The Tutoring Book

Spring 2009 Edition

By the CSUS Writing Center Tutors
1998-2008
# The Tutoring Book – Spring 2009 Edition

By the Tutors of the Writing Center, 1998-2008

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My Five Paragraph Essay about Tutoring in the Writing Center

“Fragments came floating into his mind like bits of wood drifting down a stream, and he fished them out and fitted them together.” – Elizabeth Gray Vining

This first paragraph is an introductory paragraph, in which I attempt to “hook” you, the reader, with something clever, lay the groundwork, and provide a map for where I am going to take you over the next four paragraphs. Here goes. Tutoring is nothing like I thought it would be. I worried for no reason about how I would manage to get along and be social with strangers, which ended up being a non-issue. People are actually pretty cool. On the other hand, through our readings and discussions in class, and through actual experience working with writers, I have discovered that there is a whole lot I have to learn about the process of writing, the rules of writing, and about being a better tutor. This essay will outline some of the Tools, Treats, and Truths that I discovered over the semester as an intern.

Tools

Throughout this semester, I have pulled together a little toolbox of goodies to use for tutoring sessions. Some of the tools are actual physical things I can put my hands on, while others I have written down or stored in my head for use as needed:

1) A binder with a collection of helpful worksheets—those I find myself using again and again include sheets on developing a thesis statement, creating an outline, a visual diagram of creating a five paragraph essay, verb tenses, and punctuation (particularly commas, dashes, and semicolons). I took some time to find sheets that made clear sense to me, so that I did not have trouble using them and explaining them in sessions. There are lots of great resources online and in books for this.

2) A pen and paper— I understand that tutoring sessions are not editing sessions, and that we should encourage writers to do their own writing and corrections, but in practice I have found that some writers experience some disconnect with their ability to put their thoughts into writing—several students I worked with were amazed to find, after doing a “verbal brainstorm”—where they talked and talked, and I wrote down what they said— that they had a whole lot of well developed ideas that they didn’t know about, because they were too afraid to write it down. People speak much differently than they write, and students with little confidence in their writing abilities may impress themselves with their knowledge on a subject, if someone is willing to write their thoughts down the first time or two.

3) Ears—It just really helps to listen. Listen to what the writers want help with. Listen to them read their work. Listen to them explain what they’ve read, to make sure they comprehend the
assignment. Listen to them articulate what they haven’t been able to put on the paper. And listen to their body language to make sure they’re getting it, that they’re involved. And let your ears enjoy the occasional silence when the writer is at a loss for words, but their minds are working.

Treats

Working with writers has also produced some wonderful, unexpected, good things in my life:

1) It has been a pleasure to work with such a diverse group of individuals that I very likely would not have met outside of the Writing Center. All of the students have different majors that I have little background in; some are first-year students, while others are about to graduate; most of them speak multiple languages; each writer has been working incredibly hard to balance a heavy load of classes, full-time jobs, and family obligations in order to succeed in college. We have been able to open up to one another, little by little, over the semester, and I only hope that the experience has been as rewarding for them as it has been for me.

2) While tutoring, I have re-learned several basic rules about the process of writing which have helped me in my own work, such as: using the introductory paragraph as a road map for my essay, finding ways to integrate my own voice and passion into each assignment, and breaking down overlong sentences for clarity. Even as an English graduate student, I struggle every time I write my papers. I take little pleasure in many of my assignments. Fortunately, just talking about the smaller steps of writing has reminded me not to feel overwhelmed, to break down the process into manageable bits. Like the advice I’ve given to many of the writers this semester, I’ve remembered to write an outline, keep track of my secondary sources, and follow MLA guidelines so that I don’t aggravate my instructors with small mistakes. Also, the readings and discussions in our tutoring class have helped to reshape my ideas and assumptions about academic writing.

3) A few of the writers have mentioned in their portfolios, or in passing, that the steps they’ve learned while working with me have been very helpful in improving their writing processes. In spite of all the good sessions I have had here, I tend to focus on what I’ve done wrong, or how I should have helped differently in any given situation. So it is with great satisfaction that I have heard positive feedback about my tutoring methods, my good listening skills, and my ability to help someone onto the right track in getting started. Whew! That feels good.

Truths

I don’t know if “truths” is the word I’m looking for, but it started with a T, and I’m looking for parallelism in my body paragraphs:

1) Most of the writers I’ve worked with are incredibly hard on themselves when it comes to their writing. One student explained in her portfolio that she had only herself to blame for her poor writing skills and her inability to express herself well in English. Another writer told me she was
a horrible, horrible writer, that she’s never been any good at it, and that she is completely embarrassed and ashamed at how bad she is as a writer. A third writer seems to be so uncomfortable with his writing skills, that I have yet to get him to put pen to paper throughout the semester—and yet he is very bright, busy with Chemistry and Biology labs. All eight of the students that I’ve worked with on a weekly basis have very high expectations for themselves, and I sense disappointment in their inability to articulate their ideas in writing in a way that meets their own and others’ standards. They deserve our respect and patience. Honest, positive reinforcement really goes a long way. I make sure to point out specific examples of how their work has improved over the weeks, encourage them when they come up with original ways of articulating difficult ideas, or congratulate them on a good grade received on a revision.

2) Tutoring is simple on one level, and really difficult on another. It’s not hard to give suggestions for a writer to walk away with, but I sometimes struggle with knowing which methods to use with a particular writer. I may know that a student’s work is “not quite there yet”, but feel a bit too challenged to figure out how to challenge him or her to improve it. I don’t always know how to explain grammar rules, and may find it easier to just correct the mistake myself on a writer’s paper, without giving them help to prevent the same mistake in the future. I am often stumped by the questions writers have for me about how the language works (like past and present perfect verb tense, use of articles, etc.). I just stumble through some of this and remind myself to familiarize myself with topics one at a time.

The advice I would give to a new tutor would be to take into consideration the amount of time you’ll have with a particular student—will you be meeting for a half-hour, one time only? The work you can do under these circumstances vary greatly from when you will be working with a student for an hour a week, throughout the semester. For example, a writer may need to develop a more sophisticated vocabulary, in order to better articulate more complex ideas—this is not going to happen in a week, but rather over the course of a college education. Helping a writer to develop their unique writing voice and style, too—so that they can make intentional decisions about the formality or informality of their language—is a task to work on over a longer stretch of time.

3) Finally, there is a lot to know and learn in the tutoring profession. I never considered most of what we’ve discussed in class before starting this internship. I feel that it is important for us to examine our assumptions about what tutoring is, what it means, what we can do to really help, and what we bring to it as tutors with our own baggage and experiences. I’ve given myself some breaks this semester, knowing that I’m just learning, getting my feet wet. But I also know that I want to educate myself further about the world of tutoring in order to advance my understanding, develop a coherent tutoring philosophy, and become a more effective tutor in the future.

This probably does not qualify as a five paragraph essay. That’s okay. I don’t believe that this essay provides any groundbreaking theory about, or method for, tutoring. That’s okay too. For me, the above has been useful to consider. Tutoring is a serious undertaking, but we should have fun with it too. Not everything we do will be perfect. Get out there. Discover your own tools and treats and truths. Have fun. Tutor.
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 if 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.
“What Are You Trying to Say Here?”: Encouraging New Writers to Express Themselves Clearly and Write What They Mean.

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

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

Achieving Clarity

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

The Active Ear

Many writers are told by their writing instructors (and also by you) to read aloud when proofreading their papers. It may be the case, though, that the writer has not been fully informed as to how important and useful this practice really is. For writers to simply proofread silently to themselves is not effective; the human mind has a tendency to fill in correctly where errors exist, making it very possible to glance over obvious discrepancies. Take, for example, this popular piece of internet flotsam:
Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde Uinervtisy, it deosn't mttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are aneargrd, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteer be at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can stll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae the huamn mnid deos not raed ervey ltter 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 in necessary to physically cover what the writer has written. Note key words the writer uses in her oral version. When comparing the two examples, note the differences between the two. Often there will be no comparison, the written and spoken sentences may be conveying two different ideas, though they will seem the same to the writer. It takes a critical listener to distinguish between the two and remember word differences. Usually the spoken version will contain word choices more appropriate to the writer’s idea, but were omitted for one reason or another. As in the previous section, this is also a beneficial technique to use with ESL students who may not think they know how to write what they mean, only to have the words roll right off their tongues!

**Oral Composition**

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

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

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

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

As a tutor, I feel that drop-in sessions can be just as valuable to the student as a regular appointment. There can be some important differences, though. In the half-hour allotted to the drop-in students, it is possible to listen to the student read his or her paper, explain how I heard the paper, and discuss any issues that the writer has. After all, some of the weekly appointments are also only half an hour. What I’ve found to be the difference, however, is that drop-in appointments require flexibility. One has to be prepared for pretty much anything when it comes to the drop-ins. Students may come in with nothing written, a paper that is due in an hour or a paper that needs so much work it is almost impossible to address the necessary problems within the time they have. With our weekly appointment students we usually have some idea of what they will be working on, but with drop-ins, it is quite unpredictable. Probably the most common issue that drop-ins come in for (at least in my experience) is . . .
DUN DUN DUN: The Grammar Check

Since we are not really supposed to do just a grammar check for anyone, it is necessary to explain to a student that we need to focus on the big picture as well. Thankfully, I have found that no one has put up much of a fight when it comes to needing to also focus on the big picture. When someone requests a grammar check, I try to first focus on the big picture and then if there is time left over, I help them through their grammatical issues. Instead of merely pointing them out to the student, however, I try to help them identify the problematic areas themselves and make changes as they see fit. This does not always work, but I have found that it is definitely easier for them than they think to identify and correct the grammatical problems. This is especially the case when they read their papers out loud. Being able to hear how their paper sounds and any places where it is rough is definitely a help for them.

