In an effort to create a more liberated classroom, Freire created a space where students and teachers actively taught and learned from one another, utilizing problem-posing as dialogue. This theoretical approach is an excellent way to begin a session because it allows the student to answer your question through analysis and problem solving, and as the tutor, you are engaging in learning how the tutee forms arguments or supports their thesis because problem posing questions require them to answer more that yes or no.

I found that beginning a session with a series of problem posing questions enabled the tutee to determine what they were most concerned about in their writing. Problem-posing questions can help to avoid yes and no answers by asking, “What specifically would you like to work on today and why?” By asking the tutee to decide what to address during that session and why it is important to them, you as the tutor are helping the tutee to understand that they possess a sense of power, agency, and responsibility for the tutoring session. In cases when there is limited time and a long paper to tackle, I suggest asking the tutee to pick one or two paragraphs to focus on instead of tackling the entire paper. In cases such as a drop-in session, where I have never worked with the tutee before, I might suggest that we look at their opening paragraph, thesis statement, and their first full supporting paragraph for that particular session. By limiting the focus of the session to a workable portion of the paper, there will be fewer enticements on the tutor’s part to take over and revise or edit for breadth. In a session where the student decides to focus on their thesis statement and only one to two paragraphs I would problem pose with them asking, “Where is your thesis statement located in this passage” or “How could you re-state this thesis in order to make it more clear?” Questions like these open up the conversation, enabling the tutee to begin explaining their ideas as a means of exploring their own writing.

A Multi-faceted approach: Minimalsim, Reading Out Loud, and Collaboration:

Jeff Brooks discusses several potential scenarios in his essay on minimalist styles of tutoring, ultimately advocating a hands-off approach to tutoring. In his essay, “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work” Brooks argues that, “the tutor should take on a secondary role, serving mainly to keep the student focused on his own writing” (169). Brook’s style of minimalist tutoring advocates informing the student writer about ways to improve themselves as writers, and not simply improving the product or text. While Brooks advocates an overly extreme level of minimalist tutoring, his focus on the process of writing and not the product or text is an important and necessary goal for tutors to embrace. I found in my sessions that embracing Brook’s style to a less stringent degree did prove helpful during many of my tutoring sessions. One way in which I accomplished a level of minimalism was to make a conscious effort to listen more and talk less. I would begin with a problem posing question such as, “What do you mean by this statement?” or “How can you expand your thesis statement so that it is more specific?” After asking, I forced myself to sit back and just listen, both allowing
and in some respects forcing the student to talk out the answer to the question. If I felt the need to prod the student to explain further, I would limit myself to asking another leading question such as, “What do you think this thesis statement suggests you will be covering later in your paper?” Another approach to minimalist tutoring I have utilized is to ask the tutee to free-write for a few moments as a means of developing their thoughts on a specific aspect of their writing. In a case where I feel a student would benefit best from quiet exploration into an aspect of their paper, I have suggested they take a short period of time, only 2-3 minutes to do some exploratory writing, giving them space and a bit of privacy by excusing myself for that period of time. Although free-writing is a tool that teachers often utilize in a classroom situation, it is also a method that can be used in the tutoring session as a way for struggling students to generate some beginning thoughts and ideas of their own.

Reading out loud is another way in which a tutor can foster a sense of ownership in their tutees. I admit that in many cases asking a student to read their paper out loud can be awkward at best. However, explaining to the tutee that hearing their paper read out loud enables them to both maintain ownership of their text while allowing them to hear their own language style, conventions, and voice often succeeds in encouraging them to engage in the process. Reading theorist Cathy Block argues for a metacognitive view of reader theory, “where the reader, in engaging in reading out loud also engages in controlling the text by making continuous predictions about what will occur next, based on information obtained earlier, prior knowledge, and conclusions obtained within the previous stages” (73). In listening to their paper being read out loud, the tutee can engage in generating their own series of questions about their text, questions they would not necessarily ask had they not read their paper out loud.

If the student is extremely resistant to reading his or her paper out loud, you as the tutor should engage in this portion of the session. However, reading the entire paper start to finish often becomes overwhelming. I suggest that you tackle 2-3 paragraphs at a time, taking care to stop occasionally to give feedback about what you have been reading. Tackling a few paragraphs at a time also gives both of you a great deal of more perspective about the paper as a whole. Reading out loud engages both you and the tutee in a conversation about their text, while offering the student a chance to talk openly about their paper.

Collaboration becomes the trickiest aspect of tutoring. By this I mean collaborating together in a way that does not entail you as tutor talking the entire session, or making overreaching suggestions about the student’s text. Over the past semester I have worked with several students who seemed to have no problem speaking about their ideas fluently and eloquently during a session. However, the moment I suggested that they write down what they had just said, the student was unable to do so. I used a method of what I will call collaborative dictation where I would write as close as possible word for word what the student was saying during the tutoring session. In order to begin this process I would ask an open ended question and encourage the student to talk until they had nothing else to say, writing down all of their ideas word for word. I would also write the question at the top of my dictation notes so that the student would have a frame of reference when they went back to their notes and began writing. This method enabled students to orally “talk it out” and explain their ideas to me. By writing down their ideas for them using this dictation style students can compare their oral “words” to the written words of their draft as a starting point for revising their text. If this collaborative dictation method is used during a brainstorming session, the student has the beginnings of an outline that is written in their own words and expresses their own ideas.
All of these methods are useful approaches to helping a student create a text that is completely their own. Before you start that next tutoring session remind yourself that the ultimate goal of the session is to help create better writers by enabling them to make their own decisions about the tutoring session and their writing assignments. Start the session by giving the tutee the power to decide what they want to work on. Keep the session focused on the writer’s goals by asking them problem posing questions about their writing. Listen and wait to hear what the tutee says before you talk. Engage in reading out loud as a way for tutees to hear their own voice, and take notes on what the tutee is saying. With regular critical reflection after each tutoring session, you will be an active tutoring partner who collaborates, not appropriates.

Works Cited:

Heteroglossia: The Voice of Angry Tutees

As tutors, you will encounter a diverse student population, a variety of discourses, and a wide range of skill levels which you begin to, let’s say, deconstruct as soon as you meet your tutee. Your tutees are like vibrant living texts filled with emotions, ambitions, goals, strengths, weaknesses, fears, joys, successes, failures, and so on. The amount of time you spend with your tutee is limited and so you, by way of dialogue, quickly scan through your “vibrant texts” and then offer writing strategies and practices you have learned—with great joy. You revel in delight for you believe, know, and trust that the writing activities will help “to produce better writers, not better writing.” However, this delightful objective becomes most challenging when you find yourself face to face with a resistant, frustrated, and insolent tutee. Then, you silently ponder, smile and nod with utmost encouragement, while he or she derides you with rolling eyes, and you ask yourself, shall I close this vibrant text or toss it out the window! Don’t lose heart. In this brief essay, I will provide you with not one but two school’s of thought for you to examine which will, hopefully, enable you to reflect and question, as I have, on what is the best action or approach to take when confronted with angry tutees.

Angry tutees are resistant, frustrated, and easily perturbed individuals. Please rest assured that there are experienced experts (Ruth Mirtz and Lauren Ethridge) who wish to make known:

- You don't have to put up with abusive language or behavior.
- Tell the student you're willing to make an appointment to talk to her later (ideally the next day, no later), but that you need to leave (in our tutors sessions, he or she needs to leave) now. Don't let angry students get you angry. Raising your voice, stomping off, or refusing to listen only makes the situation worse.
- Again, I want to reiterate do NOT raise your voice, stomp your feet, ignore your tutee, hold your breath, or make voodoo dolls. Rather, I offer two words that have worked for me so far—Feng-Shui. In other words, if the situation allows, just flow with it.

THE INCIDENT in the contact zone

For example, I had a “drop-in” who walked in abruptly, she thump her backpack on the table, did not offer any eye contact, her brow was contracted, lips snarled, stoic eyes searched for her folder, slammed her (marked up) wrinkled draft on the table, looked at her watch, and with a deep sigh, low tone, and tight mouth, said, “I only have 15 minutes.” I paused thinking her head would spin at any moment. I introduced myself and responded, “You must be very bright to limit yourself to 15 minutes; I’ll see what I can do to help you because I want you to succeed… So, what part of your draft is causing you the greatest concern?” She looked at me quite puzzled and said with animation and disdain, “I don’t know, that’s why I’m here.” I smiled. She smirked. I said, with sincerity, “I can go through the introduction, please read your thesis statement out loud.” I saw her jaw tighten and she rambled: “I failed English 1A twice, I’ve been to 5 different tutors and no one can help me, (I listened intently), my teacher says I have too many nuances and I don’t know what the hell that is, (she kept shaking her head her voice became more agitated) I
don’t get it! I don’t know how YOU PEOPLE (said with emphasis) expect me to write…” I listened quietly as she continued to vent. She kept looking at her watch but would not look at me. I responded, “I see you’re frustrated and the time constraints you’ve given yourself only add to your frustration. First of all, please come back when you have more time, schedule a one hour appointment to meet with a tutor for the next 6 weeks. Second, everyone at this university has a responsibility, your instructors have the responsibility to teach, you have the responsibility to learn by participating; I have the responsibility to tutor and you have the responsibility to learn and apply the writing strategies you’ve learned to all your writing assignments including English.” I added, “We have to work together. So read your introduction out loud and point out your thesis statement.” She picked up her paper with great protest, “I can’t, you read it.” I responded with a smile, “I’d love to.” I began reading her introduction and found numerous grammatical and sentence structure errors that prevented coherence and, most importantly, understanding. I had to reread fragmented sentences and dependent clauses that caused me to falter. I looked at her and asked, “What emphasis are you making in these two sentences?” She retorted, “If you wouldn’t stumble all over my words, it would make sense!” (Sudden silence fell upon the room and the other tutor tried to ignore the scene). I calmly said, “Look at me (and for the first time, she looked at me) I’m here to help you just like the other 5 tutors before me. Trust me if you make an hour appointment for the next 6 weeks and follow the exercises given, I guarantee you will succeed— on the contrary, if you choose to continue resisting those who are trying to help you, then, this (slowly putting the paper down) will be the best you have allowed yourself to accomplish… you and only you have the power to become a better writer.” She remained silent yet her staunch bitter appearance became somewhat diffused, she stared at me and firmly said, “That’s how I talk. I write how I talk…” I assured her, “There’s nothing wrong with the way you talk, it’s called ‘informal’ conversation, the kind of conversation that I and everyone else uses outside of academic writing; however, in a university setting we use what is called ‘academic discourse/language.” She looked at me as if she had never heard of such a thing. She handed me her paper and pointing said, “This is my thesis.” I smiled and said, “Great, let’s work on this together and when you get home please revise your paper to support your thesis.” Her barrier came down an inch that evening. I asked her a series of “problem-posing” questions as we read over her introduction (Who is your audience? How can you connect these thoughts? What is your main point here? What could someone say to contradict that thought? ). She not only polished her thesis but she generated a rough outline before she left. She stayed a total of 46 minutes. However, it took approximately 30 minutes for this student to finally loosen the reigns on her anger, resentment, or whatever emotional baggage she was carrying. Only then, was she able to focus and interact in a positive and effective manner.

When I began writing this paper, I felt I could end this story at this point. I felt a great success in helping this student reduce her affective filter enough for her to formulate an effective thesis and outline. I had completed a four page narration depicting life in the writing center and a happy ending to a taunting situation. What more could one want? Self-reflection—critical self-reflection. Tutors are constantly attempting to decode and deconstruct problem tutees and maybe it’s time to deconstruct our own praxis. Could I have handled this situation differently? Let’s analyze.

THE INITIAL APPROACH through eagle eyes:

My words,
“I’ll see what I can do to help you because I want you to succeed…”

What did I just tell this tutee? I am superior, you are inferior. I am helpful, you are helpless; I am successful, you are a failure” I, unawares, started our session through a current traditional lens hoping to “acculturate” the writer’s text. I refuse to believe I would ever practice an essentialist “hegemonic pedagogical imperative that academic discourses are universal and empowering” (81) yet, as you have read, I did. Additionally, by telling the tutee to just “following the exercises given, I guarantee you will succeed,” adds to the myth of meritocracy (Grimm 34). Moreover, my goal was to abandon “positions of innocence” associated with literacy myths by empowering and motivating the tutee to perform. Still, I reflect, why do I now feel I had somehow failed this student? As I read and reread my dialogue, I also underlined, “only you have the power to become a better writer”— which I consider a naturally helpful comment innocent of all implication for the sake of preparing this tutee for the world. However, what about the cultural and psychological aspect? I may have burdened the tutee to think, “If I am unable to write effectively, it’s my fault, I don’t have the knowledge (or capability) to become a better writer” and then give up! What else could I have said to help this tutee take ownership of her work? Did I just dominate the tutee with what Paulo Freire calls, “cultural invasion” (95), the act of basically subjugating the tutee, the student, the other. I uphold Freire’s philosophy and am a firm believer in liberation through problem posing so that the student/tutee may develop a “critical consciousness.” Did I submit to the hegemonic pedagogy for the sake of subliminally maintaining the status quo that Grimm speaks of? (31). Did I show empathy towards the tutee’s situation or was I blinded by her unpleasant demeanor and therefore shift into dominate mode in order to overpower?

THE SECOND APPROACH through serpent eyes:

Grimm tells us that “judgment calls not only on logic and objectivity but also on empathy and imagination. Judgment involves movement between evidence and reflection, Self and Other, individual and collective, past and future” (78)—did I reflect on the evidence before me and pass judgment based on empathy, logic, and objectivity? It was not until the tutee stressed, “That’s how I talk. I write how I talk” that I finally realized her defensive comment was a moment of truth for her. She was offended. Her character, her culture, her being was attacked repeatedly and I became one of “Them.” In a matter of seconds, I realized her voice had been repressed. I developed an empathy I never thought was possible when I first saw her “thump her backpack on the table.” It had become quite evident that literacy practices are not natural but cultural—which means we must develop an understanding of our tutee's culture in order to avoid the "cultural conflict" I experienced in this session. There is a natural cultural resistance at hand. In order for literary acquisition to take place, my tutee, though not multilingual or a member of the dominant group, must change her speech pattern through the process of "denaturalization" which may take several years (Grimm 34); Therefore, her ability to write effectively may take more than a few semesters of tutoring and English course work. Hence, my guarantee, “You will succeed” in six weeks was made in vain. Similar to Grimm's tutee, "we might think that students like Rebecca are resistant to suggestions or else unwilling to work hard enough to succeed.” (36). Tutors who disregard culture are completely unaware of the social conflict behind the scenes and (as you are now aware after reading this incident) learning becomes adversarial rather than collaborative.

My approach moved from the hegemonic pedagogical imperative or what is called the dominant culture of common sense (Grimm 33) to a social epistemic approach based on Freire’s
problem-posing philosophy. Bawarshi tells us that literacy is embedded in social practices which confirms Freire’s assertion that, “without dialogue there is no communication and without communication there can be no true education’ (93). The point I am making is that social practices involve dialogue and only through dialogue, I was able to convince the tutee that, “There’s nothing wrong with the way you talk.” I shifted the focus away for the tutee and “onto an artifact of academic literacy”—her draft/writing prompt (Grimm 32) and I want to hear her voice, her concerns, her challenges—and end her incessant cry for help.

I again turn to Grimm’s Good Intentions and recall Bakhtin’s “Heteroglossia”— “There is little reason to suppress any voice. Rather, with each new vocabulary or form of expression, one appropriates the world in a different way, sensing aspects of existence in one that are hidden or absent in another, opening capacities for relatedness in one modality that are otherwise hindered.” (22) In retrospect, there is no doubt that this tutee’s voice had been suppressed and the opportunities hindered now manifest in her resistance and obvious frustrated demeanor, “I’ve been to 5 different tutors and no one can help me.” She may have been slighted by other educators/tutors just as I initially did. When I told the tutee that informal language is used by everyone outside of academia and does not signify one’s lack of intelligence, she, in turn, relaxed and handed me her paper. In other words, I pointedly advised her that she is not stupid. Body language speaks volumes. I felt her resistance subside, I said, “Let’s work together…” There was no coercion, no domination, only an equitable interaction and discussion which will hopefully lead to a development of critical consciousness. Through this experience I had learned that one can judge logically, objectively, with empathy and creativity—resulting in the freedom to, I must repeat, open “capacities for relatedness in one modality that are otherwise hindered.”

CONCLUDING REMARKS maintaining a double perspective:

As you have read, the critical self-reflection I painstakingly endured had not only challenged my tutoring style, when faced with angry tutees, but changed my initial perspective. My subconscious could not rest until I unpacked the tacit expectations we tutors innocently propose. I confronted great discomfort, uncertain empathy, and a need to voice the assessment of my dialogue only to find that Eagleton is correct—"The literacy myth has naturalized our social structure 'rendering any alternative to it unthinkable' (38). The more one critically self-reflects the more the unthinkable becomes thinkable and the double perspective looms vibrantly that one can not deny “the conflicts between the desire of ‘wanting in’ with the anger at being ‘kept out’ (Grimm 51)—such is the lot of the angry tutee. It is only now, at this point in typing these last words, that I understand what Anzaldua means “to at once see through serpent and eagle eyes” (78)—I leave you to critically reflect and allow yourself to be challenged by her words.
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 gives 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.
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!
Empowering the Student Writer

In her article, “A Cultural Studies Agenda for Writing Centers,” Marilyn Cooper dispels the notion of student writers “owning” their writing. “Students know that they don’t own their texts only too well, and tutors know it too,” she says, pointing out that “students in writing classes are offered and can exercise little or no control over such things as the topic or genre of their papers, and the style or resister of language in their papers” (59). In order to get good grades, students comply with the perceived demands of their teachers, and “respond—quite rationally—by trying to make the papers match as perfectly as possible the specifications of assignments while at the same time—quite irrationally—trying to believe that in doing this students are asserting ownership over their texts and learning to write.” Cooper prefers terms like “agency” or “subject position,” rather than “ownership,” to define the relationship between the student writer and academic writing, stating that “selves (or, as we learned to call them, subject positions) are constantly in the process of construction and that one of the activities that contributes most to the construction of subject position is language use (including writing)” and that “writers cannot and do not achieve agency in writing by subduing language to their selves but rather by using language to construct subject positions” (58). In many ways, Cooper is defining a writing persona that has learned to establish itself through the manipulation of language. As we know, learning academic writing is as much a matter of adapting to the expectations of the university as it is in developing our writing skills. As many students adapt, they often learn to write in a manner that responds more to their instructors’ demands rather than to those of their inner voice. Even the most autonomous academic writers may suppress an inner or “home” voice. Concerned about student writers who allow the demands of academia to completely stifle autonomy, I will discuss some ways in which we can help students achieve or maintain agency in their writing.

Facilitative versus Directive Approach

The primary way to help students maintain agency is to be facilitative, rather than directive, in our feedback. A directive approach is one where the tutor tells students what they need to change in order to make the text conform to an ideal text in the tutor’s mind. Conversely, a facilitative approach is one where the tutor provides feedback that encourages students to come up with their own ideas. As C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon (in an article aimed specifically at teaching but easily applied to tutoring) explain,

In directive commentary, the teacher says or implies, “Don’t do it your way; do it this way.” In facilitative commentary, the teacher says or implies, “Here’s what your choices have caused me to think you’re saying—if my response differs from your intent, how can you help me to see what you mean?” The essential difference—as is so often the case in the teaching alternatives we have been discussing—lies more in attitude and outlook than in perceivable changes of technique. (307)

This second approach shifts the responsibility back to the writer. Facilitative commentary tells the student how a reader is likely to receive the message and then lets the student figure out how
to revise the writing so that it conveys the intended message. The facilitative approach is more
difficult than the directive. It is relatively easy to tell a student where a paper can be improved
and how to improve it; it is much more difficult to ask questions in a way that encourages
students to revise their writing. Rather than simply pointing out areas that can be improved, a
tutor might phrase comments in the following ways:

- “Can you think of another way of saying that?”
- “I think I know what you mean here. I am wondering if you can add to this or restate it in
  order to clarify it.”
- “I get a little lost in this spot. Can you add some detail that will help me make the
  connection?”

In the last two examples, you state your reaction as a reader while handing the responsibility
back to the writer to make the intent more clear.

There is no single approach to tutoring for all occasions. In many instances, tutoring
means switching back and forth between facilitative and directive modes. Sometimes a more
directive approach is appropriate. In the later drafts of a paper, for instance, when the paper is
relatively clear and organized and contains adequate supporting detail, working on LOCs might
be the next logical step. A more directive approach might also be called for when working with
multilingual students struggling with English grammar and usage. Even in both of these cases it
may still be appropriate to make changes for the first couple of “ungrammatical” constructions
and then underline the remaining, leaving it up to the writer to come up with the “corrections.”
Regardless of the circumstances, I try to be as facilitative as possible—especially when it comes
to content and unclear writing. It is the students’ writing; only they know what they are trying to
say or what they want to say. And sometimes they are not yet sure of what they want to say.
Even if I think I know what the student is trying to say, I do not know for sure. The best way to
facilitate the writing is to give the tutee the space to figure out his or her thoughts.