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

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

Agendas and Positive Feedback

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

What to Make of All of This

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

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

“Tutor”

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

-Adam Crittenden

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*When we push students to speak, to evaluate; when we listen and don't rush in to fill silences, we may be able to transform the rules of studenthood* [...] -Thomas Newkirk, "The First Five Minutes: Setting the Agenda in a Writing Conference

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

In the Beginning

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

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

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

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

Power in Partnerships

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

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

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

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

Questions to Ask: Mentoring the Silence

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

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

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

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

Dealing with Silence:

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Stopping the Interruption:**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Importance of Questioning Your Writer

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

Questions To Get Started

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

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

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

Yes/No Versus Open-Ended Questions

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

Asking How and Why Questions

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

Commands Embedded Within The Question

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

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

Balancing Questions With Other Needed Discourse

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

Questions To Close The Tutorial

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

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

Asking the writer questions is a good way to give the writer control of the paper and encourage conversation, but ultimately the tutor must cater to the needs of the individual writer. As I stated previously, some writers need more encouragement or explanations than others. Addressing the specific needs of the individual is the ticket to success. After all, we are here for them!
I thought that I was well prepared to tutor at Sac State. I tutored for two years in my hometown at Sierra College. I tutored English, Spanish, Anthropology, Astronomy and Humanities. I worked with many different types of people. I helped younger students, students my age and students who were older than me, students who didn’t speak English or Spanish but languages that I had no clue about, such as Czech, Russian and Japanese. Tutoring came easily for me. I thought it was ridiculous that I had to go through another semester of how to tutor when I had already done that at my community college. However, unlike my tiny community college, Sacramento State is a four–year college and there are a lot of upper division classes and graduate courses. I was not prepared to tutor at the Writing Center students who were working on thesis papers and academic papers for different fields such as science.

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

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

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

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

After getting all the questions out of the way we were able to go through the 13 pages of the abstract. By reading out loud she and I were able to go through her paper and find grammatical mistakes. Because I asked questions about background information she was able to see organizational problems in her paper. In tutoring it is never safe to assume that one will know what to expect from a student, especially since a writing center will get students from disciplines other than English. The best thing to do is listen to the student’s needs and concerns. That is the best way a tutor will be able to get a better understanding of how to help the student.
Paul Diederich, a senior research associate for the Educational Testing Service, once stated that “noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly, and that it is especially important for the less able writers” to hear praise because they “need all the encouragement they can get” (Daiker155). Indeed, the view that praise aids students in developing the type of confidence required in college-level writing has long been touted by members of the academic community. However, while many tutors may know intuitively that students become better writers when they are given the proper encouragement and feedback, many are hesitant to really use the art of praise to its fullest advantage. Therefore, in the effort to make praise more available to tutors as a means of connecting with and responding to tutees, this essay offers various perspectives and suggestions that will not only aid you in developing and increasing your personal arsenal of praiseworthy habits, but also in acknowledging the true power of praise and the various forms it takes in the tutor-writer relationship.

Step One: Recognizing Why We Praise

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

Step 2: Learning to Praise Equally

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

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

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

Step 3: Making Praise an Everyday Habit

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

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

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

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

Regardless of what you choose to praise in your student’s writing remember that the praise needs to be genuine and paper-specific. As Nancy Sommers notes in “Responding to Student Writing,” “most teachers’ comments are not text-specific and could be interchanged, rubber-stamped, from text to text;” therefore, tutors should at all times avoid generic forms of praise and instead attempt to point to specific areas in the text where students evidence their evolution as writers (111). Even weak students know when praise seems artificial or forced and they are less likely to trust future praise 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.
Helping the Writer Get Grades and Maintain Identities

What is the purpose of tutoring? This question seems pretty simple, but get used to it because everything we talk about in English 410A will come back to this question. Are we concerned about helping writers get good grades? Are we satisfied with a simple passing grade? Do we want the writer to discover his/her voice even if it means s/he doesn’t get passing grades? Is identity more important than academic success? Throughout the course, we seem to oscillate between two points: maintaining a writer’s identity and helping the writer pass a class. Having worked with hundreds of writers in my tutoring experience and having failed with many of them, I have found that there are some steps that will lead to more successful tutoring for both the tutor and the writer.

1. Identify the Writer. Identity in itself is a tricky concept. How do we find the writer’s identity? Is it in the opinions, the skin color, the background, or the voice of the writer? All of these factors may form a writer’s identity; thus, we must really work to try to identify the writer and help the writer find his/her own identity. This process begins before you even look at the paper and may not end until after the last session. Admittedly, I can’t say that I know everything about any of the writers I’ve had, but getting a jump start on what you can learn is important. Don’t just dive into a paper. Look at the prompt and ask the writer what s/he thinks about the topic. Are there any strong opinions? If not, what questions can you ask to find out where the writer stands on the issue? I’ve worked with students of many different opinion levels. One student always has a very strong opinion because he chooses topics that excite that opinion. When working with this student, I find it easy to see his logic and argument before looking at the paper (or even the prompt sometimes). Granted, it’s not always that easy. Another writer finds it very difficult to find an opinion on a topic that either doesn’t interest or doesn’t affect her. In these cases, I find we have to create an opinion in context with another opinion, making it difficult to identify that writer. In this case, however, I find that the more questions I can ask, the more I feel I know what the writer thinks and even what the writer thinks she needs.

2. Identify the Audience. Most papers can fit into that classic academic mode we all have come to learn and love (maybe?), but what if the paper is a lab report or a journal entry? Those types of assignments make it difficult on both writer and tutor, but often help to create an identity. I find that when the writer does not really know what is expected by an audience, s/he tends to make mistakes that allow the tutor to see what the writer does when uncomfortable. I call this the B.S. factor. Writers tend to resort to the B.S. factor when trying to meet expectations and they don’t already have an opinion or understanding of what’s expected. Many times, these sections become “academically worded” rants that allow the writer to get some steam off his/her chest. Other times, the B.S. comes in the form of vague and general statements. Identifying the audience or helping the writer identify the audience (even better) allows the writer to understand the factors at play in writing (e.g. what the teacher expects, what the field expects) and may lead to the writer using those things to make a point about the writing. I have taken several creative writing courses in my time and one of the few rules that I seem to hear most frequently is that you can break rules, but you have to know them before you can break them. Not all students will
be composition activists, but letting all of them know what the rules and expectations are and letting them decide how they will approach them will make sure we don’t stifle the writers who do want to rebel against the system.

These first two steps are all about talking. We (tutors, writers, and teachers) need conversation to help understand even what we think. I have heard the phrase “Talk is cheap.” Talk may be cheap, but it’s also essential. Conversation is the salt of tutoring. Salt is inexpensive, it heightens the flavor of whatever you cook (or write, in this case) and it can make things taste more like themselves. Conversation can help the writer understand what s/he thinks more clearly. Because is no longer a sufficient reason – the tutor might not understand or might want to play the devil’s advocate. If the writer can defend a position in conversation, s/he will more likely be able to defend a position in an essay. This system is by no means perfect. Talk will seem artificial at times, but that doesn’t mean that it won’t be helpful. If you have to use some MSG for some tutoring sessions, that’s fine. Hopefully, you can get your hands on some real salt next time. However, too much MSG can be deadly, and salt can also overpower a dish, so we need to make sure we take on the next step.

3. Work on the Writing. This is why the writer is here. We may not be able to solve all of the writing issues in every session, but we’d better work on the writing or we will lose our writers. Imagine if you went to a salon and spent an hour talking about the process of styling your hair, but left with the same hairstyle and cut you came in with. How satisfied would you be? I have failed in this aspect many times. Once, I talked about global issues and general writing “rules and truths,” successfully diverting questions about specific grammar toward global issues. However, I ended the session feeling like a failure – even though I thought I did the right thing – and session left a bad taste in the writer’s mouth. Maybe I did do the right thing, but I never saw that writer again. Wouldn’t that be considered a failure? Therefore, we need to learn what we are talking about. Know the rules and the reasons behind rules. Try to figure out the logic of grammar (it’s there, believe it or not). Use your resources. The GACs are there to help. Your fellow tutors may know a thing or two. We have computers, handouts, handbooks, and experience. If you can prove to each writer that you can solve the simple grammar issues, that writer will begin to trust your judgment on what you should talk about and may begin to see the same things you do. In a session early this semester, I had a writer so obsessed with grammar that it became difficult to focus on the structure of the paper. I couldn’t avoid talking about grammar and even spent a session solely talking about modal verbs. By the end of the semester, we could breeze over grammar issues and really dive into the structure and argument of the essay, which then leads to very abstract discussions of issues and even the process of writing – and this is an Learning Skills 87 student! Early on, I couldn’t avoid what the writer wanted to talk about without potentially avoiding helping the writer at all. We can help every writer to some extent. It may simply differ from our original aims.

4. Trust the Teacher. Going through this course, we often read and comment on the evils of the “Pen-happy Professor” and the red pen. I know we hear about awful teachers and horror stories in our reading, but let’s give teachers the benefit of the doubt. Assume that the teacher is not out to get our writer, but to get our writer to write more efficiently. This may be very difficult at times. I’ve had to bite my tongue several times while tutoring. I’ve seen incorrect red marks and vague and useless suggestions. On the other hand, I’ve also had to teach and know firsthand that
teaching is hard. As tutors, we are advised not to impose our opinions on writers, which is hard with only four writers in four hours a week. Imagine dealing with twenty-five writers each week. Often, we can’t get through an entire essay in an hour. However, we (and the writers) expect the teacher to get through all twenty-five essays in a week. I’ve actually tutored via e-mail. In order to tutor efficiently, I had to take twice as long and pulled out four times as much hair – hence my current hairline (I call it male tutor baldness). I think it’s safe to say that most teachers have good intentions, but just don’t always have the time to do it right.

5. Reinforcements. Naturally, the process of editing, revising, and talking about writing can lead the writer to feel discouraged. The writer has put a lot of effort into the paper but still has errors. This is why positive reinforcement is so crucial in tutoring. Think about the last less than stellar paper you’ve written. Or even further, think about the last paper you received with any negative comment. Frequently, I find myself feeling like my B+ should be a D+ -- and that’s just from reading the comments on the paper. After having tutored for a while, I had to write an essay in German. I got the paper back dipped in red ink. I had made mistakes on the paper that I knew were embarrassing for a writing tutor, but I did it because I felt uncomfortable writing in German. If I can make mistakes and lose confidence in my writing, the writers we deal with can also. I have worked with a writer who has passed and failed essays with no clear learning curve. After having passed a practice midterm, the writer failed the actual midterm. Talking with the writer, it was clear to me that she was uncomfortable with the topic and really couldn’t relate to what the prompt was asking. From practice to actual, she seemed to forget the importance of structure, losing focus at times and inserting odd topic sentences. However, she brilliantly summarized the prompt article and used very pertinent and specific examples. In this session, I had a choice: I could go through all of the errors and explain them, I could ignore the errors, or I could try to find a balance. Thus, I chose the Oreo principle (using positive comments to sandwich the negative), ensuring that the session was not merely deconstructive. I didn’t have to make up good elements for this student’s essay. They were already there. I just had to remember to give her credit for the things she did right. I can’t say that I was perfect in this, but I gained the writer’s trust; she never missed an appointment. As tutors, it’s easy to feel like we are supposed to fix the writer. That philosophy leads us to focus on what needs fixing as opposed to what is impressive.

6. Encourage the Writer to Find a Voice. Most of the previous steps are means to this step. If we identify the writer or at least help the writer identify him/herself, the writer will find those phrases and rhetorical strategies that feel natural in writing. If we help the writer to identify the audience, we help him/her understand when to use which tone and how much of his/her voice to use. Actually working on the writing will encourage the writer to look at each paper more than once and to really understand the “rules” or expectations of writing and the tools available. Writing becomes easier and a writer’s voice becomes more distinct as the writer learns the tools of the trade and when to break the “rules.” Trusting the teacher becomes important because the writer can easily be pulled in too many directions if you set up an “Us vs. the University/Professor” situation. Reinforcements lead the writer to build confidence and to (maybe) want to actually write more.

Because we have taken the steps to ensure that we are not imposing ourselves on the writer, we can ensure that the writer is creating his/her own identity. In addition, we know that we have still
worked on essential aspects of writing with the author, so the grades will improve, even though our focus was not solely on the essay, rather the writing and thinking process.
Tutoring, Student Grades, and How to Mesh the Two

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

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

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

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

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

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.
Dropping Defenses by Dropping Formality:
How Tutors Can Use Vernacular Terminology to Ease Tutor/Tutee Tension

Anselm Engle, Fall 2008

When I first started tutoring at the writing center, one of my biggest obstacles was with a small number of writers who treated me like some great writing guru whose word was law. While this may be a dream to many of us working on advanced English degrees, it made my job as a tutor much harder because so many of these writers seemed afraid to give input or, in some cases, even to speak to me. When these writers did speak, “What should I do?” “How should I say that?” “Should I not do that?” and similar questions came up a lot.

No matter how much I tried to explain to these students that it was their words that mattered, not mine, I never seemed to be able to get through to them. It felt like they had a computer chip implanted in their brains that made them afraid of offending me and very unsure of their own command of English. The writers asked timid questions, and on the rare occasions when they offered suggestions they quickly dropped them if I hesitated to agree or showed any reservation about their choice of words, even if it was a much clearer way to make their point.

In many of these cases, vocabulary wasn’t the problem, but the writers seemed to think that it was. Even though their vocabularies were often more than adequate for the tasks at hand, many writers felt like they didn’t know enough about academic writing to use that vocabulary, and either threw big words willy-nilly into their essays, or tried to avoid the problem by simply writing as little as possible. Many of these writers were very quick to cross out passages in which I questioned their use of words they saw as academic rather than vernacular (and perhaps we unsure of), and frequently apologized for “writing badly.”

Eventually I realized that many of these students were aware of some sort of academic standard in writing, but that they did not know what this standard was, what it was called, or even that it was a voiced concept. All they knew was that they were expected to write in a certain style, but did not know exactly what it was, how to achieve it, or even that it was standardized. I suspect many writers felt that they were the only one who had trouble with this, and were embarrassed by it. All they knew was that there was some formula, some secret language one had to know to be “in the club” as it were, and they suspected that I knew it, and was involved with enforcing this standard.

Obviously, an atmosphere of timidity, insecurity and fear are anathema to the very concept of a writing center, so I felt that I had to do something to establish clear, honest, and most importantly, easy communication between the tutor (myself) and the tutees I was trying to help. Since the main block to communication seemed to be the writer’s discomfort around me, apparently based around the fact that they found me intimidating because I was part of this mysterious in-group that knew how to write “correctly,” I came up with one of two possible solutions: either teach the writer to speak “my” language (the language of “correct” writing and the odd concept of academic standards they were wrestling with) or speak “their” language, establish a rapport, explain how academic standards work in vernacular English, and then encourage the students to experiment with their own language. Once we were able to easily communicate, I knew I would easily be able to explain the concepts behind formal writing.

The single most effective way to gain the writers trust and acceptance has been through dropping very vernacular and informal words and phrases into my discussion of their writing. By slipping into extreme vernacular, to a degree that is no longer straddling vernacular and
academic English, but is purely vernacular it is often possible to sooth a writers’ insecurity. The important thing is to use terms and phrases that I, personally, am comfortable using in casual speech, and not just pepper in the latest slang. The idea is to come across as “bilingual” as it were- someone who is well enough versed in academic writing to help them with that, but doesn’t have any sort of moral high ground or deep-seated belief that formal English is better or more desirable.

Everyone has different levels and styles of formality in their day-to-day speech as well as their academic and casual writing. The important part of casual speech has nothing to do with standard key words from the listener’s vocabulary, but from your own. Any of us can sense when someone is “trying out” a new word, and that is exactly what needs to be avoided here. Stick to words and speech pattern you’re familiar with and use. When I try to establish a friendly, relaxed rapport with a writer, I throw in words like “cool,” “flashy,” and “nutso.” I might tell a writer to “tweak” something that’s a bit “wonky,” or “cut loose” on a passage that they’re “rock-solid steady” on. As long as you stick to words you actually use yourself (and steer clear of really obscure jargon) you’ll be just fine.

In a few cases of writers who were very hesitant to engage with me, and especially those who had been sent in by a professor and didn’t want to be here, I’ve taken things to a slightly more extreme level. Obviously, I’m not recommending that anyone tutoring a slightly meek student should start swearing like a sailor, but with some of my more cagey, maybe even suspicious students, this has worked wonderfully. An extreme case is of a young man I was working with about six weeks ago. He was leaning back in his chair, refusing to look at me or the paper, and giving noncommittal, one-syllable answers to everything I asked him. His paper was full of ambiguous, passive statements that looked like he was trying very hard to sound smart in his paper but wasn’t getting anywhere. I complimented him on a clear introduction, and then pointed out that the disconnect between the intro and the first body paragraph was “a bit of a mind fuck” and started explaining easy ways to clarify it. He stared at me, burst out laughing, and we started conversing in earnest. I had successfully demonstrated to him that I was not someone who was only capable of formal writing, but also of using more vernacular speech, and things got much easier after that. Generally, something far more subtle and less offensive does the job just fine, but in some cases it’s helped me to push the envelope a little.

In almost all cases, the impact is sudden and obvious: the writers stop short, stare at me for a second, often burst out laughing and then relax. By clearly and completely breaking down the perceived wall between “correct” and “incorrect” (academic and vernacular) English, I have just made myself into someone the writers can identify with, someone who speaks, understands and respects their language. Once I have established that I am actually “bilingual” in both formal and informal language, it is much easier for me and the writers to communicate. They feel relaxed and comfortable speaking to me in an informal style, and are willing to listen to my explanations of the conventions of formal English.

Sometimes, it can be tricky to judge what level of informality is right for a person. It can be a tricky line to walk between not getting someone’s attention by using language that isn’t quite informal enough, and offending someone by crossing a personal or cultural boundary. If this is an approach you think might work well for you, my best advice would be to ease into things, both personally (across several writers with whom you have communication issues) and on a case by case basis. It’s better not to get anywhere for a session or two than to alienate a writer who genuinely needs and wants writing help, but doesn’t know how to communicate that need.
When all is said and done, tutors at the writing center are students just like the writers we help out. Part of tutoring is to help the writers overcome mental blocks, and one of the biggest blocks all writers have is fear of rejection from superior writers. By breaking down the notion that formal English is the only way to use English, it’s much easier for me to convince writers that I am not judging them or their writing. I may be a better writer, but just because I’m a little more advanced in my classes doesn’t mean I’m a member of some mysterious in-club that determines obscure rules of proper grammar and tone of voice without ever explaining what exactly they are.
Integrating the Personal into Your Tutoring

We each come from unique backgrounds and approach writing in different ways. For instance, speaking from the viewpoint of a freelance writer, my emphasis is on tutoring student writers from the area I am most familiar with—the world of writing for clients. I believe that my background as a mature adult with diverse experience using writing to influence readers cannot help but structure the way in which I tutor. The practical uses of writing have been a motivator for me and the tutees I have worked with cannot help but be swayed by my conscious or unconscious perspective. The big picture view of writing, the practicality, and also the bending of writing to accommodate various venues and desired outcomes are all pertinent to effective writing, whether or not the writing is for a paying customer. My writing is something I do because it is part of who I am, and I believe there is no escaping the personal and creative aspect of everyone’s writing.

Perhaps the most important ingredient in effective writing is the use of individual creativity to transmit information. In the case of academic writing, transmitting one’s point of view, and/or arguing a particular point is often the task. This task can be made easier and more effective as well as more pleasurable when the writer feels connected to the piece by using what he/she knows best—their own imagination. The imagination can be used to develop a style uniquely fitted to the individual writer. This style can then be used to develop the writer’s perspective. Everyone has a unique perspective, and even if their opinion is not original, it can certainly take on a fresh form via the writer’s personal creativity. The best reason to use the personal landscape of creativity though, is to give the writer their best ally in writing endeavors—themselves. All writers need encouragement to build writing confidence in order to increase trust in their own individual creativity. What is referred to as writer’s block, I believe, is nothing more than fear of getting started. The task then is to make getting started as easy as possible. Enter one of my favorites, the free-write.