**Counteracting Questionable Practices**

As Cooper notes, academia itself can inhibit a student’s authentic voice. I find that some
of my biggest frustrations in tutoring come not from the students but rather from their instructors.
Knowingly or unknowingly, many instructors stifle their students’ voices and, subsequently,
their learning and growth through an oppressive form of teaching. Many instructors still
approach teaching in what Knoblauch and Brannon refer to as the “classic teacher-student
relationship,” “defined in authoritarian terms, master and apprentice, knower and learner, talker
and listener” (298). In these cases, it is the instructor who holds the power, no matter how faulty
the teaching methods, and it is the student who suffers. Some of the ways instructors oppress
their students is through poor writing assignments and through ineffective commentary on
student papers. Besides designing ambiguous writing prompts that can steer the writer into
directions not intended by the teacher, many instructors—including some in the English
Department—provide vague, and sometimes negative feedback on student papers. Many papers
come back to the student with perhaps a single comment, such as “good” or “awkward,” next to
a passage, if even that; others contain only a check mark at the top of the first page and nothing
else. General remarks, such as “good,” “unclear,” “wordy,” or “vague” provide minimal help. In
fact, they can be confusing. I have seen students cross out perfectly clear statements, while
leaving murky ones untouched, just because the instructor wrote “unclear” next to the wrong
line.
As much as American students are known for their boldness and their ability to approach professors, many—including graduate students—are still too intimidated to ask for clarification on assignments or grading. How can we help empower students in such cases? Cooper, seeing “relatively autonomous spaces” in even the tightest of writing assignments, offers a solution: “If tutors want to help students develop agency in writing, they need to cast themselves as radical intellectuals who help students find and negotiate these spaces. Such tutors cannot . . . simply help students operate within the existing context without trying to change it” (59). My concern here is not so much in “negotiating” “autonomous spaces,” but in helping students and tutors “operate” “within the existing context” while at the same time resisting practices that subvert student growth and success. And here is where the problem often lies. Tutees do not always know that an assignment is ambiguous, commentary destructive or unhelpful. They often think the problem has to do with their inability to write or to understand assignments. The first step, then, is awareness—on our part and on the student’s. We can begin to empower students by showing them problems with assignments. After reading an ambiguous essay prompt, I will first ask the student if he or she has any notes on the assignment, whether the teacher went over the assignment, and whether the student talked with the teacher. If the student is at a loss, I may offer my interpretation of the assignment, stressing that it is at best a guess. This shows the tutee that the assignment is ambiguous to at least to one other reader, and an experienced one at that. Simply showing students that an assignment is ambiguous can instill the confidence necessary to approach a teacher for clarification. If enough students approach teachers for clarification, the conscientious instructors, at least, may seek to make their assignments more clear. In the interim, by taking a more active role in their own situations, by querying instructors on writing assignments, student writers can become better agents and advocates for themselves.

As tutors, we are discouraged from criticizing teachers, and rightfully so. While it is never advisable to criticize a teacher, it is okay to critique practices that are highly questionable. I believe that, as service workers whose duty it is to help students succeed, we are ethically bound to point out to students unfair or insufficient commentary from instructors. In being fair to both student and teacher, I try to be understated or subtle in my own commentary. If a paper is filled with negative commentary, for instance, I will tell the student that the comments “are a little negative.” I had a student whose teacher wrote nearly two pages of negative commentary at the end of his paper, without offering a single positive comment and ending with “I don’t think you are putting in any effort.” I calmly told the student that the commentary was “a little negative and personal.” How does such feedback from the tutor help? It provides perspective, helping tutees see that negative commentary is often undeserved and, more to the point, unproductive.

**Voice: Talking and Reading Aloud**

Tutoring does not mean that tutor and tutee are always working on a paper in front of them. I have had some very productive sessions where the tutees simply talked out their ideas and strategies. Such conversational sessions provide an opportunity for tutees to establish agency. They express ideas and plans for their papers as I listen and prompt them with comments or questions, often taking dictation for them. In talking out their ideas, they become fellow writers. Often students will comment at the end of such sessions that they are able to express their thoughts more articulately when they talk. Such a comment came from a tutee at the end of an especially satisfying session. At the beginning of the session, after he mentioned that he had ADHD, I quickly discovered that he had profound ideas about his subject. Furthermore, he had a
logical progression planned for the paper and most of the supporting details already figured out. Tending to get lost in mid-sentence, he could not get the plan or the writing down on paper. I had him talk out his ideas as I drafted an outline. The fascinating thing about the encounter was that the ideas and the planning were completely his. I did not have to facilitate his writing; instead, my role was to keep him on track. He maintained agency over his writing throughout the session.

    Reading aloud also helps tutees establish agency. There are many good reasons to encourage tutees to read their papers aloud. First of all, reading aloud gives them something to do during the session, keeping them actively involved. Second, they often catch their own mistakes, the differences between what they meant to write and what they actually wrote. When they read aloud, often tutees will stumble over unclear passages, realizing that what they wrote does not quite make sense. In such instances they often correct their usage and clarify their thoughts as they go. Those who do not consciously catch their mistakes (such as a missing article, a verb in the wrong tense, etc.) will often substitute in the correct word during the reading, providing me the opportunity to show them where they substituted the standard construction in place of what they actually wrote. The other thing I like about having students read aloud is that they get accustomed to hearing their voices. This is, after all, one of our goals—empowering writers to develop and exercise their autonomous voices.

Conclusion

    These suggestions are probably not what Cooper means by helping students to negotiate the system in order to establish agency in their writing. They are, however, simple, basic approaches we can take to provide a foundation for agency. Refusing to hijack students’ writing, we can do some of our own negotiating of the system, supporting the education of writers, while doing what we can to change unfair and oppressive practices. They are small steps, but that is how one often starts off.

Works Cited


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 impedance 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 of 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.
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.

A few weeks later, she got the grade back. In a journal entry of mine from October 15, 2007, I wrote:

1 Student’s name has been changed.
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.
The Man Killed the Bear,
Or
Taking the Comma Splice to the Mat

Two factors often constrain the practice of tutoring in the writing center: the limited duration of the tutoring session, and the frequently recurring writing problems confronted by the tutor. The question of duration, typically thirty to sixty minutes, often on a drop-in basis, limits the scope of any session. Given the time required to greet the tutee, establish a rudimentary rapport, understand the writing assignment, and read the student’s draft, it is obvious that the tutor must ration the remaining time carefully. The question of repeated problem spaces concerns a rather short and predictable list of sentence-level impediments to clear writing tutors often encounter. This list may include, among other things, problems with sentence and paragraph boundaries, word choice, verb tense, and punctuation. That these error patterns are common suggests an opportunity to develop a series of common mini-lessons designed to address these issues, and to keep these handy for quick deployment. This sort of catalog boilerplate lessons has the advantage of optimizing limited tutoring time while also providing the tutor reliably effective responses without demanding that the tutor reinvent the wheel for each session.

Before proceeding to describe two such mini-lessons in detail, it is worth addressing some of the possible objections to boilerplating in general by remembering that no single solution is ever appropriate to all individual circumstances. No one would suggest using a butter knife to tighten a bolt; even a good tool will ruin a project if misapplied. In the same way, a quick and easy grammatical lesson is of no use to a writer whose greater concerns involve rhetorical progression, or research. Nevertheless, when the student’s problem is spreading butter, a butter knife is indeed the right tool.

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All fiction boils down to this: “The man killed the bear.” This simple, declarative sentence says it all. It has conflict, tension, and heroic struggle against the forces of nature, all in five words, two of them articles. In fact, one might say all writing in English boils down to this too: subject, verb, and object. The sentence is silly; it is ridiculous, even outrageous. Because of these qualities, it serves as a reliable foundation on which to base almost any mini-lesson in grammar one might need to deliver. Here is how I use it.

I have the student write out the sentence in big block letters in the center of a clean sheet of paper. I then have them underline and label the subject, the verb, and the object. For students who do not know the terminology, go ahead and tell them; “banking” theories aside, somebody needs to explain this stuff. I then explain how every complete sentence must have at least the first two of these elements, and usually has all three in one form or another. This is an important step, because soon we are going to go bear hunting through the student’s essay, and it will be important to recognize bears in the wild. The ridiculous subject matter of the sentence provides an opportunity to have some fun with the process, turning what could be dull and abstract into something light and non-threatening.
Once the student has located a few bears in his or her essay, we look for a few hunters (“Where’s the man in your sentence?”). Often, the way in is to have the student identify the central verb. At this point, it makes sense to explain how even complex sentences build upon this simple structure. Have the student modify the phrase “the man” to “the tall man,” and then “the tall man with brown eyes,” and then “the tall man with brown eyes that glisten in the moonlight.” The point with this exercise is to demonstrate how to avoid confusing the function of the verb *glisten* with the function of the verb *killed*. The student can extend the exercise by embellishing the verb, and finally by embellishing the object. Have the student begin looking at his or her own sentences structurally, that is, grammatically without the burden of calling it grammar. In short order, students can pick out the various elements on their own, and most have fun doing it.

What if the grammatical problem under consideration is something slightly more sophisticated, like comma usage with prepositional phrases? No problem. Start the lesson as before, but append prepositional phrases to the sentence, like “On the mountainside, the man killed the bear.” Notice how this allows the tutor to combine a discussion of comma usage with a discussion of the importance of word order: shuffle the prepositional phrase to the end of the sentence and see the difference it makes to its meaning. And what about the pernicious comma splice? Still no problem. Add a second sentence: “Dinner was served,” and go from there.

The strategy is to simplify the problem to the point of the absurd, thereby demystifying it and making the experience memorable. If this seems obvious to the tutor, or oversimplified to the sophisticated writer, consider instead the student who struggles with sentence fragments, subject-verb agreement (the man kill the bear), or article usage (*a* bear vs. *the* bear). The strength of the mini-lesson is its portability, flexibility, and its absurdity. Between these three qualities, students are likely to remember what they might otherwise forget.

A word of caution is in order. It is important not to come across as condescending or patronizing when working in this light-hearted mode. Humor is one thing, arrogance and imperiousness another. A friendly smile and a conspiratorial “let’s have some fun with this” brings the student in on the joke.

This is not to ignore higher order concerns, either. Mini-lesson number two simplifies another common obstacle for beginning writers. We have all seen student drafts in which the student uses high-sounding words without understanding their definitions, convoluted prepositional phrases standing in for sentences, or verbs so vague that the writer’s intent simply fails to germinate. It is true that some students whose compositional reach seems to exceed their grasp are demonstrating a transitional stage of writing development that marks the shift from conversational writing to academic discourse. Such a transitional stage is analogous to a child who mispronounces the word *thumb* as *fumm*. No one would suggest that a parent encourage the continued mispronunciation beyond a certain stage of development. It is often by pressing beyond one’s comfortable limits that one learns the most.

However, the impediment to clear writing in many cases is a student’s erroneous belief that academic writing must be complicated writing. With this erroneous belief in mind, conscientious students reach for words beyond their grasp and heap them together in sequences meant to mimic what they have read in their textbooks, usually without having first fully considered what it is they mean to say about their topic.
The tutor’s task in this case is to de-mystify writing, and to shift the student’s goal from “academic writing” to “clear writing.” Here is a good way to pare the process down to its basic, portable elements. As we have learned, writing is a process of pre-writing, drafting, and revising. Explain this to a beginning writer, and the eyes glaze over. Instead, start by having the student ask him or herself, “What am I trying to say?” This may take some coaching; often students are unclear about what they want to say about a topic. For example, one student responding to this question simply repeated detail after detail from her research, but had the most difficult time drawing the particulars in front of her into a summary statement. The tutor’s best response in this case, like a broken record, is, “Yes, I see. And what do you want to say about that?” Once the student can articulate what he or she is trying to say in a simple, concrete sentence, the proper response is “Oh! Write that down!” It can be surprising how suddenly a light goes on when the student realizes that sound writing does not require dressing simple thoughts in “smart” but convoluted prose. Given permission to say what they mean, students often feel liberated, and writing becomes less fearsome.

The question I get from students most often at this point is, “You mean that’s all there is to it?” Well, not exactly. Have the student write this down, word for word:

1. What am I trying to say?
2. Whatever the answer is, write that down
3. Does this really say what I mean?

This, I explain, is the secret to writing: think about what you want to say, and then say that. But, I add, remember that step three is the point where writers double-check their work to ensure that what they said agrees with what they meant to say. If it does not agree, tweak the sentence until it does. At this point in the mini-lesson, I have the student interrogate his or her sentence and ask if it really says what he or she means. The phrasing of this question is important: “Good. Does this accurately express the idea you want your reader to come away with?” Phrased this way, the emphasis is on the student’s idea, and at the same time asks the student to consider the intended reader. Usually the student’s first attempt at saying what he or she means is close, but not quite right, so we loop back to the first step and revise until what the student has written on the page matches the student’s idea. Tutors and other mature writers can think of this as pre-writing, drafting, and revising, but the beginning writer can better concretize the process without the distracting lingo. It is probably easier, and certainly more memorable, for the tutee to think of this process as “lather, rinse, repeat.”

Speaking of lingo, if you look at your tutee and see a glazed mute swarmed by angry bees, it could be a sign of too much emphasis on jargon, collaborative social contact zones, or student-centered problematizing. A little humor and silliness often takes the sting out and still gets the message across. What I am trying to say is the next time a student comes to the writing center with a paper the main problem of which is basic grammar, consider bear hunting as a solution.
Is Sharing Really Caring?: Some Thoughts to Consider Before You Share Your Point of View with the Student Writer

I believe that I would be hard-pressed to find a tutor who would argue in favor of silencing student voices, but there are many factors that can cause even the best intentioned of us to slip in the all-too-comfortable modernist role of knowledge-bearer. The limits of what can reasonably be accomplished in a thirty-minute tutoring session, our empathy for the student and our desire to help them obtain the grade or pass the class, and our belief that we can enlighten the gullible and the ignorant can cause us to want to spell it all out for the student and, under the guise of being helpful, take too much control and appropriate the student’s text. I hope that the discussion that follows of the possible consequences of giving too much information to the student will help you in your own efforts to develop a tutoring style that respects and develops the student’s own unique point of view.

Nine times out of ten, I resist the urge to share my point of view with the student. And while some tutors feel that this approach poses a barrier to collaboration, my opinion is that even if we do our best to create a true peer-to-peer relationship between equals, oftentimes the reality is that we have much more experience thinking through the types of issues with which students are being presented, and the fact that we might be able to articulate our ideas more clearly might lead our tutees to conform to our point of view without being afforded the opportunity to fully consider all of the options available to them.

And while this might not be as much of a concern for more confident and assertive students, putting all of our cards on the table might lead to a different problem. Knowing that some political issues are quite emotionally-charged and differences of opinion can lead to labeling (bleeding-heart liberals vs. greedy, corrupt conservatives, for example), full disclosure could lead to the perception that the tutor is judging the student or unable to help them because of their ideological differences. Imagine, for example, if Nancy Grimm’s student writer, Joe, the son of the mink farmers, were to encounter a tutor who was active with the PETA organization. Think about how his knowledge of this ideological difference might inhibit his ability to express his own ideas and strain the tutor-tutee relationship.

Consider as well that providing your own analysis of the situation to the student might cause him or her to become reliant on your opinions and prevent them from learning to trust their own instincts and judgment. Once we begin to take the floor away from the student, it can become all too easy to begin to dominate the conversation. As a result, the student may not have as much opportunity to learn to formulate their own ideas and it may prevent them from developing the critical thinking skills that they will need to tackle not only future assignments, but also the issues that will inevitably arise after they leave the university. Meg Woolbright’s discussion of the well-meaning but ineffective feminist tutor provides an excellent example of the problems associated with giving a pre-packaged interpretation to the student because we believe that we have a better grasp of the issue and we want them to “get it.” By doing the interpretive work for the student, the tutor is showcasing her abilities rather than helping the student to develop her own and thereby “preventing any sort of intellectual tension that could lead to cognitive growth” (Woolbright 75).
Of course, there are plenty of students who are fully capable of a mature and rational exchange of ideas without feeling pressure to conform, and if you feel this is the case with the student with whom you are working, I would encourage you to openly and honestly engage with them. After all, this type of dialogue is fundamental to education and growth. I only ask that you first try to recall your own preparedness for such conversation when you first started college, or imagine what your response might be if you were working from the position of second language learner, or from a culture that values assonance over dissonance, and consider that not all students will be equally up to the task of “collaborative” debate.

What’s most important, in my opinion, is to avoid proselytizing and remember that student writers come to us looking for help in developing and articulating their ideas. And while it’s true that sometimes these ideas are latent and we must work to coax them out, we should not interpret their ambivalence to mean that they are empty vessels waiting to be filled with our knowledge. Keep in mind that a variety of factors, including personality type, confidence level, and culture, can affect the degree to which students will readily open up and share their points of view. Some students truly might not yet know where they stand on an issue, while others might be quite clear in their conviction but too shy or unsure of themselves to come right out and speak their minds. In either case, my recommendation is to resist the temptation to provide simple answers to the student and focus instead on opening up a discussion that will help to elicit their point of view. This can be as easy as expressing interest in the prompt and asking a general question such as, “Wow, that’s really interesting. What do you think about that?” Sometimes, students just need to be assured that they have a receptive audience and that you value what they have to say, and a general question might be all that they need to open up. Other times, the student might need some more focused questions to help them explore the issue.

I recently had some success with this strategy with a student who needed help brainstorming a paper on whether professors should fail more students. She believed that they should, but did not know how to develop or structure her argument. I asked her to think about the benefits of failing more students, and she believed that it would lead to a more productive classroom for the successful students. Then I asked her what would happen to the students who were failed, and she responded that they would be motivated to try harder. So, I asked her how to resolve the issue of the students who were trying hard but who weren’t catching on as quickly as the others. This question caused her a moment of pause, so I stepped away for a few minutes to allow her to consider the question and write a response. When I returned, she shared with me that she thought that these students should be made aware of other resources that were available to help with their success, such as learning skills classes and tutoring services. At this point, she still felt unsure as to how to structure her paper, so I asked her to make a list of the reasons she believed the professors might be reluctant to fail their students. Again, I stepped away to allow her to think and write for a few minutes, and when I returned this time, she had a pretty lengthy list of arguments that challenged her point of view. And though her opinion remained unchanged, she had a better understanding of the complexity of her topic and a number of perspectives from which to structure and organize her paper.

You might notice that most of the questions that I asked the student contested her point of view, and you might infer from this that I had a hidden agenda of trying to persuade her to change her mind. However, the tone of the discussion, my encouragement of her ideas, and my explanation that the purpose of the questions was to strengthen her argument by giving her counter points to balance her paper and juxtapose her position, made it clear that my goal was to
add depth to her argument and help her to see the variety of possibilities available for her to consider when structuring her paper.

Some might feel that I wasn’t doing enough to help the student understand the many social factors that contribute to the failure of some students while ensuring the success of others, and perhaps I could have done a better job of bringing this issue to light. Perhaps I could have asked whether she thought that some students’ backgrounds and upbringing put them in a better position to achieve success. Perhaps, a more direct question like this would have caused the student to reconsider her position. Perhaps not. Perhaps this student comes from a challenged background and has found herself to be quite successful in academia nonetheless. In the end, I don’t feel that my session with the student was any less productive, for my goal is not to recruit or convert anyone to my way of thinking. I feel that I gave the student ample perspectives from which to consider the question and develop her paper, and I think that given the half hour that we had together, that that is a pretty significant accomplishment for both of us. Perhaps if we continued to work on this paper for multiple sessions, we could have delved deeper into the issue, and in the end, who knows if her position would have changed? Either way, I think it’s okay. It is too easy to assume that our point of view is so correct and natural that we need only expose others our way of thinking and they will necessarily adopt a like mind. But the truth is that different students view the world in many different ways, and if we choose to align ourselves with a postmodern pedagogy that “requires us to stand outside our own worldview long enough to understand other ways of making meaning in the world” (Grimm 46), then we must respect the student’s right to understand it from a modernist perspective.
When I reflect back on the beginning of this semester before we actually began tutoring, I recall being incredibly nervous about tutoring. I was specifically afraid that I didn’t know enough about writing to be able to tutor graduate students. I was also concerned with tutoring these graduate students from other disciplines. So, you can imagine how scared I was when I realized that one of my first regularly scheduled tutees (we’ll call her K) was a graduate student in Social Science and was writing her thesis in Public Policy & Administration. I thought that I did not know enough about writing in the social sciences, especially for someone writing a thesis, to be able to offer any help to this tutee. But, as I reflect on the process of tutoring K I realize that this was my favorite experience in the writing center. As a result, I have compiled information that proved invaluable when working with graduate students.

**Tutoring Graduate Students**

Get to know the tutee, identify what they expect the outcome of the tutoring session will be…

For each initial tutoring session with a new tutee I focus on getting to know the tutee. According to The St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors, “Educational theorists tell us that interpersonal relationships are exceptionally important because they provide a context for interactive learning” (Murphy and Sherwood 8-9). I don’t have a formal list of questions, but I ask them questions about their major, classes they are taking, any present and future writing assignments they are already aware, etc. I also ask the new tutee questions about how they feel about their writing in general and how they would define their own writing process. If the tutee is a drop-in then there isn’t the time for this type of conversation, but I still ask questions about the particular assignment that has prompted them to come to the writing center.

I also establish what the tutee thinks they need help on. For graduate students this is incredibly important since they generally come to the writing center with something already written and will have a good sense of what they need help on. In the case K, she had already written her initial proposal for her thesis, otherwise known as a prospectus, and came to our first session with the complete first draft of her thesis. In the first session I learned about her major and the two classes she was taking for this semester as well as what types of writing assignments she expected to work on throughout the semester. She knew that she expected to bring a new chapter of her thesis for the each of the first four weeks, and after that she would bring the introduction and conclusion chapters of her thesis.

Prepare for each session and take detailed notes…

This tip doesn’t apply to drop-in tutees, but for regularly scheduled sessions it is important to prepare for the session beforehand. In the case of graduate students, this is imperative because they often come with lengthy writing assignments and time becomes a factor. I recommend taking notes at the beginning of each session about what the tutee has brought with them and what they need help on. At the end of each session I recommend jotting down as much information as possible, including the goals the tutee has made with regards to the work they will...
do prior to the next session, and then reviewing these notes before the next session. According to Murphy and Sherwood, “Tutor and student seek an overview that brings the strategic insights of the tutorial into focus and clarifies what work still remains to be done” (20). Also, when tutoring K I often found that I would need to look up information regarding APA formatting. My notes reminded me to do this before K arrived which allowed us to maximize the time in our session. Finally, knowing what a thesis in a particular discipline looks like is imperative. Completed theses can be found in our library and a quick review of the structure, organization and sources used in these theses will ensure preparation for tutoring the graduate student.