The beauty of any sort of free writing is that it is well, free and unfettered. It can, for example, be merely a group of words on a page in no conscious order, flowing like a river around and among its related or unrelated brethren. The unconscious mind can play a part in the structure of the free writing in that it is written without edit or judgment. There need not be any structural confinement; the words are best left to the writer’s whim, located randomly on the blank page. Later the writer can return and draw lines between words/ideas and insert stars or numbers which prioritize and/or set sequential relatedness. Since this writing is without edit the writer’s style is more likely to be in evidence than in a more structured arena. This exercise should help build confidence for the tutee since it is an exercise in surrendering to and trusting the writer’s intuition. This is a way to minimize or even eliminate fear or writer’s block. Get the juices flowing—much like our childhood where no one is telling us we cannot draw or paint or build sand castles. Yes we can, we are artists and architects, and yes we are writers too. A free write should be a no judgment event. Peter Elbow in Responses to Bartholomae and Elbow, opines that, “Students discover that they can write words and thoughts and not worry about what good writing is or what the teacher wants, they discover that their heads are full of language and ideas (sometimes language and ideas they had no idea were there), and they discover they can get pleasure from writing” (89). The discovery of language and ideas within the writer’s head is certain to be a pleasurable discovery that leads to enhanced confidence and motivation.
In *Tutoring Writing*, Elbow directs the tutor to use his strategy of focused free writing by asking the tutee to write for five minutes on a portion of their draft that needs development. The result is sure to include something that the writer would normally leave out in a more structured attempt. I have found this sort of endeavor to be useful in writing for clients because in any sort of writing for profit the goal is to sell the audience something, and in order to do that they have to feel compelled to read on. As social creatures we are, I believe, motivated by feeling a connection with the writer, and this connection will not exist unless we can include a bit of ourselves in our writing. Having said this, most of my tutoring sessions do not involve free writing; rather, I explain the process of my free writing as something I find personally useful. I emphasize the fun part of free writing, writing without expectations—as sort of a warm-up to the structured writing that needs to come later. Unless the tutee expresses a desire to use the free write in our session, I do not press the subject. I do, however, find that tutees will later relate that they used a free write on their own with positive results. While Elbow finds value in directing the student in free writing with the tutor in attendance, I believe this could have a dampening effect as free writing is or should be a very intimate experience.

The most important focus for writing should always be on the audience. Being social creatures, this is something we understand instinctively, although cultural considerations must be made. Muriel Harris makes the point that some Asian cultures have writer centered rather than reader centered formats, she states that, “the reader is responsible for making meaning from the text” (Murphy, 215). This means that it is the reader’s responsibility to make sense of the text, rather than requiring the writer to do the work. But we are hailing from a different tradition, one in which the writer is required to make the accommodations. So, always make the audience comfortable, do not make the audience work. This does not mean that you have to make your writing simple. You can be as complex and comprehensive as you like, as long as the writing is also clear, which means that you know what you are saying and there is little or no ambiguity. Knowing your audience (and the American college tradition of writer responsibility) is the best way to ensure accessibility; a Critical Analysis paper, for instance, has certain assumptions. The writer can assume, when writing on a particular “work of art,” that the audience has seen or read about the piece and will be able to follow a clear discussion of its character. This takes some of the explanatory pressure off the writer. In this case the audience is an authority or peer of the writer and can be expected to follow a logical explanation. But this is not the only audience a writer is likely to encounter in their writing.

Let’s suppose the tutee is a business major and is writing on the thorny issue of cultural sensitivity in the area of Human Resources. The audience of this paper may well be quite different from the writer. The writing may be geared more towards reaching a variety of individuals from different backgrounds, including different levels of education. There can be no assumption of the reader understanding the subject matter as can be made in the Critical Analysis paper. In this case the paper needs to meet the requirements of an academic paper but one which reaches out to everyone. In this case the paper’s lack of exclusivity is the focus; there is a heightened need for careful elucidation. But just as in the Critical Analysis paper, there is an urgent need for a comfortable link between writer and the reader, and this link can be made via the writer’s personal creativity.

Whether the audience is familiar with the subject matter or not the tutor is in a solid position to function as the audience. In *Tutoring Writing*, the authors use Walker Gibson’s studies of American prose style, which categorizes prose into a combination of tough, sweet, and stuffy (53-54). In my own writing, I employ a sweet style when trying to explain the advantages
of buying a particular product or service from a client, occasionally including a tough, abrupt remark, perhaps to emphasize the importance of having the consumer buy a higher quality product for safety reasons over a cheaper competitor’s product. The sudden change in style underlines the importance of the remark. It means pay attention, this is vital. In my academic papers, I may employ a stuffy style in order to show I understand the expectations of the university, while I use a bit of the tough style to emphasize my point. In the Writing Center, I read the tutee’s paper (or have the tutee read their own paper), stopping to ask questions when the reading is not clear, which includes when the tone of the paper has changed. I explain that the style has changed, which confuses the flow just as much as when the logic does not add up. I admit to the student writer that I always read my drafts out loud, carefully pronouncing each word just as it is written as a way to understand how the audience will view the document. Sometimes the idea of reading out loud seems amusing to the tutee, but whether I read their work or they do—the obvious problems emerge: typos and grammatical problems, along with distracting changes in style and inconsistent trains of thought.

Just as the writer will be more successful connecting with his/her audience by engaging the personal, the tutor will find success easier by integrating the personal into their tutoring. It helps when tutees realize that tutors are not so different from them, that we all struggle at bringing forth our inner thoughts onto the public stage of readers. The big picture emerges of how the writer is interfacing with his or her audience, and that this interface does not occur without personal creativity.

Works Cited

Complicating Common Sense: Turning a Gripe Session into a Contact Zone

On occasion, we have each sat silently between tutoring sessions in the break room and listened to our colleagues disparage student writers and the faculty assigning the papers. We hear how they “just don’t get it,” or “they read it wrong,” “they’ve never heard of _______!” We hear how many times the students were shown the “correct” way and couldn’t or wouldn’t comply. We might hear that the student writers are lazy and don’t care. We hear that the writing prompts are convoluted, the expectations unreasonable, the edits sloppy or incorrect. Sometimes, even, we may have participated in these gripe sessions ourselves, overwhelmed by the challenges posed by student writers or their professors.

Our high ethics, intelligence, best intentions, and even critical thinking skills may not have prepared us to consider the concept of the literacy myth that Grimm talks about in her monograph, *Good Intentions: Writing Center Work for Postmodern Times*. Grimm and other critical theorists, including Bawarshi and Pelkowski, describe how the popular narrative surrounding literacy—that it is something attainable within a meritocratic belief system and looks like the dominant culture’s literacy—is a myth. Recognizing that there is a literacy myth is to recognize that the dominant culture confuses what is cultural with what is normal rather than recognizing that literacy is embedded in social practices (Bawarshi, 82). Even if we intellectually comprehend what she’s saying, burn out or dismay may dissuade even the formerly idealistic practitioner from believing anything except that there must be something wrong with “the Other.” Grimm calls this cultural common sense. She writes, “As long as teachers and tutors are sure that they are already doing the ‘right’ thing, they are unlikely to change; who willingly wants to trade innocence for implication in unjust practices? Instead, when students perform in ways that are difficult for academics to understand, their performances are negatively evaluated; differences in literacies are presumed wrong” (Grimm 33).

Grimm writes, "If writing center workers get in the habit of critiquing and historicising commonsense notions of literacy but are unable to offer alternative conceptions of literacy, they won't be popular with either students or teachers"(46). “In other words,” wrote a colleague in her 410A discussion board post, “we have the burden of not only pointing out the shortcomings of the current modern concepts of literacy, but better be prepared to offer working alternatives to the perceived ‘norm’... I think it is a big job just to try to understand where I/we are ‘situated’ in the discourse, and definitely don't feel prepared to offer alternatives——I'm certainly open to hearing about them from others (from our readings, from the writers/students, etc.).” What better way to come to an understanding about where we are situated in the discourse than to challenge (in as non-confrontational a way as possible) one another’s assumptions when they arise?

Rather than reinforcing fears about what student writers (and their professors) don’t know, we can respond to our colleague’s gripes in ways that complicate their common sense. This article calls for each one of us to create a contact zone in the WC break room and in the 410A seminar room. If we as writing center workers respond to one another’s gripes, which may truly be thinly disguised cries for help, in ways that “provide a map for repositioning”(45), we
can’t help but become more introspective and grow as both tutors of individual students and facilitators of a new paradigm surrounding composition and its assumptions.

So, I’m just going to offer ideas here on how we might respond to one another, to create this contact zone, a zone for learning and growing, from a real downer of a bitch session in the WC break room or 410A seminar. Even if it makes you feel like a—gasp—glass half full optimist about the whole thing, try it once in a while. If you don’t, who will? I’ve really heard these gripes (or thought them, I confess). How might you meet these challenges with the intention to intervene, to help your colleagues “rethink literacy learning for postmodern times?”(47)

“My student didn’t even know that police brutality was something you couldn’t be for. How can you be FOR police BRUTALITY?”

Defending the student writer won’t make her “correct” in your colleague’s eyes, but it might help your colleague see that there could be an argument to be made. Depending on several things, not the least of which is the student’s understanding of the word brutality, the tutor might come to understand the context in which this student writer is approaching the topic. What is the line that differentiates for instance, “use of force” to subdue a perpetrator with “brutality”? Is this so universally agreed upon? Is it the same for a cop as a guy who gets the cuffs on him? What about to the arrestee’s mom? Grimm says, “Without recognizing how partial, subjective, and contextual our situated ‘knowledge’ is, we try to impose a version of our reality on others”(93). Instead of imposing our reality, we should rigorously engage its limitations. After acknowledging the possibility that the student’s feelings are valid, helping the student learn about her audience for the paper, by parsing out the professor’s objectives for the course or the assignment, for example, seems to me an explicit way to help her meet the expectations for the assignment without depriving her of her opinions and experiences.

“The teacher assigned an article that uses sarcasm to get its point across. My student doesn’t even understand sarcasm. She thought the author was being serious!”

Literacy is not culturally neutral. Is it possible that this student writer understands sarcasm perfectly well in another context but may not have been aware that academics also use this rhetorical strategy? Grimm reminds us that “literacy practices are content dependent”(45), and this might be a good example of that. The writing tutor might encourage the student to brainstorm out loud or on paper a time when she has used irony or sarcasm and why she did so. This might be a way to assist the writer in understanding different rhetorical styles, and the notion that these styles cross boundaries and genres.

“He hadn’t read the prompt correctly.”

So as the tutor, you believe that you understand it. It might help you help the student writer if you analyze why you think you get it. Something in your experience leads you to believe that your reading is “correct” and his “wrong.” If you work to isolate what specific elements he is misreading and address them, you might find the key that unlocks the box. Have you, as the tutor, demonstrated a “democratic desire to understand and negotiate difference rather than the institutional need to manage or eliminate it”? (82) With a student who understands a prompt outside of the academic box or rhetorical situation in which it is presented, it is important
for the tutor to step outside of the box to negotiate a way in for the student writer. Because, as Grimm says, “literacy is not culturally neutral, even though many pretend it is, changes in literacy involve changes in our understandings of identity, politics, and relationships” (45).

“There’s no way he can have the background knowledge he needs to understand this concept; he’s from Russia!”

Acknowledging that the student is under-prepared to address or respond to the assignment is only the first step for a writing tutor. Writing center tutors need to think of themselves as scholars and researchers in order to best serve both the students who come to them for help and the larger democracy (91). What might seem like exclusively “American” knowledge might be relatable to something in the student’s background. An assignment about the US National Park System, for example might seem to have no point of reference for him. Research what background knowledge the student does have by asking him questions: Where is he from? What does he know? Chances are, a student from Russia can find many points from which to formulate an argument for this essay based on his own experience with bureaucracy and government designations. According to Grimm, “The literacy myth has naturalized the dominant ideology carried in the literacy practices of school to the extent that mainstream teachers and tutors are rarely even aware when their expectations are causing conflict or confusion for students” (33).

“I don’t know what this guy is doing in college or how he got here.”

Another writing center colleague in a 410A discussion board post noted, “according to Grimm, ‘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). In other words, we must go beyond finding logical reasons students struggle with writing. Through empathy, we may be able to understand more fully what is troubling students.” What better way to gain empathy than by confronting our commonsense presumptions within a professional context? Did our education prepare us not only to be here in college but also to judge another person’s character based on how he writes a paper? Have we ever strived for something just out of our reach?

“She didn’t take any of my suggestions.”

When assisting a student writer within and among distinct conventions, a tutor needs to directly explain the rules for the discourse before offering any suggestion. Different discourses have different conventions. A scientific study often eliminates the first person point of view, for example. That same convention tends to rely on facts rather than feelings, would not include a description of the room’s lighting unless that was a variable in the experiment. If your “suggestion” to remove the “I” from the essay was veiled, indeed if it was a “suggestion” alone, that might explain why the student ignored it. Explicit explanation of the rules, in conjunction with discussion about the origin, purpose and place of these rules, is sometimes necessary in order for the student writer to understand. You may think you’re being helpful and not stifling the voice of the writer or not telling him what to say, but if you’re being too indirect you’re perpetuating the idea that only through his deciphering of your academic codes will he ever be able to enter your club, the club of ‘knowing’. There are no natural ways of doing things. The codes must be made explicit. (117) “Once we acknowledge that literacy practices are cultural
rather than natural, we need to be much more aware of how culture works, making explicit that which we take for granted and articulating that which has always seemed ‘natural,’ Grimm says.

Even if we don’t buy into Grimm’s sometimes over the top arguments, we can incorporate some elements of her presentation of a postmodern writing center into our vocabularies and our meta-discursive fluency and perhaps keep from exacerbating the most exclusionary and hegemonic of the writing center’s complicated existence. We need to both hold our own and our colleagues feet to the fire, and cut ourselves and our colleagues some slack as we learn. As we tiptoe, leap, and twist between our modern and our new postmodern ways of seeing we should acknowledge that this dance is Us: On the Border, and as Grimm says, “people who live on the border between realities find it difficult to articulate their understandings” (93).

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“I don’t know what I’m doing wrong,” the tutee told me during our first meeting, dropping a stack of papers on the table in front of me. A quick read showed the papers to be well-organized with few sentence level errors. Most of the numerous corrections seemed to be matters of style preference, not grammar. But the tutee was getting low scores and was struggling to maintain the required grades. Together we went through the comments from various professors. A theme soon emerged, with words like “flat,” “bland,” and “uninteresting” appearing in many of the notes. She had received her Bachelor’s the year before with good grades from these same professors. “Maybe I’m not smart enough for grad school,” she said dejectedly.

Why does a student who has mastered the standards of the academic community successfully enough to graduate with a Bachelor’s degree start struggling when attempting to get an advanced degree? There are a number of factors are involved. New graduate students often find themselves in classes that are much more writing-intensive than the undergraduate classes they’ve spent the last few years mastering. And, just as the language of academic discourse changes from high school to the university level, so it changes again from the undergraduate to the graduate level. Add to these changes the need to get a grade of B or better in all graduate courses, and new graduate students can find themselves asking for help from Writing Center tutors.

Undergraduate students in many academic disciplines are only required to take one course identified as a writing-intensive class. But in the first semester or two of graduate school, the new grad student is often required to take seminar classes that cover the theories of thought in the discipline or the various research methodologies with which they will be working. These classes are often writing-intensive, and the student may be taking more than one. For students who have not done a great deal of writing in their undergraduate career, this can be a time management challenge as well. When a first-year grad student complained about how many hours he was spending writing each paper, we spent a tutoring session developing pre-writing strategies that could be implemented while doing the reading and research, and would make the actual writing process faster. For example, the tutee routinely marked passages in the text, but then had to search through every marked section each time he wanted to find a specific passage during the writing process. We came up with a plan to note the page number and a descriptive word or two on a separate paper, to make it easier to find a passage. In addition, the tutee found he could start organizing these notes into topic sections that also served as an initial outline for the writing.

Although students in undergraduate classes read the works of experts in the field, writing assignments usually take the form of research papers that compare, contrast, or explain the various opinions. These papers expose the undergraduate student to the variety of thought in the field and serve their purpose admirably. But students in graduate programs often find that professors expect the students to do more than understand and regurgitate the thoughts of others. Graduate students are expected to engage with the writings, incorporating their own knowledge and expertise to add to the knowledge of the academic community and join in the academic argument.
In *Writing the Successful Thesis or Dissertation: Entering the Conversation*, Irene Clark explains this concept as similar to socializing at a party. Upon noticing a group of party guests conversing animatedly in a corner, you wander over and join the crowd. After listening for a while to understand the subject being discussed and the opinions of the various participants, you join in the conversation by providing your viewpoint. Joining the academic argument involves the same tactics, except listening to the conversation is replaced by reading the works of others.

This is a new discourse requirement that can be surprising and very disconcerting at first. “But what if I’m wrong?” was a common concern I heard from new graduate students being asked to join in the academic argument. Many tutoring sessions with these new graduate students included discussing the concept of academic argument versus the idea of being right or wrong. As a presidential election was coming up and we were being bombarded with pro and con arguments, we were able to talk about the various ways of using facts and research to support opinions and that in the end, a well supported opinion can rarely be dismissed as right or wrong, it is simply an informed opinion.

Another way graduate students engage in the academic argument is to provide insights about the text. One way to do this is to answer the question “What does it mean?” or “Why is it important?” For example, one tutee was expected to write book reviews on the writings of various experts in the field. Although the tutee’s papers faithfully reported on the contents of the book, his grades were invariably disappointing. To help understand what was expected, he brought in some of the professor’s own published book reviews. Together we identified and discussed how and when the professor had gone beyond a simple book report by giving an opinion on how well a particular concept had been explained, what sections were more important or interesting, or occasionally interpreting what the author meant. After seeing examples of this kind of active engagement with the work, the tutee was able to develop meaning and provide unique insights in his later review papers, adding a new voice to the academic community and consequently improving his grades.

When a graduate student is struggling with these new requirements to provide insight, opinion, or meaning to the subject being discussed in the paper, the tutor often needs to provide more than writing help. The tutor needs to encourage the student not only to begin putting their own ideas into the papers, but also to trust that since they were accepted to the graduate program, they have earned the right to have those ideas. These tutees can also be encouraged to talk with their professors and advisors about their struggles. The student at the beginning of this paper, who was sure she didn’t belong in the program, decided to talk with her professor about it. The professor assured her that her classroom participation proved she could do the work; she just needed to find the same spark in her writing. We worked on helping her put more of her personality into her papers, replacing dull and boring repetition of facts with opinions and insights that made the papers more interesting for the professor to read. The professor enjoyed the papers more, and she received the grades her knowledge deserved.

As a novice Writing Center tutor, I looked forward to helping freshmen with their English essays and second language students to navigate the intricacies of the English language. Although I had many concerns about the practice of tutoring, I didn’t anticipate working with seasoned veterans of the university. But I found myself working with graduate tutee’s who challenged all my expectations. Their problems were not easily classified into higher order concerns and lower order concerns. Instead, many of our tutoring sessions consisted of conversations aimed at helping them understand and fit into a new and unfamiliar discourse community.
Tutoring the Underrepresented Student

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The writing standards will always be the academic bar that college students must meet. Even though these “standards,” it could be argued, are from a white middle class perspective, it is a language that, as tutors, we understand. But it is not enough to simply expect everyone to conform or even to dismiss their own culture when it comes to writing, and as a white male tutor, I have to constantly remind myself of that. For it is too easy to sit back and expect the underrepresented student to always rise to the occasion and be the only one who is supposed to change his or her way of approaching a paper if it does not conform to our way or our perspective. So my advice to new tutors would be to be inquisitive, ask questions, be open-minded of your students’ background and understanding of their anxieties. Let them incorporate their own styles and differences into their writing at the same time guiding them to better understand the boundaries of academic writing. You may find a whole new approach in the way you communicate with people as a whole. Just remember, if you leave a tutoring session coming away with having learned something new about the student you are tutoring, then growth, learning, and communicating is taking place…for both of you.
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.
I watched nervously as my former Animal Rights colleague awaited the next question. The local network affiliate had invited her to debate the ethics of urban deer “management” with the head of a large East Coast hunting lobby. “Are you a vegetarian?” the hunter asked defiantly. “That’s irrelevant!” snapped my colleague. Though a staunch vegetarian, she knew better than to take the hunter’s *ad hominem* bait. Yet, I had always wondered, why should it be irrelevant?

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

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

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

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

**The Inquiry**

The three tutors I interviewed identified themselves as follows:

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

Tutor A

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

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

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

Tutor B

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

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

Recalling his own experience learning English, Tutor B noted that some Spanish-speaking students might have difficulty recognizing questions in written text. Spanish, unlike English, places the question mark at the beginning of the sentence. “[In Spanish] I always knew when it was a question. In English, I had to wait till I got to the end of the sentence.” Here, Tutor B suggested going over the words that introduce questions, e.g., who, which, why, etc., with the student.
When I asked Tutor C for her most useful advice, she hesitated. While weighing her response, she stressed the importance of mastering “writing related concepts” in English. This may be particularly challenging for Spanish speakers not educated here. For example, Tutor C noted that in her native country, the word “thesis” refers \textit{solely} to “the research work you do after you graduate,” not to the main idea of an essay.