Manage time and set goals at the beginning and end of each session…

In addition to being prepared for each regularly scheduled tutoring session it is important to establish goals and to prioritize the work the tutee would like to accomplish during each session. In the case of K, she often brought 15-30 pages of writing to each one hour session. This required us to immediately prioritize the areas of focus at the start of each session. For example, if K wanted to focus on formatting, organization and content of her writing I would ask her which was the most important. By setting a specific goal we could move to the next area of focus if there was time still remaining in our session after the first item was completed, and it also allowed us to keep track of what she still needed to work on in the next session. With this said, it is important to be realistic about the work that can be completed in a tutoring session. According to Doyle Online Writing Lab, “You probably only want to tackle one chapter per session” (“Tutoring Thesis Students”). I ended each session with a recap of what we had done and then we would set goals for the next session.

Ask open-ended questions (the Socratic method)…

I felt incredibly intimidated when I first met K. I had not written a paper for a Social Science class in over ten years. Also, K’s thesis was on the evaluation of an environmental conservation program which was an area I knew hardly anything about. Instead of worrying about what I didn’t know I used the opportunity to learn as much as I could about the area and subject. According to Stephen M. North in his article “The Idea of a Writing Center”, “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, and knows how to talk about writing too” (39). Keeping this advice in mind, I asked K many questions at the beginning of each session and would ask questions throughout the session. For example, I would ask K about the specific chapter we would be working on. I would ask her to summarize the ideas of the chapter, specify the target audience, and explain any theory used in the chapter. These questions helped K improve her writing because oftentimes she knew what she wanted to say but didn’t know how to say it. Our conversations would help her find a better way to approach the writing and organization of her thesis. I realized that as a tutor K wasn’t coming to me for help in her content, she wanted help with her writing, which was an area I knew a lot about.

Use a collaborative approach…

In addition to asking questions I realized that collaboration is the key to any tutoring session. With the case of K she had more knowledge than me in what she was writing, but I had more knowledge than her in how to write. Through collaboration we were able to maximize the
use of both of our abilities. In her article “Collaboration in the Writing Center, Andrea Lunsford states, “Collaboration aids in problem finding as well as problem solving” (49). This proved to be the case with K. Through collaboration, K recognized issues in her writing and together we were able to discuss the problem which would lead K to a resolution. I always start with the tutee reading their writing aloud, but after a couple of sessions I noticed that sometimes K would read and sometimes I would read. We would both sit with the writing between us and we both sat with pens in hand, ready to annotate K’s writing. Sometimes K would make changes we discussed, and at other times I would record what K was telling me. Another example of collaboration was when K had completed her thesis and needed to ensure that the formatting had been done correctly. We both sat with APA handbooks and shared the challenge of formatting this large document. Through collaboration we were able to complete this task in one session. Sure, K could have looked up this information by herself, but my knowledge of how to use style handbooks, and by this time of her thesis, allowed us to finish a task in a much shorter period of time.

Be confident…

Even though I was very nervous at first I never let K see this. I was confident in my abilities as a writer and also knew that I wasn’t afraid to ask questions if there was something I didn’t understand with regards to the content of K’s writing. I began to look forward to each tutoring session because I knew that we would work together to help K accomplish her goals. In addition, I learned something new at each session, which was intellectually stimulating.

Works Cited


Many students who seek help with their writing from writing center tutors are those who have been labeled as remedial writers and who are struggling through remedial writing classes. In “Remedial Writing Courses: A Critique and a Proposal,” Mike Rose explores the nature of remedial writing courses. He determines that remedial writers are asked to engage in writing that focuses on personal writing rather than academic writing, they are asked to attempt error-free papers, they focus on style over substance, they are taught composition independently of reading and thinking, and if they are asked to produce academic writing, they do so independently of any examples. The classroom sketched by Rose seems to be one that has been simplified, or “dumbed down”, in an attempt to help remedial writers gain confidence in their writing so they can eventually move to mainstream writing classes. However, the intent of remedial writing classes may not align with the results. The results of remedial writing classes can be the perpetuation of “social and educational inequalities” (Cooper 65). As stated by Rose, “the very nature of many remedial writing courses contributes to institutional insularity, to second-class citizenship and fragmented education, to a limiting of students’ abilities to grow toward intellectual autonomy” (126).

If Rose’s statement about remedial writing courses is true, if such courses grant remedial writers second-class citizenship within the academy, can writing center tutors have any success helping such writers, can they, in Rose’s words, help remedial writers “grow toward intellectual autonomy” (126)? I believe they can. The first step to helping struggling writers is to stop labeling them as “remedial”. The term “remedial” is insulting and implies that struggling writers are deficient in some way. Therefore, for the remainder of this paper, I will refer to struggling writers as “underrepresented” rather than “remedial”. “Underrepresented” writers are those whose home discourse is something other than Standard American English and who are subsequently underrepresented in the academy. Below are more ways tutors can help underrepresented writers succeed in their writing courses and beyond.

1) Value the writer and their writing

Underrepresented writers should not be treated as second-class citizens. They are people who have made the effort to join the academy and for some reason have not been able to write to academic standards. Writing center tutors are in a unique position in relation to underrepresented writers. They have the opportunity to value the writer as a person rather than devaluing them because of their underrepresented writer label. Writing center tutors also have the opportunity to value an underrepresented writer’s writing because of the peer relationship that exists between tutor and writer. Tutors are not responsible for evaluating and grading the texts produced by underrepresented writers, so they can appreciate the intent behind the writing rather than criticizing the actual writing they encounter. Tutors can help boost an underrepresented writer’s confidence by treating him or her as a member of
the academy whose writing has worth and makes a contribution to the academic conversation, which in turn can help make him or her a stronger writer.

2) Discuss the inequalities and hierarchies that exist in education and develop a plan of action

Underrepresented writers may feel discouraged, angry, or taken advantage of as a result of their placement in an underrepresented writing course. Their feelings are natural, but such feelings could lead to defiance and poor effort on writing tasks, which will not help the writer advance out of the underrepresented writing course. A writing center tutor can help an underrepresented writer come to terms with his or her feelings by acknowledging the inequalities and hierarchies that inform placement exams and discussing those with the writer. Once an underrepresented writer has come to terms with his or her feelings, he or she can work with the tutor on a method for approaching writing tasks. The tutor should explore all the available options with the writer and support the writer in his or her decision of how to approach his or her writing tasks.

3) Discuss audience awareness

Underrepresented writers may experience writer’s block due to actual or perceived criticism of their writing. For them, audience awareness may be two types: traditional audience awareness, where a writer keeps in mind who they are writing for and critical audience awareness, where a writer feels that they may be writing for a hostile or critical audience. Traditional audience awareness is a relatively easy concept to live with; writers think about who will be reading their text and how that reader will expect their writing to look. Critical audience awareness can be much harder on a writer. With critical audience awareness, a writer has to come to terms with the fact that his or her readers may be hostile to him or her and his or her writing. As a result of critical audience awareness, a writer may want to work against the grain of writing assignments as a way to vent his or her frustration, he or she may want to learn how to write to the teacher to make their stay in an underrepresented writing course as painless as possible, or he or she may simply want to use the tutoring session as a place to vent. If it seems that a writer is having trouble with audience awareness, the tutor should discuss audience with that writer and help him or her decide how to approach writing assignments.

4) Be prepared for teacher comments

Some teachers who work with underrepresented writers make many comments on drafts of papers that are returned to those writers. The teachers who make lots of comments may feel that their comments will help the writer to become a stronger writer, when in actuality, the exact opposite may occur. Writers who struggle with their writing, as many underrepresented writers do, may actually develop an inability to write as a result of excessive comments. As a tutor, the most helpful thing one can do is to be aware that some teachers will make lots of comments and to be prepared to
help the writer work through those comments. Reassure the writer that the comments do not mean that he or she is stupid or that he or she can’t learn to write. Encourage the writer to see the comments as his or her teacher’s way of trying to help him or her become a stronger writer. Read the paper and the comments and help the writer make sense of how to apply those to his or her paper. Then, if necessary, work through the paper line by line and help the writer develop a plan for writing another draft. If another draft is not possible, help the writer develop a plan for utilizing the comments on a future writing assignment.

5) Encourage academic reading

If Mike Rose is correct and underrepresented writers write in an atmosphere devoid of academic reading, their writing may be improved by engaging in academic reading. Suggesting extra reading to a student who already has a full workload may be met with amusement or scorn, but some underrepresented writers may welcome examples of good academic writing to help them improve their own writing. Be aware of where to find examples of good writing that can help writers with their own writing assignments.

6) Encourage the writer to keep writing

Placement in underrepresented writing courses may stifle any inherent desire a student has to write. Writing center tutors should encourage the writer to keep writing and remind them that not all of their writing experiences will be similar to those encountered in an underrepresented writing course.

All writers who come to the writing center feel that they need help with their writing. Some writers may want help with lower-order concerns (grammar, spelling) while some may need help with higher-order concerns (focus, organization) as well. Any writer who comes to the writing center can benefit from the suggestions above, but underrepresented writers may benefit from them in particular because they may help the writer feel that his or her writing and his or her thoughts are valuable. Any writer can feel that his or her writing is inadequate, but underrepresented writers may feel so more than their mainstream counterparts. By utilizing the above suggestions, a writing center tutor may help an underrepresented writer overcome his or her difficulties with writing and may help him or her to actually enjoy the writing process.

Works Cited


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--characteristics [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.
Tutoring the Student Not the LD

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 psychological; moreover, the Learning Disabilities Act of 1968 defines them as “a disorder in one or more of the basic physiological 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.
Tutoring Multicultural Students

As a native English speaker with limited travel experience, Tutoring ESL students can be a daunting task. As a tutor, particularly at the beginning of the semester, you don’t know what to expect from them, both academically and personally, and you don’t know what they expect from you. Based on articles read in class, you are worried that you not only will not have the answers to their questions, but that you will somehow mortally offend them in the process, ignorant as you are of cultural expectations and mannerisms. There is a lot of emphasis placed on the fact that different cultures learn differently; that your tutees might be unfamiliar with American academic writing styles, with linear argumentation and with the need to support an argument at all, let alone grammar and vocabulary issues that any one that took a second language in high school knows are bound to occur. So what do you do when you get your first ESL student? Sit stiff and erect, formal and off putting? How much do you assume about their knowledge base? How do you avoid making them feel stupid by explaining things they already know, while helping them to the utmost by figuring out what it is they don’t?

The article “Cultural Conflicts in the Writing Center: Expectations and Assumptions of ESL Students” by Muriel Harris can be considered a five minute how-to guide on tutoring ESL students. She focuses on cultural differences and how they might foster misunderstanding between tutor and tutee. In a survey she conducted about student expectations, she claims that South American students feel that “the tutor should ‘help and encourage students to keep it up’” and be “someone who encourages the students to improve their work.” (210). On the other hand, “the Asian students all responded that the tutor’s job is correcting errors, showing mistakes, and ‘giving clear understanding,’ not providing motivation or encouragement” (210). She also warns us that “finding their own answers rather than being told what the answer is or what they must learn can be a new process” (211), and that “as tutors, we have to suppress any discomfort with ESL students who seem to want us to tell them how to fix their papers” (211).

I contend, though, that these are not merely cultural expectations, but have to do with other factors, including things like the tutee’s major and (gasp) individual personality. For example, this semester I have tutored several business majors that were native English speakers, and the response I got the most from them to problem-posing questions about what they liked and disliked about their papers were “I don’t know, I thought you would tell me what was wrong with it so I can fix it.” To me, that sounds suspiciously like the ‘typical’ Asian student response on what a tutorial should be. I think that as English majors, we spend so much time sitting in circles contemplating the meanings of things that are indefinable that we fail to realize, as tutors, that other disciplines are far more direct, like history, math, engineering or business. These are students that are used to finding the ‘right’ answer, and have difficulty in realizing that sometimes it is not so much about what is right as what feels right. On the other hand, I have found that science and social science majors are far more used to investigation and discovery, simply based on the type of studies that they do, and thus are more open to probing for answers rather than being told how to do things. Of course, we cannot discount personality differences in this discussion – some people are just far more willing to collaborate and discuss, while others prefer a more direct approach. This is true cross culturally, and should not be taken for granted either way based on someone’s skin color or country of origin.
Harris also helpfully includes some advice for tutors, straight from the mouths of ESL students. She said that one student pleaded with us to “please do not laugh at what you see. [ESL students] already have had a feeling that their writing is not good” (214). I fail to see how this is exclusive to ESL students – no one would be in the writing center if they didn’t already have a feeling that they needed some help, and to laugh would not only be downright rude, but would be unproductive. Another student, uncomfortable with compliments, claimed that “if I am look nice in my new coat, I very much wonder if my tutor is mean I am not look nice before” (217). Again, anyone that has gotten a “oh, don’t you look nice without your glasses on!” or “wow, that makes you look really skinny!” knows exactly how this tutee is feeling. Who can claim that self-confidence (or the lack thereof) is cultural? Harris provides us with a handy list of don’ts as well: “showing impatience with students who don’t know answers or who catch on slowly, covering too much material in too short a time, looking down on students, speaking too quickly, using slang, approaching students as if they don’t know English at all, [and] displaying uneasiness,” among other things. This is good advice that should be applied to all tutees. Your native English speakers can tell just as well if you are getting frustrated with them, if you look down on them, or if you think they are dumb, and I guarantee you that they will not appreciate it either.

There are several examples that I could share on tutoring ESL students on a regular basis, but I think that the ESL drop-in is an even scarier prospect. Drop-ins can be daunting in general – people that you know nothing about, usually with papers due sometime within the next 24 hours, expecting you to be their one stop fix-it shop. Add the complications of a language barrier and it’s enough to make a tutor want to call in sick. One night I was tutoring late in the library, desperately looking forward to going home after a long day of work and school. An Indian student came in as a drop-in at 7:30 looking for help with a book report that was due the next day. She was extremely formal and wanted no chit-chat. She had work to do, and was not looking to make friends. After a quick read through, I realized that her ideas were succinct and clear, and she had been given an outline by her teacher for how to organize the paper, so that was not an issue. Her grammar, however, needed some help. So we began going through the paper, line by line, she questioning word choices while I pointed out some of her more common grammar mistakes, trying to get her to see them herself as we went further into the belly of her paper. By 9:00 p.m., I was an hour past my scheduled tutoring time and she was exhausted. At this point, we were both “drinking coffee [with our] feet up on the table” (217), laughing (perhaps from delirium), making jokes, and answering personal questions as she began to ask me about myself, about being an English major, and why I was a tutor.

Okay, now take a deep breath. Before you have an anxiety attack, let me assure you – it’s not as hard as it sounds. Here is what I have learned about ESL students in the writing center; they are here because they want to be. They are often embarrassed by their lack of ease with the language and they want to improve, not only for their classes but for future job prospects, and they don’t expect you to know everything. They are NOT stupid, or lazy, or unintelligent, though some may wrongly assume so due to their difficulties in learning English (if you were dumb enough to take French, like me, then you know the feeling). Learning a second language is hard, and the intricacies and paradoxes of English do not make it any easier. While it is important as a tutor to keep our cultural differences which could affect our thought process and writing style in the back of our minds to foster maximum understanding, I think that it is equally important to remember that we are all individuals. They are not robots programmed by their culture to think of you in a certain way or have certain expectations, no more so than we
are. Yes, they will see the world through a different lense than you – that is the beauty of multiculturalism, that it allows us so many different, sometimes opposing but often engaging points of view. However, as Americans, we know how much of the world views us – loud, obnoxious, arrogant, and fat – and as much as we hate those stereotypes, I find it rather silly of us to see someone else through a strictly cultural point of view.
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
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.
Contrastive rhetoric, pioneered by Kaplan in the 60’s, was one of the most holistic approaches for working with second language writing during the time. Contrastive rhetoric examines the differences in modes of writing between cultures. Perhaps the most beneficial result of Kaplan’s exploration of contrastive rhetoric is found in the hearts of sympathetic readers like tutors and teachers in the academy. But before we can become sympathetic readers, we must become aware of what makes writing different from one culture to the next. If you were born and educated solely in the States like me, you may be oblivious to the vast differences in writing styles across the world. Understanding some of these differences may help you identify others in your ESL tutee’s writing. You might find yourself doing a little contrastive analysis with your multilingual writers. Hopefully, and most importantly, you might begin to understand the challenges that multilingual writers face when attempting to compose written text in a language and culture wildly different from their own, opening an ocean of knowledge and creative tools to use when working with the wonderfully diverse population of writers who frequent the University Writing Center. Below, three ESL writer/tutors share their experience and expertise.

**Worldview: the Continent, Asia and a Testimony from India**

Nicolle Scrogins

Contrastive rhetoric, pioneered by Kaplan in the 60’s, was one of the most holistic approaches for working with second language writing during the time. Contrastive rhetoric examines the differences in modes of writing between cultures. Perhaps the most beneficial result of Kaplan’s exploration of contrastive rhetoric is found in the hearts of sympathetic readers like tutors and teachers in the academy. But before we can become sympathetic readers, we must become aware of what makes writing different from one culture to the next. If you were born and educated solely in the States like me, you may be oblivious to the vast differences in writing styles across the world. Understanding some of these differences may help you identify others in your ESL tutee’s writing. You might find yourself doing a little contrastive analysis with your multilingual writers. Hopefully, and most importantly, you might begin to understand the challenges that multilingual writers face when attempting to compose written text in a language and culture wildly different from their own, opening an ocean of knowledge and creative tools to use when working with the wonderfully diverse population of writers who frequent the University Writing Center. Below, three ESL writer/tutors share their experience and expertise.

**Tutoring Continental Student Writers**

Tatyana Moran

Western cultures are often viewed as individualistic and hence supportive of direct, assertive, and explicit verbal styles. However, this is a broad generalization that can be damaging while working with multilingual students. Because of such generalizations, the writing styles of European students might be mistakenly viewed as closely related to the American, white, middle-class writing modes and, therefore, not deserving of special approach. In the present article, I will argue that Anglo-American and Continental writing traditions are in fact distinctly different and that the writing center should be a contact zone where understanding of the differences between American and Continental academic writing could be negotiated.

The Continent refers to continental Europe, explicitly excluding the United Kingdom as an island. Interestingly, this geographical division has resulted in two different writing traditions. Studies show that continental scholarship of Central and Eastern Europe, including Russia, was developed through direct contact with German thinking and intellectual style. There are two different writing traditions within the Western culture: Anglo-American and Continental (Clyne, 1989; Duszak, 1997; Rienecker & Jörgensen, 2003). Based on these findings, I will refer to the writing style of the students from continental Europe as “continental” style.

On the Continent, where was been born and educated, universities do not endorse the teaching of academic writing. The underlying rationale for this position is that content is married to form and good writing is married to good thinking and all these are so tied together that instruction which separates these marriages may be a fruitless endeavor. The idea of good
writing as a gift, as an innate intellectual or artistic talent which is, in its nature, unteachable, dominates continental attitudes toward academic writing. In schools, exercises in creative writing replace the English drill in step-by-step instruction in the production of argumentative texts. For instance, the teacher may read aloud the best student’s paper but would never comment on what makes it good; thus, the ability to produce good writing is viewed as an art to be mastered through observation and practice.

Recently, Rienecker and Jörgensen (2003), who based their research on the writing center in Copenhagen University, described two traditions of writing: the Anglo-American (problem-oriented) and the Continental (topic-oriented). In their view, the continental tradition emphasizes science as thinking; in contrast, Anglo-American writing tradition emphasizes science as investigation and problem solving. They explain that American university writing, and the teaching of it is “heavily influenced by rhetorical text-concerns such as purpose, aim, reader, focus, structure and argumentation.” In fact, they claim, there is a whole continuum between the straightforward and economical Anglo-American style and that of the narrative redundant European style (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Continental and the American Academic Writing. Adapted from Rienecker & Jörgensen (2003)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Continent of (German-Romanic) tradition</th>
<th>Anglo-American tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Think”-texts</td>
<td>Problem solving texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources in the foreground</td>
<td>Problems in the foreground</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy, the history of ideas, epistemology, culture, split and mind, arts, and aesthetics</td>
<td>Facts, realities, observable matters, empiricism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on concepts and theories</td>
<td>Emphasis on methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation (preservation) of traditional culture</td>
<td>New understandings, evaluations, and actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingent epistemology</td>
<td>Controlled, purposeful epistemology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerous points, claims, conclusions, around the subject</td>
<td>One point, one claim, one conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often non-linear, discursive structure</td>
<td>Linear structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digressions allowed</td>
<td>Digressions discouraged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic writing as art and inborn ability</td>
<td>Academic writing as leaned craftsmanship</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text-features, which distinguish continental university writing from that of American university writing, are: structures which do not necessarily follow fixed patterns; digressions and associations; long paragraphs; high number of abstract concepts; linguistic complexity and abstraction; varied language, reformulations, varied use of concepts; source influenced language; and reflections of the writers personality in reasoning, conclusions, and style. While writing in the American university setting, the continental students face the following writing problems:

- Believing that writing is not an inborn ability
- Quoting too much and writing conceptually and linguistically too close to the sources
- Finding and maintaining a focus
- Getting beyond mere restatement and reformulation of the others
- Adopting an assertive academic tone
Based on my own experience as both a continental and an American student writer, I suggest a few approaches, tailored to address the above problematic areas that writing center tutors may apply.