Tutor C recalled one student who tried to translate something literally from Spanish into English. “It [didn’t] make sense, but I knew why.” Based on her own experience learning English, Tutor C believes that her ability to explain to students \textit{why} they make such errors allows them “to retain it better.”

Hardly the detached observer, I immediately told Tutor C about my similar experience with Maria, the student from Puerto Rico. Tutor C, after all, had just explained what I had suspected, but could not articulate, about Maria’s progress.

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

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

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

Parting Thoughts

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

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

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

Notes

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

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

Appendix A

1. Please identify your native language (L1) and any other languages in which you are fluent:
   L1__________  L2__________  L3__________
   L4__________  L5__________  Bilingual__________

2. How many non-native English speakers have you tutored as a credit tutor (or as a paid tutor) in the CSUS Writing Center? Of these, how many share your native language?
3. When, if at all, do you use your native language in tutoring?
4. What is the most useful advice that you can give to a monolingual (English) tutor who is tutoring a native Spanish speaker or a bilingual (Spanish/English) speaker? Please be specific.
5. What is the most useful advice that you can give to a monolingual (English) tutor who is tutoring a non-native English speaker whose native language is not Spanish? Please be specific.
6. Is there anything else you’d like to say about your experience tutoring non-native English speakers in the Writing Center?
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.
Worldview: the Continent, Asia and a Testimony from India
Niccole 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>A Continuum</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.

References


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.

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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.

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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  
*mast 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 splices, 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.
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 (prompts).

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 writer’s 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.’
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.

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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 racially 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
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.

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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.
Academic Obstacles: Interpreting Expectations

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

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

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

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

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

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

From these, and multiple other interactions within the Writing Center, it has become clear to me that one of the essential roles a tutor plays is of interpreter for the university. Tutors do not need to know everything about every kind of assignment, but we, and the tutee, do benefit from beginning our session by taking a critical look at the assignment and the academic level the student is responding within.
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 CSUSM, 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.
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.
Collaboration: Alleviate the Tension

At the beginning of my journey in the Writing Center I was quite nervous and hesitant when I found out that I was having to tutor 5 hours a week. I was not sure what to expect, and at the same time was not sure what students were going to expect from me as a tutor. I thought that the students were going to look at me as if I were some sort of expert, and that I had all the answers to their writing needs. I kept questioning myself and had feelings of insecurity and intimidation that I never felt before. Of course, my idea of tutoring in the writing center changed quickly.

As I began, I saw that some students were a bit intimidated too, as they thought I was going to mark all over their papers and criticize them on all their errors as some teachers do. But that is not why I am there. I soon realized that the writing center was a much more casual setting for students to discuss their writing struggles in a more welcoming atmosphere. I saw that the writer and I collaborated more and we could let down our guard. Through collaborating with the writers I could show them that I was very unlike a teacher, and that they could relax and talk with me on a more personal level. Also, at the same time I could relax a bit more because I saw that my role was not to act as a teacher, but to team up with the writer and work together instead of just instructing them. The Writing Center is not like a classroom at all, but more like a place where students can come to discuss and develop their writing by talking with tutors, who are students as well. Through collaborating with the students, I can help them with their writing in a more comfortable, yet still academic, setting. Collaborating with them meant that I could suggest ways they could better their writing, but in a less direct way. I could show them that I was a student too and that I understood and could empathize with the problems they faced in writing.

By relating to the writer on a student to student level, the writer can be more open to collaborating with the tutor. The writer is less likely to expect the tutor to just do the work for them, which is not at all something that I would like to do. This reminds me of a particular case that I had with a writer. In fact, it was on my first day of tutoring at the beginning of the semester. The student had brought in an article that she was assigned to read and then answer questions on, because her English class was going to be writing an essay on the topic within the article. She came in with the article and told me that she had difficulty understanding it. I then asked her to point out some of the sections in the article where she maybe did not understand clearly. She told me she didn’t understand the whole thing, and that it was tough to read. She essentially was asking me to read the article myself and then tell her what the article was about. I had to let her know that I was not going to just interpret the article for her, that would be doing the work that she was assigned to do. Instead, we read over the article together, taking turns reading it aloud. I could then see with my own eyes that the article was indeed a bit confusing, and the author was writing about such an abstract topic. So I let her know that she was not alone, I too thought the article was difficult to read. After reading each paragraph, we discussed in our own words how we interpreted what the author’s message was. With discussing the article together we were able to work as a team, rather than me telling her what to do. I simply gave her my perspective as a fellow student, rather than telling her exactly what the article meant.
talking with the student in a more informal manner I was able to help her out with her assignment. When reflecting on this tutoring session, I can see how collaboration played a key role.

In practicing collaboration we can talk to the writers like real people and less like an authority figure. We can create an atmosphere in the writing center that is much like an educational community with no teacher-student type of setting. In most traditional learning processes, generally someone is lecturing and someone is listening. We can neutralize this learning process by being good listeners ourselves as tutors. While giving our input to the student we must listen and be attentive to their feedback. So instead of a give and take relationship between the tutors and writers we have one more of a give and give. We don’t just spew out knowledge and assume the writer will remember it. We as tutors want the student to have an opportunity to give some insight on the task at hand too. In the book titled Learning Together: Peer Tutoring in Higher Education, author Nancy Falchikov points out the problem tutors face with identifying with a role, and how doing that detracts from the tutee. She suggests, “training the tutors to help boost tutee’s confidence, avoid fixed roles, training to stress collaboration, use tasks structured to require co-operation, and use reciprocal peer tutoring” (106). As tutors we can engage in conversation with the student on another level that is less formal and more natural. We can loosen up the session by means of conversation and we can share even our own experiences with writing.

As mentioned above, collaboration involves both sides of the party to give comments to make things happen. While tutoring in the writing center I was able to reflect on my own writing experience to help writers with their struggles. I had many writers that were taking English 1A or 20, both classes that I had taken. I also had a good amount of writers who needed help with the WPE, also something that I had taken. So I can understand how hard it is sometimes to brainstorm, pick a side to an argument, and use proper grammar in writing. All these being complicated as they are, one that is difficult for most is brainstorming and finding a topic to write on. Many students come into the writing center needing someone to help them narrow down to an interesting topic they feel comfortable writing about. For example, one of my regular tutees is in English 1A. She would often bring in prompts for her assignments and would be seeking help on finding a topic. We would then discuss what the teacher was looking for in the assignment. For instance, she had to write a paper on a particular concept, but one that pertained to her own life, or one that she knew enough about to where she wouldn’t have to do any research. So I then picked her brain with some open ended questions. I first asked her what other people in the class were writing about. I also shared with her some of the things that I wrote about when I was in English 1A. I then asked her about what interests her, what she does for fun, events in her childhood, and other questions about her as a person. She then started to open up and share with me things that she would be interested in writing about. Through our collaboration we were able to find multiple topics that she felt secure enough to write about.

The tutee and I were able to share ideas and develop writing skills through discussion and through collaboration of our thoughts. In sharing my thoughts and experience in writing I am allowing the tutees to see me as a real person that struggles in some of the same ways they do. I can share problems that I too have in writing so that the tutees feels a little bit better about some of the problems they face as writers. By collaboration we can see each other’s perspective
and opinion on things. We can team up and come to an agreement on things, but at the same
time be aware of differences. In, the article written by Andrea Lunsford called “Collaboration,
Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center” found in the St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing
Tutors the author explains collaboration and how it assists us in being more open minded. One
particular quote states, “Collaboration leads not only to sharper, more critical thinking, but to
deeper understanding of others” (49). In other words, she says that collaboration engages
students in “not only in reaching consensus but in valuing dissensus and diversity” (52). Tutors
and tutees share with each other information that helps in collaborative learning through the
writing process.

Through this experience of tutoring in the Writing Center I have learned so much about
the importance of collaboration. I was able to let my guard down and talk to the tutee like a
student and not a teacher. Then, in turn, the tutees were able to let their guard down and talk
with me like fellow students and not as if they were my students. The tutees and I were able to
get rid of any tension in the air by just having a social exchange of thoughts. We could relate to
one another as students and could discuss things in an informal environment. We could use our
own words to talk over topics. Through collaboration we could engage in conversation to learn
from each other’s knowledge and experiences. We can both become enlightened through the
whole process. Of course, as tutors, we might run into someone who is not so willing to
Collaborate their thoughts, then I guess we could take a more direct approach and accommodate
the situation. But, I learned that I am not to act as an editor or a teacher, but more, in my
opinion, a well informed academic therapist that understands their struggle but can still diagnose
and fix the difficulty the writer is having. When thinking about my experience in the Writing
Center I feel that my sessions with students overall were successful due greatly to collaboration.
I saw that through collaboration the tutee and I, being as different as we are, could always come
to a common ground and put our minds together and, at the same time, respect each other’s
differences. We are there to work together as a team coming to conclusions and challenging our
brains. Because of collaboration I have the tutee work with me, instead of just doing the work
for the tutee. I am now a more confident tutor and I no longer have any anxiety when it comes to
tutoring. Due to collaboration in discussion, I am able to see that I can work together with the
student so no one is put on the spot and feels obligated to say something. The Writing Center
allows an atmosphere that encourages collaboration and team work. I have benefitted greatly
from this experience and I will never forget it.

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Throughout the semester, I have been exposed to theory after theory describing different ways to approach students and assist them in becoming better and more effective writers. Some of them sounded like common sense, some I had never thought of before, and some sounded a little silly. However, there was one aspect that each subsequent class discussion on the theories had in common, and that was that each student demands individual attention. Nancy Grimm, a leading tutoring theorist, states that a Writing Center's “success should not be measured by [a student's] individual achievement” (21); however, as I have come to understand, individual attention is the key to effective tutoring. One cannot use a blanket approach when tutoring a student, and though each theory claims to be the best way to tutor writers, no one theory will aid every single writer. As you research various theories over the semester, undoubtedly the two theories that will come across as completely incompatible are modern and postmodern theory. Even the names suggest that they cannot be reconciled. However, a quick, unclouded view of both theories—their faults and contributions to tutoring sessions—will prove that the differences these theories have must be set aside, as we continually strive to serve each student in their individual goals as well as we can.

Modernism

This is known as the old school theory, the theory that all professors have practiced throughout their careers and probably the methodology that we have been exposed to as students, both in college and in grade school. This theory posits that knowledge is ultimately attainable to all people, despite class, gender, or race, and that with enough hard work, everyone can eventually come to even ground. Modernism values traditions and tries to impress upon others the importance of not only keeping tradition alive, but also how the tradition should be integral to everyone's life. I think that it should also be known as the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” theory. Thus, this theory is predictably focused on the individual and his or her achievements.

Benefits of a Modernist Tutoring Session

Since a modernist tutoring pedagogy focuses on the needs of the individual, employing this tactic in your session will of course be beneficial to the writer. As I said in the beginning, no one student is going to come to the Writing Center with the same needs, so a tutor must approach each student as an individual case. Modernism also tends to uphold the current academic system, favoring a clean, concise essay that has a focused argument and relevant supporting citations. Since we are all members of an academic community that favors such standards, a tutoring session that helps the student acquire these skills is very useful. A modernist tutor, as well, will most often adopt a hands-off approach, that is, the tutor will allow the writer to come to his or her own conclusions without guiding the topic in a direction that the tutor feels is best. A tutor can ask questions, but she must take care that she is not asking leading questions, or at least, questions that do not force a writer to focus on a topic that she does not agree with.
In my sessions, especially with writers who have difficulty stating their ideas, I will often spend most of the session engaging in a question and answer period, adopting multiple stances on the topic and asking the writer how she feels about each direction. I try to illustrate that there are always many ways to approach a topic, and while I will not endorse any particular one, such sessions usually result in a writer being able to not only decide on a direction to take her essay in, but to be well-versed in applicable counter arguments to discuss in the essay.

**Drawbacks of a Modernist Session**

Since the modernist will promote and engage in accepted academic discourse and assume that all students, with the proper application of hard work and study, will be able to master this discourse, it naturally places some students who have not had the benefit of an education that prepares them for college at a disadvantage. Not all students are as prepared for college as the university would like them to be, and not all students agree upon the same definition of academic discourse. As you will no doubt see, there are many students who are bringing the knowledge of multiple languages and cultures to the Writing Center, often with English not being the first language they were exposed to. These different cultures have varied discourses, all of them valuable, even though they are not exactly the discourse that the university is asking them to communicate with. Asking a student to wholly abandon his or her cultural discourse is not a position we should endorse, and so a pure modernist session that values only the university’s standards unfairly stifles student voices.

The hands-off approach of a modernist can be seen as standoffish, as well as silently endorsing the university's discourse, blocking a writer's attempt to challenge what has been set up as an authority. This is where postmodernism comes into play.

**Postmodernism**

As famously argued by Nancy Grimm, postmodern theory in the Writing Center leaps at the chance to challenge academic authority and attempts to discover ways in which such authority excludes groups of students. This theory takes the opposite stance of modernism and states that precisely because of differences in class, race, and gender, not all students are welcome into the academy equally. In fact, since the basis of postmodernism is that language at some point always fails, the language that we use to include students in academic discourse simultaneously excludes others. Grimm argues in *Good Intentions* that postmodernism is “the ability to simultaneously maintain multiple viewpoints ... and to regularly renegotiate issues of knowledge, power and ownership” (2). This theory, instead of focusing [purely on the individual, looks at culture and society as a whole and looks for ways in which language and the institutions that employ it fail particular groups of students while servicing others.

**Benefits of a Postmodernist Tutoring Session**

Postmodernism steps in where modernism trips up. It does not assume that all students will achieve the same end, regardless of their background, and works tirelessly to accommodate every type of student. It examines academic discourse and openly discusses with the writer how she will be forced to adopt this way of communicating, but that it is not—by any means—the
best or only way to communicate. Through this, we can ensure that writers do not come away from the university with the misunderstanding that they must master this discourse or be a failure. It also continually strives to make the academic system fairer and more accessible to each student. Unlike modernism, it actively seeks flaws in the current system, exposes them to others, and makes a concerted effort to change things for the better – allowing each student a chance to express him or herself in a personal and meaningful way.

I find that I often have to employ the basics of postmodern tutoring theory in my sessions with a Vietnamese student. She often tries to argue with me that because she cannot master English as a second language, that she is not as smart or capable as other students. She is extremely unsure of herself, and even though she has a fine command of the English language, she invariably sees a hierarchical difference between herself and native English speakers. Thus, throughout the semester, I have discussed the importance of all discourses, and we have, at least for 15 minutes each session, talked about how we all use different discourses to speak to different people, and therefore there is no right or wrong discourse. I believe that because she has felt this inequality for most of her life, one semester might not be enough to shake her completely from her point of view, but at least it will give her something to consider.

**Drawbacks of a Postmodernist Session**

I think that the most obvious drawback is that since postmodernist tutoring theory does not want to focus on the individual achievement, but rather the achievement of the whole writing community, we sacrifice individual writers’ success in order to try to repair the system. It seems to want to focus on the individual by taking into account different backgrounds, but it stops short when it wants to make the focus of the session the ways in which to challenge academia. It fails to consider that some students are not as passionate about writing as we are, and as such, they may simply want to learn the academic rules, pass the class, and move on. This is not to say that postmodernism does not explain academic rules; it actually exposes them for what they are: merely a product of the authority in place, as I said above. However, it does so using emotionally charged language. Grimm describes those students that do well as also having the knowledge of “how to set a table for company dinner, ... how to make a salad with more than iceberg lettuce, ... [and] how to chat during cocktail hour” (37). The problem with this type of language is that you divide students. You have those students who wholeheartedly agree with Grimm that the only way to succeed in school is to have a privileged upbringing, and then you have the students who are not represented by Grimm and postmodernism – excelling in school despite the fact that they don't represent postmodernism's “white middle-class” student. This division is antithetical to what postmodernism claims to uphold, and as such is one of the flaws in its system. Therefore, if we take a purely postmodern attitude in the Writing Center, I think we might find that we turn some students off.

Looking for and repairing flaws in a system is definitely encouraged – all tutors should want to improve academia. But, I believe that in postmodernism's attempt to distance itself from its predecessor, the theory has completely abandoned the wisdom that those “old school” educators developed, without pausing to sift through it for useful nuggets to employ in postmodernism.
Where Does This Leave Us?

Bringing together two very different theories may seem confusing, and it might look like I'm sending conflicting messages. However, each theory strives to help the students succeed; modernism tries to help a student succeed in a more academic sense, while postmodernism attempts to push a student beyond the 'A' and recognize his or her place in multiple discourses. We should constantly attempt to help a student achieve success in a particular class, but also in the life and discourse that exists outside of class. Therefore, I believe that regardless of whatever particular theory we decide to subscribe to, we must be careful not to exclude other schools of thought. In fact, we can apply the most useful aspect of postmodernism to not only itself, but every other theory that we explore. The idealism of postmodernism states that we continually improve; thus, we must always look for the flaws in a theory and try to supplement it with new ideas and aspects of other theories if we ever hope to improve our own tutoring sessions.
Incorporating the Postmodern Approach

In *Good Intentions*, Nancy Grimm creates a binary argument that reflects her view of the university as a place that is exclusive, rather than inclusive, of the broader community. Grimm says that she has “been working against the commonsense theories that make it easy to position students as lacking, against the notion of academic literacy as ideologically neutral, against the tacit assumption and practices that maintain an unfair status quo” (102). She believes that classroom assignments, the standard academic essay, and current tutoring practices all reinforce a value system that excludes different literacies and social structure concepts (102). Grimm proposes that post-modern writing center tutors need to “work with more awareness, more explicitness, more discomfort than before, when they were protected by the assumption that institutions are fundamentally fair” (103). While I personally found many of Grimm’s basic arguments unfounded based on my own experiences as a writing tutor, I do believe that many of her ideas can be put into practice within the current writing center structure. While I still believe that all universities must maintain academic standards that incorporate the use of the academic essay as a means to convey the student’s ideas, there are changes that can be made to initiate a broader understanding of various discourses as well as cultural differences from the students seeking our services. My goal is to propose ways in which we can create a transitional space that incorporates both modern and post-modern ideas. In this gray area between both schools of thought, tutors and students can work together through reconciliation, reciprocity, recognition, and judgment as recommended by Grimm (75-79).

I do disagree with Grimm’s statements that students who learn to write within the confines of academic discourse are relinquishing their cultural distinctiveness, so the writing center needs to be the place where these changes are prevented. I believe the job of the writing center is to help students move efficiently from one discourse to another. If cultural distinctiveness is diminished, which Grimm has not proven, then I believe that the families and support systems of each student are responsible for reinforcing the retention of these various traditions, not the writing center. With this fundamental difference between my viewpoint and Grimm’s position, her concepts cannot be incorporated completely, but rather, can be utilized to inform the approach a tutor takes with students from other backgrounds.

Under the concept of reconciliation, the tutoring session would include discussion of the variances between home and school life (Grimm, 76). While I do not believe that tutors are responsible for managing this transition, I think that having open discussions about a person’s race, gender or class may identify viewpoints or tools that will enable the students to succeed. For example, if a student comes from a background that encourages circular discussion, not a thesis driven approach, then you can utilize freewriting as a means to identify the student’s ideas. After a discussion about the required essay format prevalent in U.S. writing, it would be much simpler to identify a thesis statement with the examples splayed out in front of the student. In this way, incorporation of the traditional writing in which the student is familiar can be used as a stepping-stone to U.S. academic writing. By understanding a student’s background, the tutor might be able to help with the transition from the writing experiences that the student had to the requirements of current academic writing. Grimm believes that the tutor should open the discussion about these differences. I would agree with her that the initiative should come from
the tutor because the tutor initially holds the dominant position in the relationship. By making this gesture, a better understanding of each other will occur. The outcome may be that both the tutor and the student will create a “transitional space where they can play with and challenge cultural expectations, reimagining social futures” (76). In other words, both the tutor and student may experience change within themselves that provide a better-informed perspective on the differences and sameness of various people and their respective cultures. With this awakening, a new perspective on the college culture as well as the surrounding environment may be positively impacted.