**Attitudes toward Writing**
The continental ways of writing a good paper are bound to certain teachers or thinkers, not to commonly accepted rules. One continental philosophy teacher put it in the following way: “We do not instruct before writing, our students are supposed to sit at the feet of their masters and absorb their writing themes and styles.” Continentalist teachers, as a general rule, do not believe in instructional materials which re-enforces the perception of writing as an art. To address these continental attitudes, writing center tutors can ask the European tutees to reflect on their writing in Europe.

a) If they believe they are bad writers, explain that American academic writing is not an art but a craftsmanship that everybody can learn.

b) In case they believe to be excellent writers, point out that learning to write in a different mode will enrich their gift and quality of thinking.

**Introduction and Thesis Statement**
Continental writers give poor previews of the exposition to come and are reluctant to reveal their thesis, using a strategy of avoidance. Duszak (1994) provides the following example of a Polish style introduction: “I am not dealing here with… Neither am I dealing here with … This attempt does not aspire to … but only outlines a problem.” Writing center tutors should not press continental writers to come up even with a tentative thesis and stick to it; usually, European writers perceive the idea of a thesis as limiting their thinking and their process of interpretation. Instead:

a) Negotiate the need of some kind of hypothesis rather than thesis.

b) Talk about “evolving thesis” and recommend the thesis to be stated at a later stage of the writing process.

c) Negotiate stating the thesis at the end of the paper if the writer seems to be capable of managing the paper this way

**Organization and Cohesiveness**
Knowledge, not the structure, is idealized in the continental tradition. The way knowledge is conveyed in continental academic texts presents a demanding task for the reader. European students are not trained to write for an audience, nor do they care to make their text more “marketable” within the academic discourse community. To negotiate more explicitness and better organization, try the following:

a) Do not to be irritated of European elitist approach to academic writing.

b) Involve them in an honest conversation about more democratic ways of presenting knowledge

**Voice**
Continental academic writers tend to appear wary of committing themselves fully, without hesitation and reserve, to their statements, propositions, and suggestions. In other words, they formulate their pronouncements in a far less assertive, direct, and matter-of-fact tone than English writers usually do. This high degree of *hedging* also implies a certain modesty of
understatement. Consider the tone and voice in a following example provided by Duszak (1997) and written by a Czech academic writer:

I know only too well how much I expose myself to the danger of being accused to be again humming the same, old tune. I do not want to deny that the research into the problems of written language and into its particular status, as opposed to that of spoken language, has been one of the subjects repeatedly attracting my attention. And each time I was fairly and honestly convinced I would never take up the subject again.

I would not recommend avoiding pressing the issue of the assertive academic voice; instead, acknowledge the difference between the two writing traditions and your understanding of the struggle of the continental writers to adopt a more assertive tone.

**My Best Tip:** From the very first tutorial, writing center tutors should make the differences between the Anglo-American and the continental writing traditions explicit. Although the rules of the Anglo-American mode of writing have been explained to students in their writing classes, continental students need to build an awareness of their own modes of writing in order to transition to American mode of writing. Only this way they may see the academic writing in an American university not as oppressive and limiting mode, but as a different and enriching experience.

**How Can Tutors Help Asian Students Improve Their Writing Style?**

Hyang-Sook Park

Everyone who has worked in the writing center this semester knows the plight of international students who are striving to adapt to the American academic community. Most Asian students studying in American universities experience a hard time making themselves familiar with the new academic community. Not only do they have to develop their writing ability in English, but they also have to adapt to the different writing style, which is a new concept to them. Kaplan (1988) argues that no writing style is universal, but each varies in every culture and changes constantly. Different cultural values can determine the form and style of writing. As a writing tutor, it would be helpful to have an understanding about how a student’s culture is connected to his/her writing. Knowing the differences in writing styles can be the first step to finding an appropriate approach to assist writers transition into the American writing style. Therefore, I would like to address how the Asian writing style is related to its culture and tradition and give some suggestions that may be helpful in tutoring writing.

In American writing, students are taught to develop a thesis statement, identify supporting ideas, add a few examples being both coherent and cohesive, and conclude the paper with a brief summary of the paper. Conversely, Asian writing does not have a thesis statement at the beginning of the essay, but rather a topic statement at the end. American writing is writer-responsible while Asian writing is reader-responsible. American writers try to convey their thoughts directly and clearly with explicit details; whereas, Asian writers do not express connections too explicitly as a way of showing respect to the reader. Despite the loose organization of the essay, the reader has the responsibility to make connections between various parts in the writing and understand what the writer conveys in his or her writing. On the contrary, American readers have little patience with implicit detail. Therefore, tutors should help the students become aware of the cultural differences and of the value of audience awareness in writing.
Asian students who are accustomed to sentence-level instruction and pattern practice in the writing classroom may have difficulties in expressing, supporting, and explaining a single idea at length and in detail. Providing model sentences can help students become familiar with how they are expected to write. American culture values individualistic expression and debate. On the contrary, directness is considered to be impolite in Asian culture. For example, it would be rude and disrespectful if you say, “I disagree with the view of the author…” Due to the cultural values, Asian students tend to seek more of a consensus and may feel awkward performing writing exercises without a model or collective help. Therefore, providing model writing samples can increase their writing fluency.

Second, providing a mini lesson is another way to help students. For this activity, tutors can ask students to explain a given idea elaborately or ask them to support the idea by giving examples or relating to a personal story. This activity can encourage students to get to the point without digression from the topic. For example, tutors can provide sample supporting sentences and ask students to further explain by giving a specific example or relating a personal experience. Understand that the writer-responsible conception of a piece of writing moving from general to specific may be difficult for an Asian writer to grasp because they are unfamiliar with writing thesis statements, topic sentences, and supporting sentences. So try explaining that writing is like taking a photo. For example, a photo without a focus can be very blurry. When you focus on the topic you want to discuss, you can describe all the details and examples clearly. This analogy can teach students how the essay moves from general to specific.

Another useful strategy is color coding. Color coding can help students to stay coherent from the beginning to the end of their writing by using different colored pencils or markers to mark a thesis statement, topic sentences, and examples. While writing a paper, a student can continuously keep in mind the purpose of his/her paper by using different colors, and as a result, it can help them to produce cohesive writing.

Free-writing and processed writing are two useful writing techniques. Free writing directs students to simply get their ideas onto paper without worrying much about grammar, spelling, or other English mechanics. For free-writing activities, allowing students to write in their native language can be a benefit. In doing so, students can focus on content without pausing to think about the vocabulary or grammar. After free-writing, a tutor can ask the student to explain what he/she wants to say in the writing in English. The rational is that most students feel more comfortable communicating in person than writing due to their lack of academic writing skills. The students can develop their ideas fully by just writing down their flow of thought.

Processed writing, another useful strategy, requires many hours work. This activity can guide students into logical, persuasive writing and train them to be good negotiators with their ideas by discussing the purpose of writing and organization with them. Processed writing can save students from frustration and even the loss of confidence caused by the pressures to write a perfect, native-like essay.

Communicative relationships between a tutor and a student can also maximize learning potential. “Language acquisition emerges from learners wrestling with meaning in acts of communicating or trying to communicate” (Myers, 231). Guiding students to achieve focus, clarity, connectedness, specificity in their writing will be a very critical role for tutors. I think it is an important role as a tutor to introduce students to the variety of styles, conventions, and different academic disciplines. Tutors can help them feel more like insiders to the academic discourse community by encouraging them to express themselves explicitly. Finally, I ask you to listen carefully and actively when your tutee speaks slowly or in broken English. This thoughtful
consideration can encourage the student to become more willing to speak what he or she wants to express in the paper.

The Testimony of an Indian Working with Diversity
Manpreet Devi

It is important that tutors create a close relationship with bilingual students to make them feel at home. Having been in the shoes of an ESL student, I can say that it is extremely hard to share personal feelings or thoughts with a person who was raised in America because there is always a fear that my ideas might not be accepted or would not be understood. For example, I have worked with a student from Thailand who presented himself as a very timid person. He would ask for exact guidelines of what to write and in what structure. Soon enough I felt that I was doing the work for him. It is his job as a writer to present me with many ideas which I can then help him develop. I asked him to write down his thoughts for a paper: the uses of MySpace. He wrote down terms like, predators, young teens, safety, and privacy. We talked about these terms for a little bit and what they meant to him. He said he thought about his younger sister as he was coming up with those terms and how she could be in harm’s way if she doesn’t use her new MySpace safely. A little conversation led to a good idea of what the paper was going to be about where it was headed. Thinking about his culture and how it is a brother’s responsibility to watch over his sister, he was able to make close connections with his topic. Bringing his personal life into this also made it easier for him to write with less help from me. As a tutor, I encouraged him to talk to me more about his family and the role a male plays in his culture. Seeing my interest encouraged him to pursue his paper the way he wanted to.

Making the Student Feel Comfortable
When multilingual students don’t feel comfortable sharing their idea because their culture doesn’t allow them to be so open about a subject, it is always a good idea to show extra interest in their background. I always found it very helpful when a tutor or a teacher would compliment my unique or indifferent ideas. It’s important that they are encouraged and appreciated for working hard. When they see that their ideas are valued by someone they look up to, it is satisfying and very encouraging. This helps the student express ideas more freely since their ideas are not “odd” but useful and interesting to others. Once students create a channel through which they can express whatever they please, it then takes them to the next stage of sharing information with more people. Likewise, I was able to help the student with a MySpace paper as well as his future papers because I invited his ideas and wasn’t afraid to show my amazement towards some values that people from his descent hold.

Reading Out Loud
As tutors, we don’t want to miss any opportunity of improving the writing of the student. Many students catch their own mistakes when reading aloud. During every session, if a paper is read out loud, in addition to a student catching his own mistakes, he will be working on speaking clearly. Talking out loud and asking questions will help the student put together his own sentences and learn by listening to the way the tutor speaks to him. I had a student whose sentence structures rarely made sense. The positive thing was that he never spoke the way he wrote. He spoke in full sentences missing just a couple of words. Whenever I came across sentences like these, I turned them around into questions and had him answer it out loud. For
instance, he wrote, “To stay safe on MySpace, you should put age 99, location, add strangers, put pictures private.” I would ask, “I am going to make a MySpace. What can I do to stay safe?” He would answer slowly and in short sentences, but they were not run on sentences when he spoke. I would quickly start writing down what he said word for word. When I showed him what he spoke versus what he wrote, he agreed that writing something down was a problem he faced. I suggested that he ask himself what he wants to write in a sentence, and then answer that question out loud while writing the answer down. He is currently working on editing in this manner and shows much improvement.

Making an Outline
ESL students at many times have problems with development. They have a topic and know what side they are on, but don’t know how to turn that topic into a 3-4 page paper. One way to help an ESL student is to ask him many questions while going through his essay. When a student has to explain everything, he is forced to think about ways to expand his ideas. If he had a good idea written down on paper, asking numerous questions shows him what his reader needs to see more of in his paper. In future papers, he would find it easier to clarify many ideas because he gets used to explaining one thing in many different ways. By asking questions, the tutor not only shows interest but also challenges the student, which makes the student a better writer as well as a better speaker. Asking questions leads to new ideas. If one has a weak thesis for a paper, he can make it strong by answering a variety of questions the tutor asks. If this process is followed for all papers, the student will become a strong writer on his own through continuous writing.

Focus on Higher Order Concerns First
It’s always helpful to educate the student about higher order concerns first since they need to be able to structure their paper before structuring their sentences correctly. The structuring may be something new to a foreign student since writing styles are different in different countries. If a tutor provides them with a handout of the basic structure of an essay, it can be used by the student for future papers. Students who are new to the academic writing structure are not likely to get it the first time. Therefore, it is important that they are given something to reference.

Take it One Step at a Time
Most importantly, be aware that if this is your first time being with an ESL student, it is normal to be frustrated. They need help in many areas, and at most times, it is not in our control to help them with everything in a 30 minute or one hour session. You are just one source through which they will learn a few things to carry on into their future writings. It is not the tutor’s responsibility to make a student a perfect writer by the end of the semester. It is our responsibility to make sure that we are steering the student in the right direction, that we are not just helping them to get a passing grade on one paper, but to make them good writers in one small area or another.

We might remember that multilingual writers are not only trying to acquire academic writing skills but that they are also struggling with the threat of loss of identity by forgoing the style of writing which represents more than just a part of their past. Their writing style represents
a thread of politics, economics, family, faith, perspectives, principles, ethics, and other various
codes unique to experiences that are not inferior but equally vital to any that an American like
me might express through writing. A keen amount of sensitivity to the very essence of who
writing center writers are and how to best help them maintain their identity during this transition
is essential not only to the success of the writer but to you, the tutor, as well as the Writing
Center, as it stands to serve the best interests of its writers.

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Helping ESL Students Learn Academic Language

Tutoring is like any challenging undertaking: there is a goal to be aimed for and obstacles in the way. Our objective in the writing center is the improvement of student writing—our obstacle looking at a paper in need of revision and wondering how to do it. The tutoring session can go in all directions: we might find ourselves wishing we had actually paid attention to high school grammar instruction so we could explain how to stay within the conventions of English, or we might be hoping for a magic theory from class to organize the writing into a cohesive essay. But what would the experience of the writing center be if we had the straight and easy path up the mountain? Meandering is much more enlightening as one needs to hone one’s observational skills for insights that can be shared in papers and in class discussion! In this paper, I am looking at a particular minority population at the university, the ESL student.

Tutoring an ESL student brings added dimensions to the tutoring session. The language barriers that manifest in speaking and in writing have to be navigated by the tutor. Often cultural differences inform that writing. Students coming from other cultures often have different expectations of what is good writing—which the American university system might deem as obscure for the purposes of academic discourse. The literature on ESL instruction stresses the importance of being aware of the implications of ESL students trying to engage academic writing. It is challenging to approach the university in the first place let alone when one is feeling intimidated because one’s intellectual thought has to be expressed in a foreign language!

A first principal towards effective instruction with ESL students is to acknowledge the contact zone between the tutor and tutee. Being a friendly tutor who takes an interest in a student’s background can instill a sense of ease and be the groundwork for the rest of instruction. They can be shy because they know they are presenting “ESL” writing and that it needs work. But, as the brochure for the Writing Center stipulates, we are not the good grammar factory! Rather, with ESL students, we become cultural informants who can acculturate the ESL writer to the conventions of the university. Not much difference there between ESL writers and native ones, but the ESL student needs to have pointed out to them examples of where their writing strays from the required discourse necessary for the academic department to which they are writing. They want to be given information and feedback on how to meet the requirements of the university.

When working with ESL students, trying to balance the tutoring session between higher order concerns and the less privileged lower order concerns is difficult. I hope I am not committing sacrilege—it is up to tutors to decide what works in their experience—but I usually pay attention to the sentence level. I find it useful to really get down to the sentence level and model effective academic writing. Instead of flowing or long sentences I try and get to the point in compact language by writing out the sentence as I see it represented by the student’s draft. We talk through what the intentions of the sentences are and I show how that looks in an academically appropriate manner. I annotate and highlight parts of the professor’s prompt so that the writing always has a direction towards audience. Also, along with attention to the prompt, I find I often need to start with creating a thesis idea—again, by talking through with the student the ideas presented in their writing or just conversing about what is in their head. Many ESL students do not have a working vocabulary to talk about academic writing—they may not know
what a thesis is—or they may not know how to structure a paper according to the concept of a thesis and a controlling idea. Sensitivity to the student’s writing and not appropriating the text by taking over is of course necessary, but the modeling step works for me. I let them rewrite my sentences in their own words to practice. Also, it is shown in the ESL literature that grammar lessons right then and there do not make a significant difference in their writing, so no worries about your high school behavior!

Just remember that it is important to note that the tutor’s emphasis on what and how to revise a paper will be greatly heeded by the ESL tutee. In a writing center study by Jessica Williams based on ESL students, she points out that “The majority of changes can be traced to tutor suggestions”(6). Our responsibility might be more pronounced when working with ESL students, as the relationship is informed by the respect given the tutor by the tutee. Not just respect but a type of lifeline for helping teach the student the academic discourse so difficult to access when not a native speaker.

The ESL students I am working with have told me of the nervousness they feel trying to engage the academic discourse of the university. We can relate to the anticipation felt when turning in a paper to a professor. Compound this with the insecurity of writing in a foreign language and we can see the importance we have to these students. Our role as cultural informant means socializing the student writer in the discourse expected of them by pointing out their errors in writing and working through them. The writing center and ESL students can produce real results that can imprint themselves on the student writer for the remainder of their academic career. Considering the positive affects a tutor can have on ESL students, the extra time and effort can come back to the tutor as the satisfying reward of transmitting lasting knowledge for someone.
Language in America

For those of us who live here in California, diversity is a way of life and for those of us who are tutoring in the writing center, ESL students will invariably come in for help with their writing. California is no longer divided into one or two subcategories, but has become a colorful state with a multitude of languages and dialects. As an ESL teacher last year, I was no stranger to working with second language learners, but what I discovered working in the writing center was that different languages require different strategies and a working understanding, no matter how minute, of the structure of an L2’s native language is extremely helpful. While it would be outrageous to expect all tutors to have a command of all the languages they will encounter at one time or another in the writing center, it is not unreasonable to at least know some of the obstacles students face because of the differences between their L1 and L2 languages. In this article, my goal is to examine some of the most common, basic language errors that one may encounter in particular languages and ultimately carry over into a students L2 writing, with the hopes that the job of tutoring will become easier when the tutor has an awareness of the knowing what to look for. Although the following information is nothing more than a snapshot of some of the most common problems and is in no way a comprehensive examination of all potential language errors, I am hoping tutors will find it valuable to be when tutoring tutees who are still trying to find their way in English.

Russian

While I have had no shortage of English Language Learners come to me for help, I was a bit surprised that a majority of them were native Russian speakers. Despite the large and descriptive introductions and fairly lengthy conclusions, LOC’s such as grammar seemed to be problematic for many students. As I worked with native Russian speakers, I noticed some distinct grammatical pattern errors emerging within their writing which can be a derision of the commonalities in their L1.

The Alphabet: One of the most fundamental differences between Russian and English lies in the most elementary of language structures: the alphabet. Where as the English alphabet is derived from the Latin alphabet and contains 26 letters, Russian uses the Cyrillic alphabet which consists of 33 letters which includes 21 consonants, 10 vowels and two letters that do not have a sound but instead indicate a soft or hard sign. While this may not seem relevant, consider the way in which many students phonetically spell words. So for instance, if a native Spanish speaker were trying to spell an English word it is relatively easy because we use the same Latin based alphabet. A Russian student, on the other hand, will have more difficulty spelling a word because the alphabets are so different.

Grammar: Articles and Spelling- A lack of articles is probably the most common grammar error I see in Russian students who are writing in English. The reason is simple; there are no articles in Russian. The concept of articles is foreign in the Russian language and the system of using articles in English is in and of itself confusing. For the most part, Russian is a phonetic language which means that words are often spelled the way that they sound. Word
pronunciation can be predicted from its spelling and vice versa. This is certainly not the case for the English language and as such can be extremely frustrating for Russian students.

esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/russian.htm

**Chinese**

Unlike English, the writing system of the Chinese uses a symbolic form, similar to numbers and music notes in English and consists of 2,000 characters. One of the primary issues with Chinese writers is the way in which Chinese writing differs from English writing rhetorically. Structurally, English and Chinese expectations are vastly different. For example, the structure of an English essay usually adheres to the following pattern: introduction-body-conclusion. The Chinese structure, on the other hand “is characterized as ‘beginning-following-turning-concluding’”(Chen). Let me elaborate on this a bit further. Typically in English, we start off with an introduction which not only introduces the topic, but contains the thesis statement. The body paragraphs elaborate on the topic and then the conclusion asks the reader to continue to think on this particular subject. The structure of a Chinese essay is very different. In the beginning of an essay a topic is introduced that is only partly related to the theme. The next part not only follows the idea in the first paragraph, but amplifies it. The third part of the essay is a turning point in which the topic in the first two parts is viewed from a different perspective, thus reaching its climax and surprising the reader. The last paragraph is extremely important in that it contains the theme of the essay as well as the thesis. Whereas English writers introduce the theme early in an essay, Chinese writers seek to delay that theme until the end.

The tone of an essay is another point of variation between the two modes of writing and should be considered from a cultural perspective. Certain characteristics such as humility and politeness are looked at with respect, and for the Chinese, is a sign of good writing. Chinese writing is very “reserved” arising from the desire of writers to be seen as humble, while English writing is typically viewed as being very straightforward, and from the Chinese viewpoint can be considered quite rude. Contrasting values also influence writing and stem from “different beliefs: collectivism and individualism”(5). There is no “I” in Chinese writing, but rather the collective “we.” One enormous difference tutors need to be aware of is the common practice of citing “proverbs, maxims, and fixed phrases”(6). For the Chinese reader, this will make the writers seem knowledgeable. This is vastly different in English writing, were such implementations will seem more like plagiarism than knowledge. Indirect writing is valued in China, not the more direct style seen here in the United States.

http://owl.univ.kiev.ua

**Vietnamese**

The language of the Vietnamese is an Austro-Asiatic language that uses the Portuguese version of the Latin alphabet, and while this may seem similar to our own alphabet, an emphasis is placed on tone when speaking. In Vietnam, writing is not a separate subject but is taught in conjunction with literature. This means that students are taught to write through various types of literary analysis, such as movie reviews, plot summaries, and character descriptions. Ultimately, this type of writing will not be very useful for students entering college where the emphasis is more on critical thinking and analysis. The structure of the essay is similar to the pattern here in
the United States, but whereas the Western essay is “thesis driven” the “Vietnamese essay can seem circular” (Tran 1). The Vietnamese essay is written more indirectly and tends to be less analytical.

Like the Chinese, much of the difference is derived from cultural differences rather than linguistic differences. Unlike English grammar rules, the Vietnamese language classifies lexical items in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to, “‘animate’ (con), inanimate (cai), ‘book-like’ (quyen), ‘picture’ (buc), ‘photographic’ (tam), ‘food or medicine’ (thuc)” (Tran 2). For the Vietnamese writer, the beauty of the words is essential to good writing, but might be seen as “wordy” here in the United States. Emphasis is not placed on individual thought and originality, but is instead set on how well a student can repeat back what instruction has been pounded into them throughout the course of the semester. The notion of an “empty vessel” waiting to be filled with knowledge does not promote analytical and critical thinking, instead fostering students who may be reluctant to use their own words and ideas in an essay.

What does it all mean?

So how do we as tutors navigate through the vast array of languages that have come to represent California and the concept of diversity? Although we are tutoring English, the influence of alternative cultures is prevalent and cannot be ignored. By enriching our own knowledge of the linguistic and writing barriers facing our students, we are therefore enriching the possibilities of language for all. After all, writing is the way in which we show knowledge, explore ideas and make connections. Without the ability to communicate, we are powerless, but by understanding some of the most common issues that our tutees face, we are helping them achieve access to the world in which they are now living, the world of academic writing. Bringing them that much closer to the fluency they desire.

Works Cited


Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern Writers

Way back in the 1960s, Kaplan wrote that people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds write differently, in ways that reflect their own language and culture. Writers use different methods, styles, and structures depending on their native language, native culture, and educational background. (Zhong 3) Culture seems to play the largest role in writing style variations, so I would like to give Sac State tutors a little background on three culture groups that are likely to be seeking help in the writing center but are probably unfamiliar to most tutors.

I have spent the last three years living and teaching English in China, India, Egypt, and Oman. Of course, the culture of each of these countries is not exactly the same as that of the surrounding countries, but the similarities are enough to present some key features that will hopefully help tutors. I will discuss Asian students – meaning Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Laotian, Thai, etc - based on research and my experience with Chinese students. Some of these countries have related languages, and all are similar in culture and education in the areas related to writing center work. Likewise, the Indian, or South Asian, culture and education is similar enough to those of neighboring Nepal, Bengal, Pakistan, and others. Most Middle Eastern countries share language, culture, and education methods to a strong degree. These students are those from Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and others. Turkish and Israeli students will have cultural similarities. Afghani and Iranian writers will have some language but mostly cultural and educational similarities. All of these populations are present, and growing, in the Sacramento area and at Sac State.

To be successful in an English language university, students need to be able to write in a fairly formal voice, with a concise and linear organization putting the main ideas first and following with details. Students need to be able to present their own ideas and opinions while staying strictly on topic and completely answering a prompt. This style of composition is generally taught throughout school, starting in elementary school and continuing in high school.

All three of these groups – Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern – share, amazingly, a few cultural and educational writing similarities generally opposed to the Academic American English standards. Writers from these backgrounds often place important ideas at the end of sentences or paragraphs. This way of presenting ideas and organizing writing reflects the cultural values of self-discipline, modesty, and harmony (Zhong 4) important to all Asian and Middle Eastern groups. To avoid what seems like aggressiveness, writers may put the less important information first, and then gradually express the main ideas in a way that promotes easy agreement. Asians have a more circular writing style that goes around the main ideas, covering the all of the details, before making a strong point. South Asian writers may also use a circular style, or likely a meandering progression towards the main point. Details and similar ideas will be presented before the strongest main idea. In the Middle East, writing is done with a zigzag approach to the main idea; writers will move generally towards the main idea but will provide details and side points along the way. (Zhong 3)

Education is also similar in the Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern countries. (It is important to note that the amount and style of a student’s education is specific to the resources of their family as well as the country of origin.) In most traditional education environments, students from these countries are used to authoritative teachers and disciplined learning
techniques. Students tend to maintain formal and distant relationships with teachers, have great respect for teachers, and expect teachers to impart all knowledge required in a class. Students are taught through memorization and rote learning and are expected to reproduce information in writing or examination. Critical thinking, or analyzing something a teacher has taught is not common. A Chinese proverb explains ‘if one can recite three hundred poems from the Tang Dynasty, one can then compose one poem’ (Zhong 5). Memorization and rote learning are used all over the world, and have their merits, however, students educated almost entirely in these strategies tend toward academic writing that is more ‘reproductive’ than critical or developed in the American Academic style. Students will likely rely on repeating an authority’s opinions (author or teacher) rather than incorporating their own ideas or conclusions.

The similar cultural and educational backgrounds of the Asian, South Asian, and Middle Eastern students is separate from language features that affect their writing in English. The following sections give tutors a few language specific – grammatical and mechanical – points that can help a tutor decipher what is happening in a student’s text.

**Arabic** *(most Middle Eastern countries; to some extent also Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan)*

First-language Arabic speakers, and those who use the Arabic writing system, face a significant challenge when learning to write English. There is very little positive transfer from the Arabic language to English. The most obvious differences – the written alphabet and the direction of writing – are only the beginning of an Arabic speaker’s writer’s difficulties.

**Grammar and Mechanics**

- **Word order:** Subject Verb and Adjective Noun order are opposite in Arabic. An Arabic speaker may put verbs before subjects, as in ‘runs the athlete’ and nouns before adjectives, as in ‘bus yellow.’
- **Verbs:** Arabic speakers may omit ‘to be’ verbs, especially the present tense as/is/are because the verb does not exist in Arabic. Arabic also does not use *modals* (can, could, would, should, etc) so writers may avoid them, add verb endings such as ‘he cans runs,’ or add auxiliaries as ‘he does can go.’ *Phrasal verbs* do not exist in Arabic so writers may avoid them and will commonly make errors or omit the ‘preposition.’
- **Prepositions:** Arabic uses fewer prepositions. Writers may struggle with the difference between in/on, with/by, etc.
- **Pronouns:** Writers may overuse or repeat pronouns because Arabic incorporates them into the verbs. Ex. ‘John he works.’
- **Punctuation:** Comma spllices, run-ons, and overuse of conjunctions are common for Arabic speakers writing in English. Punctuation usage in Arabic is freer and it is common to start sentences with and/so repeatedly.

*Learning and Writing Styles*
Students in Arabic speaking countries are most likely going to have been educated in a system of rote-learning, memorization, and under the expectation to reproduce information that was delivered or imparted from an authority – the teacher. The concept of expressing one’s own ideas or opinions, or presenting some original thought, may be new to a writer, and may even be considered unfair. Elicited answering and discussion might also be challenging for students used to ‘learning’ exactly what the teacher says. (Smith 209) Tutors may find the writing from these students to lack opinions and thesis statements, and therefore neglect the teacher’s assignment.

Chinese (all Chinese dialects and other Asian languages)

Although not all Asian languages are from the same language family as Chinese, the writing systems and education systems are similar, giving the students some similar features in their written English language.

An initial, and lasting, significant difficulty for Asian students learning English is the alphabetic script. Learning and writing the letters is not difficult – especially compared to memorizing and writing thousands of characters, but students find the amount of space a word to use – it’s length in letters – a challenge. Ideograms present a word in a relatively compact space, so reading in English can be both physically (because the eyes are not trained to read in strings) and cognitively (because of the time and sound memory needed) demanding. (Chang 310) Even in more advances years of study, Asian students may struggle with comprehension of texts that are longer or convoluted (prompt).

Grammar and Mechanics

- Verbs: Chinese, and related languages, do not conjugate or inflect verbs. Writers will likely have trouble with subject verb agreement, irregular verbs, and simply choosing the correct tense. In Chinese, tense is marked with adverbials, so these might be overused in English. Phrasal verbs also do not exist in Chinese, so writers will likely avoid them.
- Pronouns: The Chinese pronoun system does not distinguish gender or case. Writers may simply always use the same gendered pronoun, as in ‘John is here, she’s inside’ – always choosing ‘she’ regardless of the subject, or writers may choose pronouns randomly. Similarly, the distinction between I/me or my/mine isn’t made, so students may confuse these in English.
- Prepositions: Like many languages with a more regular preposition system, the idiomatic English prepositions will be challenging.
- Plurals: Learners often have trouble remembering to add the plural ‘s’ to nouns because nouns are not marked in their 1st languages. The array of English non-count nouns is confusing also. Some students will tend to ‘over-correct’ and pluralize nouns in incongruous situations.
- Articles: Chinese does not use articles, so the English system is difficult.
- Conjunctions: Writers will commonly over-use conjunction words, placing them at the beginning and middle of a sentence, as in ‘Because I didn’t know him, so I didn’t call him.’
Learning and Writing Styles

The methods of education will greatly affect a writers’ work. Asian students tend to have great respect for teachers and consider them persons of authority, so students may find it difficult to express opinions or share their own ideas. Memorization is a popular learning tool, and Chinese students are especially adept memorizes – probably due to the ideogram writing system that must be memorized (Zhong 7). Unfortunately, memorization skills may not serve students well for writing activities where analysis and explanation are needed. It is also important to note that Asian students are extremely industrious and hard working (Chang 322). A tutor should never assume that a written draft is a 1st, 2nd, or even a 3rd. These students pour over their work and are reluctant to show anyone work that is not their greatest effort. I spent about two years, over a dozen papers, tutoring and working with a Laotian student and never saw a draft fresher than 5th. It is important for tutors to be aware of their responses to these papers that have already been through rigorous readings and rewritings to prevent from making detrimental comments.

South Asian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Nepali, Bengali, and others)

These languages, and others, come from the same language family, so many challenges faced my English learners will be similar for students even with different first languages.

Another group of South Asian languages – including Tamil and Telegu - comes from a different family. The grammatical and sentence level mistakes made by these learners will be different, but the higher-order writing concerns will be very similar since education style plays a larger role in writing style than mechanics.

It is important to note that English, sometimes called Indian English or South Asian English, may be the first language, or the language of education for these students. South Asian English uses constructions that would be considered incorrect in American or British English, but are correct in this dialect. Dialectical differences are more ‘forgiven’ in spoken language but students who write in Indian English may find the different rules and norms of Academic American English especially challenging – particularly when it comes to self-editing a text. (Shackle 227)

Grammar and Mechanics

- Verb tenses: Indian languages, like English, uses similar past, present, and future tenses, including simple, progressive, and perfect but learners tend to use the English tenses more universally than allowed. “Verby” sentences, or atypical progressive endings (-ing) stand out. Ex. ‘we are wanting,’ ‘he was understanding,’ ‘you will be knowing.’
- Modals: Writers may overuse could, should, would in an attempt to indicate kindness and reserve. Could is sometimes mistakenly used to mark a past attainment, as in ‘we could go’ instead of ‘we were able to go.’
- Adverbs: Writers may have trouble distinguishing the connotation of English adverbs, using ‘too’ incorrectly, as in ‘I like it too much’ rather than ‘I like it very much.’ In
Indian languages, adverbs can be repeated for emphasis as in ‘please speak slowly slowly’ for ‘please speak very slowly.’

- Prepositions: Writers will likely struggle with the appropriate use of on, in, with, for, by, from, to, and others because of the rather idiomatic English usages and because Hindi prefers postpositions.

_Learning and Writing Styles_

South Asians have a great respect for written language and its place in education. Although teachers and tutors can appreciate this respect, it can lead to writers using an elevated, or overly formal, writing style (Shackle 241). Of course, this register may or may not be suited to a course or assignment, but the most challenging aspect may be that students attempt more complicated structures in English, aiming to match their native language styles, and therefore make mechanical and grammatical errors that hinder meaning.

_Works Cited_


African American Vernacular English and the Larger-Than-Academics Problem: Social, Economic, and Educational Immobility and the Loss of Identity

There seems to be a growing awareness of the potential importance of our ever-changing textual world and its effects on young writers, especially speakers of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) whose nonstandard interaction with Standard American English (SAE) writing continues to obstruct their academic and economic success. Many of these students are not only disadvantaged socially and economically, but they also struggle educationally. Many of the obstacles they encounter are similar to those of multilingual students who struggle with cultural and linguistic interference when learning SAE for academic purposes, all the while trying to maintain their personal identities through their organic languages and cultures.

While SAE is institutionally preferred or standardized in academic writing, there may be a need to accept a certain amount of AAVE writing characteristics in order to help AAVE speaking students transition into SAE writing. It should not be our goal as tutors to extinguish the use of AAVE all together. Instead, we should attempt to help these students become aware of the differences and give them the tools to use both appropriately in any given context. Perhaps the adroit ability to move between these varied discourses can then be marveled similar to that of a multilingual individual’s ability to code switch. If you have ever heard a bilingual speaker, say of Spanish and English, utter a sentence that is made up of vocabulary from both languages, then you have witnessed the phenomenon of code switching. This often happens to individuals who speak more than one language and who are no longer translating vocabulary from their native language to the second language in order to speak. Essentially, code switching occurs when a multilingual speaker thinks in more than one language at a time. This is an important skill to teach AAVE speaking students if we want to see them succeed in the academy. More crucially, speakers of AAVE who do not acquire standardized writing practices are left little room for socioeconomic advancement. These socioeconomic and vertical mobility disadvantages haunt many speakers of AAVE culturally, academically, and vocationally. However, as a word of caution to avoid racial stereotyping African Americans, it is imperative to remember that not all African Americans are speakers of AAVE, some speakers of AAVE are of other ethnicities, and being a speaker of AAVE is not necessarily an indication of an AAVE writer.

Stratification can be particularly immobilizing for the successful career advancement of speakers of AAVE with a less than stellar socioeconomic status. AAVE prevents many capable job candidates from either getting a job for which they are qualified or being promoted to do jobs they may have otherwise earned if their use of AAVE was not stigmatized. The stratification of SAE above other varied dialects of English has created a social stratification of speakers of those dialects, especially AAVE, which affects individuals’ lives in many contexts, including their careers. Walker asserts, “A possibility must be stressed that, with becoming standard, there is one less barrier to entrance into the mainstream of society. For example, a job interviewer will not be able to use English as an excuse for not considering a black person for a job” (1977, p. 42). Donlan also recognizes the effect social stratification has on successful mobility and argues “that America’s schools must provide the instruction necessary to free the growing number of disadvantaged from a hapless future of continued poverty and frustration” (1974, p. 261). But I think Joan Baratz’s succinct words, as quoted in Fasold & Shuy,
resonate the genuine issue: “In refusing to teach standard English to these [students] we cut off even further their possibility of entering the mainstream of American life” (1970, p.26). Although this is much more general and in response to the issue of neglecting to address AAVE features and teach SAE, the issue is not who should be responsible for the acquisition of SAE, but merely that it is fundamental for the mobile, social, and cultural success of a large demographic of society. Essentially, there is much more at stake for these students than grades or passing a class. When tutoring speakers of AAVE, it is necessary to maintain a keen sensitivity to what more these students have to lose.

The acquisition of SAE for speakers of AAVE is much like bilingualism, and as such, both dialects serve as assets; furthermore, being able to switch between the two dialects could only broaden the social breadth of the community. Cooks urges that students “must master how to switch back and forth between the different genres to be successful” (2004, p.76). Labov (1965) likens this bi-dialect acquisition to bilingualism of foreign language because speakers of nonstandard dialects share three fundamental things in common: many are isolated from SAE, learning SAE does not necessitate neglect for the home dialect, and structural features of AAVE can most certainly cause interference with SAE. Although “the shift to another language in bilingual situations seems to be a radically different step… there is a functional relation between different languages [bilingual] and different styles [monolingual] which cannot be overlooked” (Labov, 1969, p. 21). It is, in fact, favorable for speakers of AAVE to maintain their cultural heritage through their home dialect while acquiring SAE. This idea is similar to code switching in bilingual speakers. However, bi-dialectically, this becomes a complicatedly different phenomenon all together, and for the sake of simplicity, I’ll refer to the bi-dialect phenomenon as code switching as well. Anyone interested in reading further on the subject might consider Labov (1965), Donlan (1974), or McCrary (2005). However, resources on the subject most certainly do not end there. Donlan defines this dialect switching as “the mutual acceptance of both dialects and the ability of the speaker to switch back and forth as the situation demands” (1974, p. 263). We can see the need for this shifting in view of the conflicts that many African Americans face when speaking in different contexts. They may face ridicule from their peers for speaking SAE or may not be taken seriously or treated respectfully at work or in school for speaking AAVE. This makes it a social necessity for speakers of AAVE to have the ability to switch back and forth between SAE and AAVE.

This bi-dialectic shift should be embraced or, at least, encouraged as a positive tool for rhetoric and voice. McCrary advocates it as giving students “the freedom to make a contribution to academic discourse by using their own language or voices and the values embedded within them…because that is what is denied to many other-literate students in the academy” (2005, p. 75). Their are common rhetorical issues in the writing of speakers of AAVE, such as the tendency to use a tone much like the preacher Martin Luther King or other African American orators, and some awareness of audience will often show in a shifting in and out of this “high-context” and “low-context” rhetoric (Blackburn & Stern, 2000; Chapman, 1994; Linn, 1995). Often you will find a rhythm, pacing, and preachy tone similar to what you might hear from a speech from Martin Luther King, Malcom X, or Barack Obama, especially when they are addressing an African American audience. The dry nature of academic writing, which rejects the performing style of AAVE writing, creates a formidable reaction to SAE writing for these students because it is so far detached from the style of their home dialect and overall culture. As Linn states, “Thus the incoming African American students, who have grown up being passionately involved with their arguments, must learn the rhetoric and stylistics of presenting ideas as though they were completely objective and impartial and that the ideas had an objective life of their own” (1995, p. 39). Balester shows how African American students’ perception of prestige is why
they use the passionate tone of a preacher, explaining, “They are attempting to be identified with educated or sometimes literary language by using features stereotypically associated with it. Their stereotypes quite naturally will come from discourse they perceive as elevated or prestigious” (1993, p. 78). I find it most important to draw these writers’ attention to the difference in tones between the two varieties in English. Sometimes this can be a delicate task. We certainly do not want to give the impression that we judge or mock, as this dialect variation has strong racial implications which I would argue miss the mark grossly when we ignore the role of socioeconomics. Nonetheless, I will refrain from the urge to rant on about it in this article. So how can we bring light to this rhetorical variation between SAE and AAVE? One way might be to search the internet for a two speeches, letters, etc. by the same orator (MLK, Malcom X, etc.) and have one written intended for a white, college educated audience and compare that to one written for members of that speaker’s community. The idea is to show our AAVE writers 1) what code switching is and 2) how to do it. Most of the time, they do not even see the AAVE features which makes it necessary for tutors to find a way to bring them to a writers attention when they are present in the writing. I have never experienced an AAVE writer refuse to write SAE (although I might be inclined to view this as refreshing and powerful). Like all other writers on campus, they want to get good grades, pass classes, and graduate. Just because a writer has a difficult time with taking an appropriate and consistent rhetorical approach when they write, does not mean that they are unaware of the social implications attached to them. Thus begins the struggle for a new identity somewhere in between, one that will be accepted by both communities of speakers.

The academy’s expectations of SAE production in college composition papers necessitate an aggressive growth of SAE in the writing of speakers of AAVE in order for the demographic to attain social and vertical mobility. Nonetheless, adherence to expectations and standards by this disadvantaged population is not necessarily the primary concern. As tutors, we are educators, and as educators, we have a responsibility to avoid stifling the African American voice while attempting to instill appropriate SAE writing features for their success in academic work and business. By stifling their style completely, we run the risk of causing more damage than just dry, formulaic, unoriginal term papers; we run the risk of destroying their social and cultural identities. The academy values a sophisticated use of voice, but this is a sophistication which speakers of AAVE, as novice writers, lack. Cooks explains that students “must learn not to think of writing in a hierarchical structure but rather to think of all types of writing as being equally valid” (2004, p. 76). Roozen reminds us to consider “how important it is in human terms to look at the whole person, to support the extracurricular activities as well as the curricular” (2008, p. 30). Throughout my experiences working with speakers of AAVE, I have noticed a strong resistance to this hierarchical structure, especially with students new to an academic community, but the institution has built that structure and has maintained it. These writers are not the only ones who need to stop thinking of writing as a hierarchical structure. We all do. Perhaps this breakdown begins with the tutor. We have the power to be sensitive and encouraging, of bringing awareness to the African American student of the significance of having a strong control over both dialects. Educators have a responsibility to provide more for students than standard methods. As composition tutors, we encourage students to develop their own ideas and arguments by supporting them with evidence and analysis. We explain that we value their opinions, that we are interested in what makes them unique and progressive thinkers. However, we need to listen because listening is a fundamental signal that we truly value what they have to say.

Getting off the soap box, there are definitely practical approaches to working with the writing of speakers of AAVE. One of the best places to begin is just knowing which features are common (and sometimes even unique) in their writing. Like code switching, you may recognize some of
These features as ‘errors’ you might find in an ESL writer’s paper. It should come as no surprise, then, that often the best way to approach these features in an AAVE speaker/writer’s paper is with more direct and explicit feedback as we would an ESL paper.

- They will rarely omit a plural –s if it is pronounced /z/
  The boys and girls bought stamp to mail letters to their three cat.

- Possessive –s in noun possessive construction is often omitted
  The lady purse is pink.

- Regular plural endings omitted
  I’m takin five class this semester.

- 3rd person singular –s is almost always omitted
  Everyone drive to work at the same time.

- Dropped –ed past-tense marker
  We park the car too far away, yesterday.

- There is often an absence of inflected “is” and “are”
  She ( ) mad cuz we ( ) fly.

- “be” used to mark habitual actions in the simple present tense.
  He be callin me all the time.

- “been” used in past perfect and present perfect progressive
  You been sleepin a long time. (past perfect)
  He been sleepin. (present perfect progressive)

- “done” as future perfect or intensifier
  I be done finish when you get here. (future perfect)
  I been done had some. (intensifier)

- Absence of “if” or “whether”
  She don’t know ( ) he gonna come come home.

- Double prepositions are often used.

- Apostrophes are often not included.

Perhaps the list above looks like unforgivable errors for any native speaker of English. However, I urge you to consider further reading if you find yourself having a similar response. Labov (1972) and Smitherman (1977) have done some extensive and fascinating research to determine why these features exist in AAVE. In a nutshell, when Africans entered the American population through the
slave trade, they brought with them nonnative languages with different grammar systems. As they acquired English, just like any other second language learner, certain features of their native languages remained. Researches, including but not limited to Labov (1972) and Smitherman (1977), have identified many of the features in the list above as grammatical rules found in languages native to West Africans. Of course, this is a grossly oversimplified explanation, but I would hope that it prevents anyone from viewing AAVE as an inferior dialect. The following five suggestions are what I consider key to successfully working with AAVE speaking writers:

- Build a rapport with the tutee. Spend some time getting to know them. Help them view you as an ally, as someone who is knowledgeable and genuinely concerned about them as an individual. This trust is absolutely necessary in order to affectively address some of the sensitive issues that will surface. There will be no need to shy away from open communication if proper rapport is established.

- Bring awareness to the features in their writing which are inherently AAVE by attempting to show the differences, especially rhetorical features. Many of the grammar features can be addressed more simply in the beginning as you would with any other writer. However, after building a solid relationship with your tutee, you just might decide to discuss some of the dialectic implications with some of these as well. The importance initially is awareness.

- Openly discuss the cultural, social, economical, and educational implications (again building rapport) as they arise. Do not be afraid to discuss some of the issues we address in this article with your tutee. Just be wise and sensitive. Remember that your ultimate goal is to help the writer with their writing. While open communication is essential, we must be careful not to over indulge and take away from the writer’s right to our time with their writing.

- Address necessary features through practice. Use the internet to find texts that might be valuable in comparing and contrasting rhetorical features in SAE and AAVE. Use handouts and give mini-lessons you are familiar with to address less prominent grammatical ‘errors’. Use many of the same techniques you use with all writers to address higher order concerns (i.e., focus, organization, development). If a writer had trouble understanding your implicit/indirect feedback, try making it more and more explicit/direct until they do. Remember, since AAVE features are similar in many ways to ESL features, we may want to address them similarly as well.

- Communicate the value of maintaining their voice once they gain control of using both SAE and AAVE. Hopefully, during our open discussions, we will have touched on the educational implications brought about through both AAVE and SAE writing. If our tutees reach a place in their writing where they show advanced control over both dialects, we get to embark on the joyous task of helping them find ways to maintain their identity by creatively incorporating some rhetorical features of AAVE. Perhaps once they reach this point, they won’t be coming to tutoring sessions, but if nothing else, we need to encourage individuality by acknowledging the value of a tutee’s voice and teaching them to acknowledge that value as well.

This is a recursive process. It is not linear. It is important to perpetually build trust and rapport, to discuss and communicate openly about said implications and the value of maintaining identity through
voice, all the while bringing to light existing features and providing the appropriate tools to give the writer independent control down the road. Once a strong confidence is established between tutor and tutee, you might find that these are some of the hardest working writers you will ever work with.

References


Chicano English: Understanding a Significant Dialect and its Writers

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.
Learning a New Language for College

Because you have no doubt, by now, read articles from the texts concerning domination of the student, we would like to defend some of the principles of students learning a “new language” for college. Many students and critical theorists are against the “patriarchy” and “colonization” of students being taught college-level discourse. Many define it as dominating, logical and straightforward—elements that feminist theory does not support or endorse. According to Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski in the article “Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center,” academic discourse is stifling and elitist because it advocates University standards. However, we feel that learning the discourse of college is not only necessary but can be helpful in many ways. In order to receive a college degree, a student must learn what it is that the college accepts as “college level discourse” and learn to use it during their time on a college campus. Now, please don’t mistake us for tutors who simply want to dominate tutees and teach them the “right way” to do things. We simply believe that the discourse, or language, of college writing is a useful tool in any student’s arsenal. Not only will learning this way of writing and argumentation help a student to navigate college successfully, but it will also help students to navigate the larger world outside of academia, if the world that they want to navigate mirrors the discourse of a college campus. Again, please don’t mistake us for wanting to take away a discourse that someone uses at home, with friends, or any other area of life that doesn’t coincide with college. Instead, we want to give students another language that they can utilize to be successful in life. No matter what discourse your success calls for, you will have more than one to tap into if you are willing to learn different styles. In this article, we hope to give tutors a practical approach to answering tutees’ questions about why they need to learn this style of academic discourse.

What

Academic discourse is the “language of the university.” It is typically straightforward, clear, concise and “elevated.” By elevated, we are referring to using more complex ideas and higher levels of articulation. In addition, academic language is aimed at producing clarity through organization and logic. That is, it is not conversational, does not employ slang, and is more formal than forms usually used with friends or family members. Reliable sources are also very important to this form of discourse. Because the academic institution is built on perpetuation of higher knowledge, we want to know that the knowledge and information being passed along is intelligent and reliable. Using these reliable sources shows that the student knows how to use the academic language effectively and is able to recognize and utilize the experts in their field of study. It also illustrates that the student knows how to properly research and support an argument being made. Audience is also a very important factor when writing for an academic discourse. The audience usually is those at the collegiate level, although it could include a wider audience, such as the audiences of academic journals and newspapers, among others. All of the traits make this discourse one with a specific tone and style distinct from any discourse outside of academia.
We like to tell our tutees to keep one question in mind when they are writing: “Why is this important?” If what you are writing has no relevance to what you are supposed to be writing about, then it is filler. The writing should not be concerned with “right” or “wrong” opinions, but rather backing up the paper with examples, facts, statistics and other relevant information. This discourse in not focused on a particular content, but more specifically the language used to talk about the content. In other words, this specific language does not change the ideas of the writer; rather, it allows them to use a specific language to express those ideas in a specific forum and for a specific audience.

**Who/Where**

Those that use the discourse of college can be found anywhere on a college campus. The discourse community at the University usually includes professors, instructors and students. Academic discourse is the language usually used in the classroom, tutorials, conferences or any university affiliated programs.

While academic discourse is commonly used on the college campuses, it is also commonly used in the workplace. Additionally, it can also be found in politics/government, media (such as newspapers and news-shows), and snooty coffee shops. Because it is so standard and versatile, the discourse of academia can be used in various places.

**When**

The discourse of academia is used in places you would expect, such as the classroom, workplace, and the newsroom, as well as those you may not expect, such as a bar, a family dinner, a sporting event, or a six-year-old’s birthday party. As we stated in the previous section, when you start looking for it, the discourse of academia is being used in so many places as a sort of standard discourse. However, that is not to say that it always appropriate for every situation. Instead, it gives students (as well as others) a form of discourse to utilize if the situation is appropriate.

The “when” that is most important for tutors is while writing an academic paper. We are here to help students with their writing process, and more specifically, their academic writing process. Bawarshi and Pelkowski argue that basic writing emerged “to protect the university from the threat posed by the racial, rural, immigrant, underprivileged, [and] under-prepared Other” (81). As tutors, we work with a lot of students who are in basic writing courses and it is crucial that we explain to these students the importance of academic discourse. Contrary to the assertion of Bawarshi and Pelkowski, academic discourse used in basic writing can give voice to the “Other.” Learning academic discourse gives underprivileged or under-represented groups a voice in academia. They can use the language of the academy to make themselves heard and use their writing assignments as an outlet to express themselves.
Why

Possibly the easiest way to explain why we use academic discourse at the university is to chalk it up to tradition. Traditionally, the university has promoted a discourse that is very formal and elevated. This explanation is not good enough because both tutors and tutees need to know why they are still using this tradition that was created by old white guys way back when. One reason why academic discourse is still very prominent is the fact that it creates a standard for all students to adhere to. If all students use the same language while at the university, then they are held to the same standards for grading; thus making the grading more objective. Also, if all students use a similar discourse it creates unity in the classroom. Similar to other areas of life, using a college discourse allows students to use the same language in a classroom setting. Another reason why students should use academic discourse is because it advocates the thoughtful use of language. This discourse is highlighted by intellectual speech and the ability to use it. For example, if your teacher consistently used slang and cussing instead of using any formal language while giving a lecture, would you take her seriously? Probably not. It encourages people to articulate their thoughts and thought processes. This makes you more credible and more likely to be taken seriously in academia. By using academic language, it also shows that you value the university standards. If you are coming to college, there is something about academia that you value, and academic discourse is the perfect language in which to express your ability and desire to take the university standards, and any subsequent degrees awarded, seriously. If a student doesn’t want to use the discourse of academia, or take it seriously, then why should they have the privilege of obtaining a job based on their college education? This discourse is also important because when a student gets to the college level, they are engaging with complex thoughts and ideas. These thoughts and ideas come from the professors, the textbooks, and fellow students. In order for a student to express these highly difficult and complex ideas, a formal tone, coupled with major-specific language (e.g. in English studies using the word symbolism) will help the student to get their message across not only to their professors, but also to their peers.

Academic discourse is valued in both a university setting as well as in a job setting. Learning to use academic discourse prepares students for the workplace. In addition, when applying for a job based on a degree from a university, most likely the people responsible for hiring are going to expect that you will be able to communicate effectively in this type of discourse. Many employers value highly developed writing skills and people who know how to use formal language properly. Also, taking into account the fact that academic discourse promotes clarity and organization, it is no surprise that this discourse is also an asset to any college graduate. Academic discourse promotes many of the same skills that employers want in their employees. Another point to make about academic discourse is that it highlights activities that we already engage in everyday. Academic discourse asks students to summarize, compare and contrast, evaluate, argue, etc. These skills are ones that we practice every day, but this discourse values those skills.

Although some composition theorists have argued that academic discourse silences home discourse, we tend to disagree. Bawarshi and Peikowski argue that “Acculturation… is driven by an essentialist and hegemonic pedagogical imperative that academic discourses are universal and empowering” (81). We would argue that academic discourse is not, as Bawarshi and
Pelkowski state, a universal, but instead a discourse that is specific to a certain place and community. Also, it does not promote acculturation but instead it highlights the different discourse communities that exist.

By learning a new discourse, it can open your eyes to the fact that you belong to several discourse communities. If students are not exposed to academic discourse, they may be in danger of presuming that their home discourse is the only discourse. By showing students that they can inhabit two discourse communities, diversity is actually promoted. This allows people to move between discourses more easily and comfortably. In turn, by learning a new discourse (such as academic discourse), students will be able to adapt to new communities and environments that they may not have previously felt comfortable in.

**How**

This “How” section is a little difficult. It could be “How does a student use this discourse?” or “How do we teach this discourse to students?” or “How do we express the importance of this discourse?” There are many possible answers to many possible questions. It could even be “How do I express the importance of this discourse to my tutee?” We think that this last question is one that each tutor has to answer for themselves. However, we think that this article may be a great way for those tutors that are overwhelmed by this question answer it. One fact that we think is important is that learning this discourse helps students to learn that everyone uses many different discourses in many different situations. This particular discourse allows students to navigate the school and workplace more effectively. You may want to discuss what sort of discourse a tutee uses at home in order to explain and connect academic discourse in a way that they will respond positively. For instance, if the tutee uses a home discourse where the culture stresses great respect for elder generations, you may want to express to the tutee that using reliable sources is akin to revering the “wisdom” of older generations. Or if the tutee’s home discourse uses slang, you might want to stress the importance of knowing specific terms and key phrases of the discourse of their major. Another example might be if the tutee’s home discourse utilizes the style of story-telling, you may want to connect this to academic discourse’s use of thesis statement and details that back up that thesis statement. When telling a story, you often back up the point of the story with details that prove the story’s point. In much the same way, making an argument will employ many of the same techniques. These are obviously not all of the ways that a tutor can explain the significance of academic discourse in terms of a tutee’s home discourse, but it is a start. The most important aspect of explaining and discussing this type of discourse is for the tutee to understand its relevance on a college campus. Although many will go out into the world after college and never use this type of discourse again, it is still important for them to learn. It will add to their knowledge base, and may even be a helpful tool in the future. We may not use algebra every day, but it is helpful to know that \( \frac{1}{2} \times \frac{1}{2} = \frac{1}{4} \) when baking a cake.

A very important “how” to discuss is how to teach our tutees academic discourse without silencing their home discourse. Bawarshi and Pelkowski go on to assert that “mastery of academic discourse is often accompanied by a change in one’s point of view” (87). To agree with this statement is to ignore the fact that academic discourse does not promote hegemony of
ideas, but instead a standard of language used to express individual ideas. Academic discourse gives students another language through which they can express themselves.

Ultimately, we are just trying to show the importance of academic discourse and its numerous uses. Learning a new language and a new set of skills is never a bad thing. The goal of college should be to learn and gain knowledge, and academic discourse is just another thing to learn while on campus. This discourse can help students navigate the academic world as well as the business world. As tutors, we must show our tutees that every person belongs to several discourse communities and that each has its own language. Also, by helping our tutees understand academic discourse and how to use it, we can help them become proficient in the language necessary for success in the university.
The Writing Center Catch-22: Helping Writers Succeed While Questioning Our Own Assumptions about Academic Discourse and Standard English

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 CSUS2, 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.
It Is Ok. I Am Expert.

Tutoring is an acquired skill. The time spent in class and studying articles such as this one will not fully prepare you for what you are about to face. A significant portion of it can only be taught to you by the tutee. One case that requires much practice is learning how to tutor someone who has a different major than you.

Now before you think, “Well, maybe I’ll get lucky and avoid it,” you won’t. It’s going to happen. It’s common to be afraid of the idea of tutoring someone in a subject that you are unfamiliar with. How are you to know how to help this person? Because you just unwittingly signed up to tutor any student at any level of any subject, does this mean you now must go out and do a crash research of everything?

The good news is that this is the writing center. It is not the chemistry center or the business center. You don’t need even a general knowledge of the subject that the tutee brings to the session. You are only responsible for helping them improve their writing. And the ability to articulate oneself through the written word is universal across the curriculum.

With this in mind, you may still find yourself wanting to look up your scheduled tutees, maybe check out their Facebook and do a bit of research on their subject prior to your session. Depending upon your zest for knowledge, that could mean anything from spending hours in the library to looking up their subject on Wikipedia. That is ok. Doing your best to familiarize yourself with their subject ahead of time can open the door to swifter modes of communication. And I’m sure the tutee will appreciate your efforts.

But it is highly unlikely that the tutee will bring in something as basic as you were able to learn in those few days prior to your session. In fact, they may not even show up for the session at all. Being a tutor means being flexible and ready to adapt to a new situation at a moment’s notice. Your appointment with the genetic botany major may be cancelled at the last minute and filled by a walk-in who needs help on their psychology thesis. At that point, all the time you spent reading up on plant genetics becomes wasted. It would’ve been better spent working on your own studies or drinking margaritas.

Don’t be afraid. This does not mean the situation is hopeless. Truth be told, there are cases in which a complete ignorance about the subject at hand can actually help the dynamic of the session.

When a tutee signs up for a session, they are often unintentionally placed in a subordinate role right out of the gate. As it is today, the writing center unfortunately has a stigma of being a place for “a lower order of writers who need help getting on the same level as the rest of us.” New tutees come in with the idea that they are somehow not good enough to do this alone and need the help of an authority on writing. Not always, but often enough, they will first admit to
themselves that they have a problem and then show up with their tail between their legs and sheepishly ask for help.

Of course, this is not correct. But it is common. And this kind of dynamic makes for a very poor session, one in which the tutee is quiet and reserved, possibly just handing over their paper and saying, “I need you to fix this for me.”

Our duty as tutors is to use our entire toolbox of skills to combat this. In this case, we will do so by embracing our lack of knowledge. It is not the only way and should not be relied on as a fix-all, but it definitely helps in certain situations.

The goal of this is to turn things around and place them as the authority on the subject. Simple questions regarding the nature of the assignment are helpful for any tutoring session. But now, you can ask simple questions regarding the nature of the discipline. When they tell you what class their paper is for, don’t be afraid to follow that up with an “Ok. What is that exactly?”

Suddenly, they are thrust into the role of the teacher, telling you, the person they originally held in the traditional professor role as “untouchable expert,” about things that they consider to be the most basic. It helps to place the tutor and tutee on a level field. This is key to the writing center model. We are not working in the traditional professor and student roles. We are peers helping peers. No one is supposed to dominate or be the absolute authoritarian. And if this balance is to tip, it should be in favor of the tutee. “Ownership of the piece is the writer’s and must remain so for the greatest growth in writing and revision proficiency to occur” (McAndrew 73).

Showing them that they too are the expert gives them a much needed boost in confidence. They may come in feeling that just because they are having trouble writing, they are no good at anything. This technique quickly dispels any such thoughts. It gets the shy tutees to open up, and it gets the extroverted started on one of their favorite activities: talking.

So much hinges on getting the tutee talking. They become comfortable in their environment, stop focusing on distractions, such as the fact that they are speaking to someone they don’t know personally, and begin working on how they can instead solve the task at hand. Just the act of them talking about something they know gets their brain into the habit of formulating words from ideas. I imagine that would only stimulate similar brain activity and make it easier for them to articulate whatever part of their study they are trying to get down on paper.

Although it works wonderfully, the asking of simple questions is not just for breaking the ice at the beginning of a session. Keep it in mind throughout as a way of perpetuating conversation if you ever find things starting to slow down too much. But you should only use this in moderation and after carefully reading the tutee’s body language, tone of voice, etc. You don’t want to break their train of thought or take the focus away from their goals for the session. And you don’t want to give the impression you’re an idiot, either.
In the end, it’s ok if you don’t know anything about the subject at hand. Just make sure you know how to gauge the situation and help the tutee feel comfortable in their role as an equal in the session and an expert in the subject.
The Value of Writing Center Tutors as Writing Tutors

Current pedagogy attempts to define effective practices in writing centers in response to the perceived potential of this ‘other’ space. Operating outside institutionally imposed expectations, but charged with supporting the less powerful individuals within that institution, tutors and writing center administrators are confronted with a tremendous challenge: support the ‘man’ or fight the ‘man?’ Tutors find themselves at the center of a tug-of-war as theorists vie to define their methods and rescue writing instruction from its quandary of whether to focus on teaching standards or honoring diversity. Much of this discussion stems from differing views on what the purpose of a writing center and, more specifically, a tutor are. In particular, theorists (and practitioners in our class) do not agree on the basic tenets of how a writing center should be structured: most basically, in what subject areas tutors should be trained. Although this seems like a fairly basic question (i.e. we are writing tutors, so shouldn’t we be trained in writing?), it actually poses a subject for much discussion in the world of theory. Most notably, this discussion plays out in the debate between having discipline-specific tutors that focus on particular areas of study and generalized tutors who are trained in the discipline of writing.

The first step we wish to take in order to enter into this conversation is to establish a vocabulary with which to discuss this issue, and, in so doing give a sense of the purpose of this paper. There is no reasonable distinction between what has been described as a “discipline-specific” tutor and a “generalized” tutor. A “discipline-specific” tutor is trained in a specific discipline. So too is the “generalized” tutor. The “generalized” tutor is trained in the discipline of writing and will for our purposes be called a writing-specific tutor, a term that we feel more effectively captures the expertise of tutors working in most writing centers today. Furthermore, this nomenclature is more appropriate for those who staff writing centers, the purpose of which is to tutor students on writing-specific tasks.

In Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences, Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad propose that tutoring is best performed by tutors with specialized training in the disciplines of their tutees. This proposal is based on a 1993 study performed by Jean Kiedaish and Sue Dinitz in which they observe that “students writing papers for upper-level courses would be best served by carefully trained tutors with knowledge of the discipline,” a position McAndrew and Reigstad support (McAndrew 72). The authors argue that although generalized tutors can help writers in all disciplines well enough, “well-trained tutors who are knowledgeable about a discipline can be of even more help because they can read like the audience for the piece, in this case experts in the discipline” (73). Further, although McAndrew and Reigstad recognize the benefits of specialized and writing-specific tutors, they pose that “the best would be to acknowledge areas of expertise among all tutors and cluster that expertise into specialty teams based on academic areas” (73). They conclude that a writing center would function best if it were broken up into schools of study, like “colleges in a university” (73). This, they assert, would allow tutors to have a greater knowledge base of the subject matter students are writing about as well as the conventions of discourse expected in the discipline.

Although the benefit of discipline-specific tutors might be seen as their ability to converse more confidently with the tutee about the area of study, we might conclude from this, however, that the discipline-specific tutor is in greater danger than a writing-specific tutor of
focusing on content rather than the writing process of the tutee. This concern is echoed again and again by theorists attempting to address perceived problems of writing centers. If North’s contention is correct and tutors improve writers and not texts, then discipline-specific tutoring can have a negative impact on tutoring sessions. Potentially, these tutors could harm a tutee’s development as a writer by focusing on helping her or him create a text that is adequate in regards to content, instead of helping the tutee become a more successful writer over all. In the seemingly never-ending battle to discourage academia from seeing the writing center as a “fix-it” shop, there is a de-emphasis on grammar and other mechanical concerns. To tell tutees that we won’t fix your grammar but we’ll be happy to fix your content will certainly impair efforts to assert the mission of writing centers as places that seek to improve the writer rather than mastery of content.

Discipline-specific tutors would presumably also have a stronger grasp of the conventions of the discipline than the tutee. This too can lead to a tutoring relationship in which the tutor is seen as the expert and the writer a mere disciple, a dynamic that very closely mirrors the classroom and therefore diminishes the benefits of the writing center as a space in which the benefits of collaboration is a driver of success. Furthermore, unless the tutor has access to the classroom, even the most skilled discipline-specific tutor will not be as qualified as the student to understand the writing task. While many instructors practice the rhetorical techniques of writing effective prompts, most writing tasks are communicated not just through the written prompt but also through classroom practices, exercises and culture. Thus, it is the tutee that must be held responsible for understanding and communicating to the tutor the purpose of the writing task, something they may feel unqualified to do during a session with a perceived “expert.”

According to McAndrew and Reigstad, research on the benefits of peer group work has shown that peer groups “develop their own metalanguage about writing that allows them to discuss writing processes and products in ways that teacher-supplied language rarely does” (McAndrew 9). This “teacher-supplied language,” however, seems to closely describe the kind of language discipline-specific tutors would speak. Instead of bringing in a new, quizzical voice that tutors often do when faced with a subject they are unfamiliar with, discipline-specific tutors may simply reinforce the language of the teacher. The idea behind having more specially trained tutors is that in engaging in discourse with a discipline-specific tutor, the tutee would further gain access to that discourse community. The hope is that through working with the tutor, the tutee would gain a better understanding of the content area they are studying and the conventions they are expected to use in writing. While this sounds ideal, it does not, however, allow for a space that is at least partially separated from the requirements of the instructor and a discipline in which students can engage in sincere questioning of their subject. This oversight is unfortunate as it suggests the omnipresence of the instructor and institution.

What is particular about writing centers that entices so much interest from theorists is that they pose a place where the institution may be challenged because of the student-centered nature they embody. One thing that is often glossed over in many discussions of the role of writing centers and their tutors is the population that comprises these centers: tutees are students and tutors are students. What these players have in common is that they are learners, primarily engaged in a quest to gain knowledge, and they are people that almost certainly participate in various discourse communities. To further delve into the implications of this, we turn to feminist theory and how it can be used to describe the work being done in today’s writing centers. According to McAndrew and Reigstad, there are “three distinct aspects of feminist teaching” (which, it is important to note, don’t have anything to do with being male or female, oppressed or
At the center of feminist theory is the desire to encourage a deeper engagement on the part of the learner in three ways: feminist theory “redefines subject mastery as seeking knowledge on personal terms and in concert with others,” “it awakens students’ voices, encouraging and supporting them in expressing their responses and life experiences,” and “it establishes a new authority in the classroom: Students are responsible for their own learning because the learning is grounded in their life experiences” (McAndrew 7). While tutors might struggle to see how to enact the first two tenets in half-hour tutoring sessions with drop-in tutees, we might all agree that learning should be the responsibility of the learner—and is, perhaps, only successful under those conditions. We should not shy away from placing a significant portion of the responsibility for their learning process on the tutee, for it is their education for which they come to the writing center. Tutees should be expected to bring the knowledge of their own discipline with them to a session, including content and conventions, while tutors should bring the knowledge they have of their discipline as well, their knowledge of writing. We can, of course, help them determine where to find the information they need about their discipline if they do not have it. However, tutors are not simply there to reinforce the knowledge of the instructor and the institution the tutee is already coping with, but to help them find their own place as writers within their discipline. We do not need to be experts in other disciplines in order to help students understand the knowledge base and expectation of their disciplines more clearly through discussion. If we come to a session aware that there are other ways of thinking and knowing in various colleges around campus, then we can help students become more knowledgeable members of the academic writing community, as well as the language and knowledge community they wish to belong to, no matter what community that is.

In her essay, “Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center,” Andrea Lunsford advocates for a writing center based in collaboration, specifically “collaboration that is attuned to diversity” (Lunsford 51). From her extensive research, Lunsford enumerates many benefits of collaborative learning, including enhanced problem solving skills, interdisciplinary thinking, and a “deeper understanding of others” (49). A collaborative view of the writing center such as this would capitalize on the benefits of a feminist approach for tutoring described above that “redefines subject mastery as seeking knowledge on personal terms and in concert with others” (McAndrew 7). Here, the question is not how do we overcome differences between tutors and tutees, but rather, how do we capitalize on them. Lunsford connects this benefit to the demands of the workplace by citing reports from the Labor Department indicating that to be successful in today’s workforce, students “will need to be able to work with others who are different from them and to learn to negotiate power and control” (52). The idea that students need to learn to “negotiate power and control” is not new, and the question remains to be definitively answered if learning happens best in an environment that is teacher-led, student-led, or defined by power-sharing/decentered authority. Writing center advocates invariably come out on the side of a decentered authority. When tutors and tutees are both able to approach a tutoring session as learners and experts, who each have valuable knowledge to contribute to academic discussion, tutoring sessions can become a place where difference is not simply “dealt with,” but rather where it is what ignites the academic curiosity and discussion that is necessary for learning to occur.

When tutoring takes place with discipline-specialized tutors, the equal exchange of differing questions and expertise is lost, for the ownership lays with the tutor, as that is where the knowledge resides. Tutors would clearly know more about the subject matter and the writing conventions than the tutee, leaving the tutor in the power position. In tutoring sessions with
writing-specific tutors, on the other hand, knowledge resides in both parties and opportunities to generate new, shared knowledge emerge, a benefit expressly acknowledged by feminist theory. A writing-specific tutor can offer the kind of audience that asks the tutee to take authority over the subject she or he is addressing, for in most cases, the tutee will know more about their content, even if the tutor knows more about the writing process in general. Instead of offering another audience similar to the instructor, one who knows the content and conventions better than the student, the writing tutor can provide a much safer space that gives more room for the tutee to be the expert. This equalizes the subject positions between tutor and tutee, for they both possess a level of expertise and can therefore work collaboratively as learners. This can allow students to develop the “voice” feminist theory calls for because it respects the knowledge and worldview of the tutee, not just the expert tutor or instructor. According to Rebecca Moore Howard, in her essay “Collaborative Pedagogy,” “students can teach each other; more important, they can discover things that individually they might not” (59). Howard quotes Lunsford and Ede, who claim that “successful collaboration … allows not only for ‘group cohesion’ but also for ‘creative conflict’ and the protection of ‘minority views’” (65). When generalized tutors place students as “responsible for their own learning” and expect them to contribute their own “life experience” in a meaningful way to the session, then collaboration can be successful because the tutor’s and the tutee’s views are both placed as the “minority view.” Neither viewpoint is privileged if both come as equals who have expertise in differing areas of study. They can each contribute and thereby create new knowledge, not just reaffirm the knowledge supplied by instructors.

Writing center tutoring is based on the idea that collaboration is an effective learning method. Ideally, collaborative learning decenders authority, reduces the stakes for writing, and fosters growth through an appreciation of differences. However, this appreciation of difference has not always been the focus of collaborative learning. According to Lunsford and Ede, “collaborative learning theory has from its inception failed to challenge traditional concepts of radical individualism and ownership of ideas and has operated primarily in a traditional and largely hierarchical way” (Howard 61). In her essay “Peer Response in the Multicultural Composition Classroom: Dissensus—A Dream (Deferred),” Carrie Shively Leverenz also explores this deficiency. She states that “although (early collaborative) pedagogy does give students practice in how to become members of established knowledge-making communities, it does not give them a mechanism for critiquing those communities” (2). How to teach this ability to question the institution in which one operates is keeping theorists everywhere awake at night. Luckily for us, as writing center tutors, we are inclined to encourage this kind of questioning, whether we mean to or not. Because of our ‘in-between’ role—not quite instructors, but not quite devoid of all authority—the collaborative environment we create will naturally be a place where standards and value systems are challenged. Collaboration at its roots encourages questioning because people share their systems of thought and in this transaction, thinking changes. We do not need to become experts in the disciplines of our tutees, but rather become experts in sharing and receiving knowledge, for in order for collaboration to really work, both parties must come to value the knowledge of the other. If one contributor is the expert in everything, it is not collaboration, just another classroom.

Perhaps to answer our question of how exactly our tutors should be trained we should consider why we have a writing center at Sac State in the first place. In general, we think it is fairly safe to say that most of the tutors in our writing center are tutors because they feel that writing is an important process that students should learn, and believe that through discussing the
process of writing with a peer, students can become better writers and more confident thinkers. Through approaching the concept of the writing center with respect for the discipline of writing and for the learning process of students, we should not feel the need to convert our center into a biology or history tutoring center. Providing an environment that values collaboration and shared experience and expects students to be responsible and active learners in their own writing process will encourage learning among both tutor and tutee in a way that allows both to succeed in and out of the institution.

Works Cited


Becoming a Junior at Sac State comes with its own right of passage: the WPJ. The WPJ (Writing Placement for Juniors) exam is a placement test that will allow the student to be placed in the English class that will help them the most. Students taking the test will either be placed directly into their Writing Intensive (WI) class that they need to graduate, or they may be required to take one or two additional English classes before they take their WI requirement. This is to ensure each student maximum success when they finally do take the WI course.

However, since not all students excel at timed writing tests, or may even feel that they could really benefit from a foundational writing course, there is another option. Students do not have to take the WPJ. Students can choose to take the English 109M (for multilingual students) or the English 109W course that will serve the same purpose as the WPJ placement test. Instead of a timed writing test, this choice allows students to enroll in a semester-long course where they will write several essays. At the end of the semester, the students in these courses will turn in a portfolio containing the essays and a cover letter that shows how they improved. Much like the WPJ, after students finish the 109M or 109W course, they will then be placed into the next English course that is the best fit for them.

How will each student know which choice is best for him or her? This is where the tutors at the Writing Center come in. Our job, as tutors, is to explain this choice to the students/writers and help them decide which option may be the best for them. We can do this by discussing their current reading and writing habits. Ultimately, it is up to the students to decide what is best for them. Our focus as tutors should be to help them work through this difficult choice.

Choosing the WPJ

If the students/writers read frequently, feel they have a lot of previous college writing experience, feel confident that their writing will earn them a good grade in their classes, feel comfortable writing in an academic style, are comfortable and confident in timed-writing situations, and are confident as editors and revisers of their own work, then these students/writers are good candidates for the WPJ.

Understanding the WPJ:

- Students will take the WPJ only once
- The WPJ has two parts:
  - the student will be presented with 4-5 mini texts, such as a cartoon, a map, an advertisement, a written excerpt, a table, etc; the student will then figure out an issue that relates to all of the presented texts, take a position on this issue, and write a short argumentative essay
    - students will be given one hour to complete this portion of the test
the student will then write a separate, critical, self-reflection essay about their writing process: how they write and why they write
  - students will be given 30 minutes to complete this portion of the test

Once the test is complete, students will be placed into the writing course that fits their level of writing best:
  - some students will be able to take their WI class next (3 unit placement)
  - some students can enroll in the WI course along with the 1 unit, group tutoring, 109X course (4 unit placement)
  - some students will need to take one or more additional writing courses before they are allowed to take their WI course (6 or 10 unit placement)
    - this will ensure each student the very best chance of succeeding in the WI class when it is eventually taken

For more information on the WPJ, visit the website at (??????????????)

Choosing the 109M/W Course

If the students/writers do not read frequently, have not written much at the college level, are not sure if their writing will earn them a good grade in their classes, are not comfortable writing in an academic style, are not comfortable in timed-test situations, and need a lot of help from teachers and peers for editing and revision, then these students/writers may be more successful if they choose to take the 109M/W course.

Benefits in Choosing the 109M/W Course:

- Students will have a chance to work on their writing skills throughout the semester so that they can ultimately feel confident when taking their WI course
  - students will be given multiple opportunities to work on the same paper, learning to revise and edit
- Students can come to the Writing Center and get additional tutoring on each essay throughout the semester
- Students can gain writing confidence at their own pace and not be subjected to the potentially stressful, timed-writing situation
- The 109M/W course can also provide essential, foundational writing practice for students who have been away from school for an extended period of time

Choosing Between 109M or 109W:

- Students whose first language is not English and who receive an EDT score of 4 or higher should choose 109M
- Students whose first language is English should choose 109W
- During the first week of classes, the students can be moved into the correct 109 course if they have registered for the wrong 109 course
Placed into Writing Intensive + 109X: What does that mean?

English 109X is a 1 unit, credit/no credit, writing-intensive, student-centered, group tutorial workshop. The 109X course will provide group tutorial support for Writing Intensive course assignments, and it will include additional instruction in academic writing, focusing on the writing process: writing a rough draft, revising the draft, and editing the final draft before turning it in.

Students who receive a 4 unit placement from the WPJ or a 109M/W class will be required to enroll in 109X along with their upper division Writing Intensive course. Students who receive a Writing Intensive + 109X placement can enroll in any Writing Intensive class but must also enroll in the matching, supplemental 109X tutoring session. Each discipline will have a small-group 109X tutoring session available. Students need to make sure they enroll in the 109X that matches the discipline their Writing Intensive class is in.

The Role of the Writing Center and the WPJ

In addition to presenting each student/writer with the available options (WPJ or 109M/W), tutors also have the opportunity to do much more. If students want to practice before they take the WPJ, then the Writing Center is the perfect place to brush up on basic writing and editing skills so that they can approach the WPJ confidently. There is a sample WPJ test available for students and tutors to know what to expect. If students choose to enroll in the 109M/W course, the Writing Center is the ideal place to get additional help with their writing. Either way, the Writing Center and its tutors play a vital role in helping each student at Sac State achieve success as they work towards their degree.

Appendix:

- Self Assessment
- Sample WPJ Test
- WPJ Grading Criteria
MAKING THE GWAR CHOICE:  
ENGLISH 109W/109M OR THE WRITING PLACEMENT FOR JUNIORS (WPJ)?
*at each number below, please circle which statement you *MOST* agree with.*

1. I read frequently  
   I do not read frequently

2. I have been asked to write frequently in my college classes  
   I have not been asked to write frequently in my college classes

3. I feel confident that my writing will earn me a good grade in my classes  
   I am unsure if my writing will earn me a good grade in my classes

4. I am comfortable writing in academic discourse  
   I am not entirely comfortable writing in academic discourse

5. I am comfortable writing in a timed-writing situation  
   I prefer having the chance to revise my writing

6. I can assess my own work without relying on teacher feedback  
   I depend on teacher feedback to tell me if I’m doing a good job with my writing

*Now, please count the number of questions for which you circled the top statement.  
If you circled four or more of the top statements, taking the WPJ may be the best option for you.  
If you circled four or more of the bottom statements under each number, taking English 109W/109M might be the best option for you.*
Essay #1 (60 minutes/90 minutes for MLi)

Several significant issues could emerge from the following five texts. Please read the texts and write an essay in which you not only identify one significant issue, but also take a position on that issue. Use information from at least three of the texts provided, as well as your own experience, to support your position.

Adults were asked the following question: Do you feel that you will need more training or education in order to maintain or increase your earning power during the next few years? Their responses are tabulated below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEEL MORE TRAINING/EDUCATION NEEDED</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TO MAINTAIN/INCREASE EARNING POWER DURING NEXT FEW YEARS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Based on ever employed)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Yes %</th>
<th>No %</th>
<th>DK/RF %</th>
<th>Total %</th>
<th>NI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(100)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-39</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-55</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(283)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(127)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 and over</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than H.S.</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. grad</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(565)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voc/Community college</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some 4-year college</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College grad</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>(328)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Less than one-half of one percent.


From “Winning over young voters” by Tamara Draut, San Francisco Chronicle

To win young voters, politicians need to understand that today's youth -- who are in the thick of their battle to work or educate their way into the middle class -- are being hit by a one-two punch.

The economy no longer generates widespread opportunity and our public policies haven't picked up any of the slack. As soon as they graduate from high school, young adults are plunged into an obstacle course that has dramatically changed in just one generation. From the price of a college education to the new cutthroat realities of the economy, young adults are trying to establish themselves in a society that has grown widely unequal and less responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens. At each step in the obstacle course to adulthood -- getting an education, finding a job, starting a family and buying a home -- our nation's public structures are showing major signs of decay and distress. The outcome: This generation has less economic mobility and security than other generations.
What are some of the specific issues politicians would be smart to address? The high cost of college and the dramatic rise in student loan debt, to start. Today, the average college graduate leaves school with $20,000 in student loans. Far more smart young people never make it through college because they can't scrape together enough loans, grants or money from minimum-wage jobs to foot the bill. Today, the cost of attending a public four-year state college is just more than $11,000 -- about what it cost to attend a private university, adjusted for inflation, a generation ago.

http://smartpei.typepad.com/robert_patersons_weblog/kathy%20sierra%20college%20ed.jpg

According to 2003 Census Bureau statistics on earnings in the United States:

--Associate's degree holders average $8,000 a year more than high school graduates.
--Workers with bachelor's degrees make nearly $23,300 more a year than high school graduates.
--Master's degree holders average $11,300 more a year than bachelor's degree holders.
Essay #2 (30 minutes/60 minutes for MLi)

Please read the following text and write an essay in which you discuss to what extent this statement resembles your own experience with writing.

“Learning to write is a complex process, both individual and social, that takes place over time with continued practice and informed guidance.”

Statement on Learning Outcomes for First Year Composition from the Council of Writing Program Administrators.
Sacramento State Writing Placement for Juniors (WPJ)
Placement Rubric
Tier 2

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<th>Identifies and articulates a focus arising from the prompt: sets a meaningful task that addresses the readings provided.</th>
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<td>Articulates writer’s own position in analyzing a significant issue: meets the expectations of academic audience(s) with regard to establishing a controlling idea that is analytical.</td>
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<td>Develops an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion that analyze major ideas surrounding the issue: produces a developed and cohesive academic composition employing conventions that are appropriate for the genre selected.</td>
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<td>Develops writer’s position appropriately for an academic audience by incorporating support using specific details and examples: cites the readings provided, adequately integrating them into text.</td>
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<td>Provides evidence of awareness of writing as a process: demonstrates awareness of or reflects critically on writer’s own literacy history and practices.</td>
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<td>Demonstrates awareness of conventions of academic discourse: makes appropriate rhetorical choices regarding purpose, format, evidence, tone, conventions, and organization, and genre.</td>
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<td>Displays evidence of editing with adequate control of grammar and mechanics appropriate to an early draft. Errors do not slow the reader, impede understanding, nor seriously undermine the authority of the writer. Grammatical errors, inappropriate word choice, or incorrect usage may occur throughout the essay but rarely interfere with effective communication.</td>
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My first experience with theory took place the first semester of my English Graduate Studies. I was taking a literature class on the Ethics in African-American Aesthetics and rather than just diving into the actual literature, we spent the first class meetings reading and discussing literary theory. Then, as the course went on, we continued to read articles of theory alongside the literature. I hated theory. It was intangible, dense, and didn’t really seem to relate to the material of the course. The articles on theory felt like a complete waste of time. After just a few weeks I stopped reading the theory articles and focused mainly on the literature. Even though literary theory is not a part of this course, I can see how a student could be put off by the theoretical material that is presented in a course that requires actual practice, a course like this one.

Theory is hard; there’s no denying that. It’s written in a complicated language and it deals with abstract ideas that don’t always necessarily connect to the discussion or practice of the course. Thus, our immediate response, at least mine was, is to ignore it and focus on practical material since this offers realistic tips and techniques. Furthermore, reading material that deals with practice seems to provide answers and suggestions for situations we have, or possibly could, experience. Hence, the readings that regard practice seem to hold more interest and possibly more value with the students of this course. However, we cannot forget the value of theory. The theory of this course, as it does in any course, has immense value. Yet, it is almost impossible to understand its value unless we first understand what theory is and why it is used in a course like this one.

Theory, at least in my understanding, is an analytic structure designed to articulate and explain certain observation. So, theories are composed when people make an observation and try to rationally explain what just happened. Therefore, another way to look at theory is as a description that is followed by a reasonable explanation. For example, if I sat outside and watched a trail of ants gather food, I could begin my theory on ants by first describing how ants pass food from one another, then I could fully formulate my theory by explaining that the reason why ants gather through trails is because it is faster for them to mobilize food by passing it down then it would be if each ant took their own piece of food all the way back to their colony. But what does all this stuff have to do with the writing center and tutoring?

Theory provides an ongoing discussion in a variety of academic fields. Because theory is a descriptive explanation, it allows us to see how different people, people of different places, origins, cultures, or academic trainings, view similar situations. For instance, just like my ant theory, Writing Center theorist observe the practices that are taking place in a particular writing center and try to formulate an explanation for these occurrences. This allows us to learn from the observations of others. So, we can discuss issues that concern writing center across state, country, or entire academic world. From our understanding of how things generally work, we can apply forms of different theories to produce practice that meets our own writing center’s specific concerns, or even possibly creating our own theories in response to the theories of other people. Nonetheless, the purpose of reading theory in a writing center course like this one seems to be to allow us, the tutors, the opportunity to engage the academic conversation surrounding writing centers so that we may produce solutions in a collaborative spirit.

The value of theory, then, seems to surround the practice it can produce. For me, this is where theory gives the tutor creative power; a theory gives and observation and an explanation
but might not offer any further practical suggestions. It is the responsibility of the tutor, or class of tutors, to create methods of practice that not only reflect the theories but also reflect the demands of the student writers. So, when we read a person’s theory on postmodernism, for instance, we can decide if that is a theory that seems to hold value in our writing center and university, then work on creating tutoring strategies that take into account the concerns of postmodern theory. Furthermore, I could incorporate postmodern theory by developing a tutoring strategy that offers students solutions that take into account the complexity that is involved in writing and the idea that good writing is relative. For example, my tutoring sessions would be more descriptive than prescriptive so that the student can understand the general, big picture, concepts that are involved in the writing process as oppose to just having a tutor telling them what to write without much reasoning. These sessions would also include the conversation of relativity by having me, the tutor, describe to the student how writing choices that hold value in academic discourse may not hold the same value in areas like creative writing, for instance.

As you can see, theory does not provide the answer; it provides, perhaps, a starting point, a foundation, to the creation of our own answers. Thus, we should not look at theoretical works for tips on tutoring; we should look at theoretical readings to serve as a foundation for the tutoring techniques that we can create, as individuals or a class, to fit the specific demands of our writing center.

This means, though, if we are taking on the freedom to create practices, that we have the responsibility to thoroughly understand the various theoretical works we come across. I will admit that understanding theory is a challenging task, but it’s one worth doing. So, here are some suggestions for trying to understand theory:

**Read to understand**
Don’t focus too much on agreeing or disagreeing with the author right away; you’ll have plenty of time to do that when applying the theory. Before anything, make sure you have a clear understanding on what the author is observing and the explanation she offers for her observation. Once you have a clear understanding of the theory then you can decide on whether or not it holds value.

**Focus on the parts that make most sense**
Some of theory is dense and deals with abstract issues. So, if the task of grasping all of the connections the author is trying to make seems too difficult, then first focus on the things that you do understand and let that be your starting point to understanding.

**Discuss the theory with your peers**
Nothing has worked better for me than working with a group of my peers to collaboratively make some sense of a theoretical text. When working with a group, you can discuss the parts that made sense to you and question the things that didn’t make sense, and perhaps one of the things that one of the group members understood was the thing that had questions about. Overall, talking to people about a text, whether I understand it or not, helps me develop a better understanding of it.
One thing that becomes apparent when you take this class is that there is more going on in the Writing Center than people just editing papers. Even over the first few weeks, you read through theories and arguments that place a theoretical weight on every mark of the paper and word from the tutor’s mouth. Students coming into the Writing Center often expect the tutors to have a type of expertise in the craft of writing that will “fix” their paper, which can conflict with the more communal and student-based educational goals of the writing center. For example, going through and correcting a student’s grammar may actually weaken their writing process if they do not learn why it may be “incorrect” and how to avoid it in the future. Moreover, telling a student to write in a more “academic voice” could be another way of subduing the individual culture of the student under the monopolizing uniformity of an impersonal establishment. The clients at the Writing Center are students at the university, and they rarely bring in writings outside of assignments to work on. So as tutors in the Writing Center, we are interacting directly with the pedagogies of what is typically called “higher level” education. Bound within the academic institution, the Writing Center becomes an extension of that academic discourse, but is also somehow separate from it. We exist in a type of liminal space where we are familiar with the demands and expectations of the classes and teachers, but are not (always) the ones running the class or grading the papers. Marilyn Cooper suggests in her article, “A Cultural Studies Agenda,” that cultural constraints affect students’ writings and the tutor’s attempt to help them. She goes on to state how tutors in the Writing Center are in a good position to change the discourse of writing in the university.

So how do we incorporate all of these invisible influences of culture and theory that can fog the room when we sit next to a paper-in-hand student? It is “all well and good” that a Writing Center can be a type of frontier for the expedition into a new and possibly more beneficial discourse on writing, but how can a frontiersperson know whether to take Cooper’s or North’s directions? Is Brooks’ map of the land to minimal? Myers’ fraught with traps? DiPardo’s just a big picture of Fannie? How can a tutor come to terms with these pages of theory and find an efficient way to practice it if they are unsure what theory to take? Through my own experiences in 410A and the Writing Center, it is not necessarily about choosing a theory, but taking what you can from all of them and trying to implement the most apt parts during the individual tutoring sessions. Since I am fond of metaphors, I am drawn towards one as a means to explain: Each reading is like a string that is also attached to other strings of theories from which the article draws its argument from (like Grimm drawing from Friere). As a tutor, we can gather all of these strings (or as many as we can) into a ball of approaches that we take into the Writing Center. Once in there, throw the ball and bat it around with the student writer to see what strings come out. As some of the readings address, it is extremely difficult to setup a unified approach for tutoring student writers. Each student comes into the Writing Center with unseen histories and experiences coming from within and outside of academia. A “multicultural” student may come from a social background that encourages them to be quiet and absorb while they are trying to learn something, while another may need to engage and speak out loud in order to get their thought process moving. Furthermore, we as
tutors also have our own backgrounds and learning/teaching styles that seem to work best with our individual personalities. So it can help to have all of the strings with you when you go into the tutoring session, as long as you are critically aware of your interaction with the student.

Being critically aware of yourself and the student can be a difficult task. However, engaging the student as a person instead of an object to be transformed may help you gauge some of the reactions to your approach. Make them aware that you are there to try and help them, but that you are a person as well and that if both of you work together, refining the paper may become an easier process. This can hopefully provide a context for using different strategies in an effort to reach one that speaks to the specific student in front of you. Not only can it provide you some leeway if you need to switch approaches, but will hopefully make the student more comfortable about giving you feedback when they do not necessarily understand the approach you are taking. With this sort of context established, you can then start throwing the string-ball back and forth with the student to see what approaches/theories seem to work the best for that student. Try a “feminist” approach of promoting the student’s voice by asking them more open-ended questions about their writing. Ask yourself if the student seems to be responding well to this approach, and also think about what you are trying to accomplish by using that theory. Doesn’t seem to be working? Maybe it’s time to cut that string and take a “patriarchal” approach by using more direct methods. Create lists for the students to fill out about their writing (i.e. supporting examples, main themes, transitional words to use, etc.), or give them focused writing assignments. Doesn’t seem to be working? Maybe it’s time to tie the strings together and switch in and out of the theories depending on how and when they seem to be effective. If brainstorming, maybe have the student create a list of possible topics/responses to the prompt and follow it up with an open-ended question about which one appeals to them more and why. Or maybe reverse it. Ask the student for their reaction to the prompt or the subject matter and then have them create a list of supporting examples to see which approach may have more sustenance.

To elaborate a little further on how one can incorporate multiple theories, I’ll provide a personal example of a tutoring session I had with a drop-in. The student was working on a paper for his portfolio in an English 1 class. He had already turned in a draft of the paper and came to the writing center to correct some of the “mistakes” the teacher had marked and to rewrite it. At one point in the session, we turned to the use of passive voice since that was one of the aspects the teacher marked throughout the paper. I originally tried to be more non-directive by asking the student where he was using passive voice and for possible ways to rewrite the sentence. After a short while it became clear that the student was not familiar with passive voice and so I decided to switch to a more directive approach. I started by giving him a technical definition that passive voice is when there is a form of the to-be verb followed by a past participle such as the phrase “bombs were dropped.” We then turned to his paper to find examples where he was doing the same thing. At this point we could have gone through and corrected the parts where he used passive voice, but I wanted him to understand why it may be a concern for his teacher. I explained to him how passive voice often removes the subject from the sentence which can cause the sentence to appear less “active” and make it hard to determine who/what the sentences are focusing on. He understood this and saw the merit to removing it in his writing. However, not wanting to solidify a hegemonic stance on writing, I went on to tell him how academic writing often has a standard against using passive voice and
that some teachers, like his, may mark him down for using it. Because of this, he may have to comply with the standard considering that the audience for his paper is a grading professor. But I did not want him to think that passive voice was some kind of disease that should be removed from all writing, so I also provided some examples of when passive voice may be acceptable, such as if he wanted to subdue the subject in order to bring the object to the foreground. I wanted him to choose to use or not use it rather than feel like he had to. That he would remove it from his paper because he understood the expectations of his audience and decided to write more actively rather than thinking that it is the way to write; that passive voice was a bane to be removed (For example, here I use passive voice because the subject that would remove the passive voice is irrelevant to my aim of the sentence). I wanted him to be aware of the cultural influences of the institution that were influencing his writing and to conform to them when he thought it was appropriate, but to also be aware that it is only one of the many language cultures that he may interact with. One can even see this variance in the cultural expectations of writing within the academic community since some professors are less concerned with passive voice than others. So again, it comes back to making the student critically aware of his audience and the “academic voice” that they often expect him to use.

Like many of the articles for the class, my writing and examples here may have some holes or may not touch on other considerations that may be equally important. However, that does not mean that you can’t take some of the insights in those arguments and apply them as you see fit. Just because the essayists discuss the theories in their writings does not necessarily mean that you have to stick to their contexts. Make their theories your own! Throw them in the boiling pot! It also helps to understand that each session cannot always be the “perfect session” where tutor and student leave with supreme understanding and an “A” paper in the making. Tutoring is a craft just as writing is a craft. It takes multiple drafts, and sometimes a “bad grade,” to realize what you need to focus on or improve. But do not get discouraged as each session is a chance to understand a little more about your own tutoring beliefs and exposes you to another type of student that you can try and help.
“Don’t Stop Believing!”: An Approach to Theory

I have always been a fan of theory whether it is to do with literature or composition. The idea that you can look at one text or idea and view it from multiple perspectives has always drawn me into the world of theory. When, in our tutoring class, we were assigned certain articles that seemingly forced a theory into our tutoring approach I felt somewhat at home. In contrast, many of our classmates found that the majority of the articles were theory heavy and had little to no practical applications. I was completely taken aback by the strong feelings towards the articles and the idea that the author was personally attacking us. Perhaps because the language was strong and at times biased contributed to these feelings, however, this does not make the argument any less insightful. Theoretical concepts can be useful in and of themselves if only to give us an alternative way to view tutoring. We should look for what can be useful and fuse together those ideas that coincide with our own set of practices and ideologies. Many more questions then answers arose out of our discussions on these theories both on the postings online as well as in class.

A significant amount of our classmates viewed many of these articles as ways to promote an agenda that stemmed from those theories. For example, Marilyn M. Cooper’s “Really Useful Knowledge” was an article that argued for student awareness of the limitations placed on them by the university and ways to negotiate within these limitations to exercise student agency. While many read this article as a way to empower students others regarded it as an elitist writer putting forth Marxist ideas for the sake of the writer’s political agenda. A possible reading could be read this way due to the Marxist jargon used when expressing her ideas, but the point of the reading was completely missed. Cooper believes students need to be informed about the structure of their education system so that they will not fall prey to traditional ideas that will stifle progress for them and by connection progress for society. As educators and tutors we need to be aware of our own motivations and by doing so we see that these motivations are what set our own agendas when tutoring. What needs to be addressed first is what your ideas of education is and what your role is as an educator or tutor. There are those who believe that education’s place in society is to help students think critically, allowing them to make decisions that will ultimately help them succeed in the world outside of college and academia. In order for them to do this they need to also succeed within academia if they plan on using their academic credentials for this purpose. This is my own belief and so this is what informs my agenda when I set forth to tutor.

In class, we were not in short supply of controversial ways to approach our tutoring sessions and “Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center“ by Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski was no exception. B & P (what we called them in class) argued for an approach in the writing center where students are made aware of what is being done to them when they are being taught how to become more fluent with academic discourse. When students learn how to use academic rhetoric, they are being changed both in how they communicate and think at school and at home. If, for example, prior to being exposed to academic discourse we had a different mode of communicating and an alternative way of viewing a certain subject, then academic discourse would alter that mode and perspective when we are introduced to it if we were not made aware of the changes that could possibly affect our perspective and home discourse. Both these articles provide an insight into how our exposure to the academy has its limitations, in
addition to its opportunities, and how we are socially constructed by the knowledge that we acquire. Both of these approaches fall in line with my own views and so I incorporate them or attempt to when tutoring.

The articles provided in class are different lenses that give you a variety of ways to approach tutoring. Many of these approaches use theory to explain their tutoring methods and while some provide useful knowledge that is practical, others only provide ways to view tutoring with practical examples making a brief appearance if at all. It is up to you whether or not you should stick to concrete examples that will help you get by during the semester as well as the remainder of your educational career or if you want to approach tutoring as not only giving the student practical advice but also how to view current educational settings and standards. Once again, what do you think the role of the tutor is? Do we adhere to university standards to get a passing grade or can we find a way to make the student more aware of their environment in addition to working on those grades? As you can see, more questions arise then do answers but I can provide some suggestions.

Something I heard in class gave me an interesting idea on how to approach the theoretical texts that we were given in class. Peter Elbow, a compositional theorist you might encounter suggested the Believing Game and the Doubting Game when confronted with an idea you do not agree with. As students, we are fairly competent in the Doubting Game because we are taught to approach any text we are assigned with a critical eye and we look for flaws. We not only do this with texts but with others’ beliefs on a day-to-day basis. What I am suggesting is not only to play this Doubting Game, but to engage in the Believing Game as well. In order to do this, we must not only be willing to hear someone else’s point of view but also try to believe what it is that is being argued. If we try to believe a certain perspective then we are more likely to find the good in it and not immediately turn away from it and junk it. Once engaged in the believing game and we begin to see some value in an argument we might also see certain flaws in our own oppositional views, thereby helping us re-work and fine tune our beliefs.

In addition to this Believing Game, you can also ask yourselves some questions that will avoid mostly negative conclusions. Firstly, what did you like about the article? What is one thing that you can use in a tutoring session? What could have been done better in the article? If for some reason, you cannot engage in the Believing Game and you cannot find one useful tidbit, it could be because the article caused within you such a visceral reaction that you weren’t allowed to see anything past that feeling. If so, perhaps you can take a step back from the reading and read other people’s posts or listen to other people’s discussions in class. There were many times that someone had such forceful reactions to the readings that, until they listened to another’s point of view without the article’s sometimes incendiary language, they were able to see the other side of the issue. If, after all these suggestions, you still feel nothing good can come of these socialistic aspects of tutoring, then trash it and stick to what works for you.

I could be presenting the issue as something that is easy to do with a clear path to take but the idea of taking ideas that work for you and leaving the rest have worked with my own practices and ideologies. I wanted to become an educator to help rather than hinder my students/tutees and that seems to be the goal of most if not all educators. We all have good intentions and we need to be honest about what we want to get done and how we will accomplish that. By reading these articles, we can get a better grasp of our own views by being either for, against, or ambiguous towards them. If these articles provide a small percentage of useful, insightful ideas that work within our own pedagogical structure then we should grab what can be used. This does not mean that we shouldn’t be critical of these ideas, only that the manner in
which they are expressed be it strong language, a biased view, or theoretical jargon shouldn’t take away from those ideas themselves if they suit your own views. If we don’t give them a chance because of this then we might find (or not find) that we missed something useful. These articles are assigned to us in order to give us additional tools to enhance our tutoring sessions. If we do not “believe” or are opposed to new and different methods of approach then some of our tutees might feel the effect.
As a Writing Center tutor at Chico State, I came across an essay by Friedrich Nietzsche entitled, “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” which transformed the way in which I viewed language and the composition process. Although I’ll fall short of providing specific applications for tutoring, the essay has continued to resonate with me and has informed my perspective on tutoring and writing. I will provide extensive passages from that essay, along with some explication on my part as to the way in which it has shaped the way in which I approach both tutoring and the composition process.

Language as a Social Contract

The first premise of this article is the consideration of language as a social mechanism. By situating language within the dependent structures of our society, we can better observe its limitations. Language is perhaps the most prevalent and binding social manifestations to which we all experience a contact zone of expression ranging from compliance to defiance. Our existence within a social framework includes “a uniformly valid and binding designation for things, and this legislation of language likewise established the first laws of truth” (81). Of importance is the ironic use of the word “truth,” a word describing an unreal, yet constantly sought after anthropomorphic artifice. The seeking of Truth will be referred to throughout the cited passages as an endeavor fundamentally opposed to the pure interaction between an individual and the experiential world; seeking truth—making meaning of our experiences through language—is a process of defining and capturing the world, rather than merely experiencing it.

This function of language requires a forfeiture of the richest phenomenological experience. In order to use language, and thus gain acceptance and understanding within a society, the individual must agree upon certain Truths: “To be truthful means to employ the usual metaphors...to lie according to a fixed convention, to lie with the herd and in a manner binding upon everyone. Thus he lies in the manner indicated, unconsciously and in accordance with habits which are centuries’ old” (84). These conventional habits allow us to exist with a tolerable amount of understanding. Unfortunately, a tremendous cost is incurred in terms of our empirical and artistic experience of the world around us.

The primary goal of any society is preservation. However, that security is purchased at the price of artistic and phenomenological integrity. To that end, language conventions protect and constrict its compliant followers. “Only by forgetting this primitive world of metaphor can one live with any repose, security, and consistency: only by means of petrifaction and coagulation of a mass of images which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid, on in the invincible faith that this sun, this window, this table is a truth in itself, in short only by forgetting that he himself is an artistically creating subject, does man live with any repose, security and consistency” (86). While refusing language conventions may put an individual outside the security zone of society, it conversely reunites the individual with the fluid and volatile aspects of the imaginative and experiential world.

Language Designations

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“Empty husks,” is one term used to describe words—these designations that serve as reference points for our conveyance of language. Stripped and “drained of sensuous force,” these language designations point with a grey and lifeless finger towards the vibrant experiences they wish to represent (84). Word designations become operational only after we as a society have mutually agreed upon the elimination of all unique characteristics of a particular phenomena, in order to place it into an understood category: a word. “Just as it is certain that one leaf is never totally the same as another, so it is certain that the concept “leaf” is formed by arbitrarily discarding these individual difference and by forgetting the distinguishing aspects” (83). This process of transferring phenomena into words is an empirical cleansing of the experience into a thin and hollow designation.

Worse yet are the industries of Truth which create jargon and categories to fortify their self-importance. The machinations of these industries robotically pile up terms and conventions, all the while, authentic artistic interpretation and expression continues to degrade. “Just as the bee simultaneously constructs cells and fills them with honey, so science works unceasingly on this great columbarium of concepts, the graveyard of perceptions. It is always building new, higher stories and shoring up, cleaning, and renovating the old cells; above all, it takes pains to fill up this monstrosely towering framework and to arrange therein the entire empirical world, which is to say the anthropomorphic world. Whereas the man of action binds his life to reason and its concepts so that he will not be swept away and lost” (88). There is great fear that without these anthropomorphic monstrosities our security—our means of expression and making sense of the world around us—will be swept away in the direct contact with unbridled phenomena.

Creativity vs. Convention

Society’s response is to chose those conventions which protect us, no matter what the cost. The choice between creativity or security is elementary. “As a rational being, he now places his behavior under the control of abstractions. He will no longer tolerate being carried away by sudden impression, by intuitions. First he universalizes all these impressions into less colorful, cooler concepts, so that he can entrust the guidance of his life and conduct to them. Everything which distinguishes man from the animals depends upon this ability to volatize perceptual metaphors in a schema, and thus to dissolve an image into a concept” (84). In essence, humanity distinguishes itself from the perceptual world by reducing and categorizing phenomena into language designations. It is a very powerful narcotic, this illusion of possessing and designating phenomena into conveyable units. It fulfills both the security needs and the power lust of the society, to shape and dissect the world into Truths. “When someone hides something behind a bush and looks for it again in the same place and finds it there as well, there is not much to praise in such seeking and finding. Yet this is how matters stand regarding seeking and finding ‘truth’ within the realm of reason. If I make up the definition of a mammal, and, after inspecting a camel, declare, ‘look, a mammal,’ I have indeed brought a truth to light in this way, but it is a truth of a limited value. That is to say, it is a thoroughly anthropomorphic truth which contains not a single point which would be “true in itself” or really and universally valid apart from man” (85). Nonetheless, our pursuit of Truth in science, business, and academia lumbers along, satisfying our fear-based impulses; meanwhile, the experiential world remains artistically neglected.
The Empowered Student Writer

Although the term is not specifically referenced, the Poet is the logical solution to the problem posed by the conventionalization of phenomena into language. The Poet uses language heroically, as an indication of the manner in which he/she engages the world (as Whitman would say, “loos’d of limits and imaginary lines.”). Not only will the Poet reject the inclination to submit to societal conventions, he/she understands that within the role of language, there exists no solid footing upon which to fool one’s self with the illusion of Truths. In fact, there exists no enduring platform upon which to rest an assumption of adequate expression or understanding. “The adequate expression of an object in the subject”—is a contradictory impossibility. For between two absolutely different spheres, as between subject and object, there is no causality, no correctness, and no expression; there is, at most, an aesthetic relation: I mean, a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue” (86). It is this aesthetic relation—this stammering translation—from which the Poet emerges, whether in and out of the Writing Center. It is within the volatility of the conveyance of language that true creation occurs, much like the lava bubbling forth from the Earth’s crust, only to flow and hiss in the cool ocean waters. Imagine the writing that would occur if individuals rejected the conventional restrictions and chose to engage and express the empirical world freely. That individual would “refashion the world...so that it will be as colorful, irregular, lacking in results and coherence, charming, and eternally new as the world of dreams” (89).

Much is said about the confidence of the student writer, including the propping up of self-esteem with measures that may or may not fully target the building of real integrity. If the student writer is issued the task to encounter phenomena with courage and integrity—ignoring the conventional designations and biases—a newly and truly empowered artist emerges: “Released from its former slavery and celebrates its Saturnalia. It is never more luxuriant, richer, prouder, more cleaver and more daring. With creativity it throws metaphors into confusion and displaces the boundary stones of abstractions, so that, for example, it designates the stream as ‘the moving path which carries man where he would otherwise walk’” (90). Second-language learners have an inherent advantage over native speakers in this regard, as they are less exposed—and thereby less complicit—in the conventions that have grown stale and cliché with each successive generation.

The goal is to produce a student writer who is empowered—not through the false praise and equivocation of well-intentioned tutors—rather, through the transmittal of a real understanding of the nature of language and its limitations, the societal pressures and poetic imperative with which to engage the empirical world with fresh eyes. That type of student writer will approach composition as an artist, one who “smashes this framework to pieces, throws it into confusion, and puts it back together in an ironic fashion, pairing the most alien things and separating the closest, [that artist will be] demonstrating that it has no need of these makeshifts of indigence and that it will now be guided by intuitions rather than by...ghostly schemata...he speaks only in forbidden metaphors and in unheard-of combinations of concepts. He does this so that by shattering and mocking the old conceptual barriers he may at least correspond creatively to the impression of the powerful present intuition” (90). Pedagogically feasible? The alternative is to allow the phenomenological kernels of experience to dry up and harden under the heat and pressure of societal and language conventions.