This change moves directly into Grimm’s next point of contact between the tutor and the student, which is reciprocity. By sharing cultural differences and incorporating these individual views into a better understanding of the other person as well as ourselves, we eliminate the need for domination. “Reciprocity ‘connotes a continuous though imprecisely defined sharing of authority and mutuality of decisions’” (Grimm 76). When we approach a tutoring session with the hope of not only assisting the student in improving his/her writing, but also with a desire to better understand the student’s history which directly impacts his/her perspective, then we have created an environment where power is shared between the tutor and the student. This is an important element in moving from modern to post-modern perspectives.

While I do not believe that we should eliminate the assistance that we provide for our students in writing better essays, I do believe that there is room within the tutor/student relationship to encourage an exchange of ideas. After all, the essay does belong to the student, not the tutor. We do owe it to our students to help them succeed, even if that entails a concept of power, which is contrary to Grimm’s theories. Sometimes, the direct approach to tutoring is necessary in order to give the student the tools necessary to succeed. However, on balance, we can also try to reach beyond ourselves; we can allow the exchange of cultural understanding that is not as prevalent within our writing center today. So often, I find myself asking a student how things are going for example, but only listen with a superficial interest. I believe we can incorporate better listening in order to reach a shared experience with our students. Paraphrasing is one way to acknowledge that we are truly listening. We can repeat back to the student what he/she just said and expand the idea. For example, if a student says that he/she just received an essay back with notes from the professor, we can say, “Oh, you received feedback. What did you think of the teacher’s comments?” Then we need to stop whatever we are doing with our hands, bodies or eyes and just listen to his/her reaction. When he/she expresses an emotional response, we can repeat the emotion, then ask how he/she wants to approach the review. This brief exchange lets the student know that we are actually listening to him/her, and also places the control back in his/her hands by letting them decide upon an approach. I believe these small changes in our own listening skills can further engage the student in the process and incorporate Grimm’s reciprocity concept.

The next step is to accomplish recognition within the tutor/student relationship. Grimm says that the tutor must learn to accept as well as identify with the differences that are presented to us by our students (77). In other words, we need to see ourselves as part of as well as separate from the students (77). This feat is a rather abstract concept that I believe to be difficult to apply within the short confines of a tutoring session. For example, I have a student that speaks three languages and comes from a background wherein her family had all of their property taken away by the government, and they were shunned because they were of a different faith then the current régime. My personal experiences do not contain anything remotely close to this student's personal story. She, however, did not see herself as unique because many families were
impacted in this way within her country. I began my approach with her in very little ways, such as complimenting her on speaking so many languages when I have only learned one fluently. When she wrote about her experiences, I commented on my own personal reactions to her struggles, how daring and strong she must be as a person. I admired her fortitude and said so. We are very different from each other, but have let the other person’s experience inform our own. I believe that over time both tutors and students can learn to appreciate both common ground and differences through the shared relationship that is developed in a tutoring session. We can accomplish this more abstract idea of recognition when we develop strong and sincere lines of communication within the tutor/student relationship.

The final element that Grimm believes would move us from a modern to a post-modern approach is a judgment that moves the tutor and student “back and forth between multiple realities” (78). This movement is not only applicable to the many roles that we as individuals play within our own lives, but also the many roles that are assumed by our students. I have found this concept to be the most confounding. I have a difficult enough time keeping my own life straight, and I believe it would be nearly impossible for me to move with a student across all of the avenues in which he/she lives. While I think it is valid to move “between evidence and reflection” to continually reevaluate the validity of my own judgment of others, I do not believe that it is ever possible for me to truly understand the experiences of another. I think that it is actually presumptuous to think the life occurrences of another person could ever be fully understood by an outside observer that is briefly exposed to these experiences.

While I would strongly urge the tutor to adapt whatever avenues of understanding might be available to them when dealing with their students, I think some realistic limits have to temper the goals espoused by Grimm. As tutors, we can be more conscious of the various cultural differences that are present within each of our students and attempt to understand how these variances impact his/her abilities to meet the expectations of academic writing. In addition, these differences may very well change our own assumptions about our students, the academic environment, and the larger environment in which we live. These understandings and changes can take place within the confines of our tutoring sessions. However, I do not believe that the academic standards should be changed or altered based on the various cultures that are currently present on our campus. If we reduce the tutoring center to a place where cultural differences are the focus, rather than the goal to improve the writing of our students, then we are doing our students a disservice. One of the many points of attending college is to gain skills that will make you successful outside of the college environment. If we do not assist our students in conveying their ideas effectively, then they will not have the tools to succeed. We owe it to our students to help them prepare for effective communication in whatever future they chose to pursue.

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Here's the bottom line: I hate Grimm. There. It's out there, and I feel better for having said it. I'm a modernist, and most of her postmodernism sounds silly to me. However, through my exposure to Grimm and other postmodernists we've dealt with this semester, I've been able to incorporate some areas of postmodernism into my little modernist heart.

I'm a firm believer that there's a right way to construct a paper, and a wrong way. This is mostly due to my experience in having constructed papers “the wrong way” and getting marked down for it. Therefore, I have a difficult time with the postmodernist idea of keeping a student's voice intact due to cultural considerations when I think it will cause them to be marked down on their paper. For instance, I have a hard time coddling a student who uses circular logic in an English paper simply because their culture commonly writes circularly instead of linearly like English. Don't get me wrong, I think it's fascinating and extremely helpful to know that, but I think sometimes postmodernists sacrifice the academic health of the student to keep their voice intact. The student is writing an English paper, and my modernist ideals tell me that they need to write it linearly so that the professor won't mark them down.

For me, the challenge has been being true to my own philosophies while still passing the class (I know—modernism at its finest, right?) It's taken a long time, but I think I've finally been able to reconcile myself with postmodernism. I simply ignore everything I don't believe—KIDDING (sort of.) Instead of ignoring the whole of it, I've thought a lot about what Grimm has to say this semester. I've thought about it, and I've decided that I disagree with a lot of it, but I've also decided that there are some valuable things that Grimm has taught me, in spite of my intense dislike of her book.

I like that Grimm wants to encourage a student's voice in his or her writing. What I disagree with is the tactics. I think it is perfectly acceptable to break with convention for the purposes of art (which I believe writing can be), the thing I disagree with is the tactics. Postmodernists (as I see it) advocate keeping the voice intact during the learning process. Frankly, as cruel as it sounds, I don't think this is the best way to make great writers. I think one must first be able to adhere to the rules and conventions before one can understand why rules can be broken, and that will convey in their writing. I contend that making writers adhere to a strict guideline gives them a greater understanding of the language, and makes them more purposeful in their breaks with convention for artistic purposes, which I believe creates a better product.

However, having stated my modernist bread-and-butter, I've worked to celebrate unique, clever, or interesting writing choices in the papers I've seen. Usually, this means taking the time to recognize a fabulous vocabulary word the student was able to employ, but it can also mean poetic sentences, or in at least one case, an entire thematic approach (her entire paper was peppered with allusions to nature and utilized some beautiful vocabulary choices.) These aren't things that I would have normally thought to comment on.
Actually, the entire concept of praise is one of the things that has struck me most about our postmodernism readings and the thing that I have really taken to heart. Previously, I think I used praise far too sparingly, so I have focused on improving my communication of praise to students this semester. I try to be very mindful of telling students what they did well, and not simply focusing on what they could improve. I think this has translated into more effective tutoring sessions since it's a lot easier to for people to hear constructive comments when they are balanced with compliments. Granted, these are things that I had previously “known,” but I think if you tried it, you'd be surprised at the difference taking the time to give a little bit of extra, deserved praise will make. I know I was.
Reflecting on my tutoring career, there is one complaint I never get tired of hearing: “Lisa, you are making me think too hard.” While this is not the first time I have heard this from my students, it seems that I am hearing this much more this semester. So why am I hearing this more than usual? Do they just like to complain? Are they lazier than usual? Are they less capable of thinking on their own than the students I have had before? Or is it simply that my approach is different? In this past year, my education and research in composition and literacy, has influenced my pedagogical approach which has become more directed toward a social constructivist pedagogy, and consequently has affected how I interact with my students. Through a social constructivist lens, I help students to construct meaning from their experiential truth as members of a linguistically connected society, while at the same time adhering to academic expectations.

Sometimes a student addresses an issue in a way that his tutor may think that his tutee has misunderstood or misrepresented in his paper. It is a delicate dance between guiding the student to a more credible position and leading him into the direction the tutor thinks he ought to take. “We must practice a non-directive pedagogy so as not to shape students’ ideas regarding self-identity, but rather try to foster their awareness and discovery” (Given). Furthermore, in order to allow the writer to sustain the ownership of his paper, according to social constructivist theory, we must consider that tutors should engage in dialogue as a coach rather than an all-knowing teacher. In Tutoring Writing by Donald McAndrew and Thomas Riegstad, the authors write, “What we see when we watch a tutoring session is a social interaction that’s focused on literacy and learning, a dialogue between the more experienced tutor and the less experienced student writer that takes place in the wider context of language and culture. The writer will reconstruct her understanding of the current draft and of writing as a direct result of the dialogue”(McAndrew 2). One way to encourage this dialogue is by asking the student writer questions in which the tutor is not looking for a specific answer, but one that allows the student to discover what he already knows. For example, one of my students brought in a paper on the difference between good discrimination and bad discrimination. She said that it was OK to discriminate when choosing a good neighborhood when buying a house – that sometimes, neighborhoods that are mostly black or Latino are known to have high crime rates. (By the way, my student is both Latina and African American). I asked her several questions: Then it’s OK for me to get together with my neighbors and agree to never sell to blacks or Latinos? “No.” she said. “That would be wrong – that would be the bad kind of discrimination.” I said, “But I’m just trying to keep my neighborhood safe. What’s the difference?” She had to consider this question. She wasn’t sure what to say. So, I asked another question. So, you said up here in your paper that when choosing a neighborhood, it is OK to discriminate when choosing a neighborhood when choosing a good neighborhood when buying a house – that sometimes, neighborhoods that are mostly black or Latino are known to have high crime rates. (By the way, my student is both Latina and African American). I asked her several questions: Then it’s OK for me to get together with my neighbors and agree to never sell to blacks or Latinos? “No.” she said. “That would be wrong – that would be the bad kind of discrimination.” I said, “But I’m just trying to keep my neighborhood safe. What’s the difference?” She had to consider this question. She wasn’t sure what to say. So, I asked another question. So, you said up here in your paper that when choosing a neighborhood, it is OK to discriminate when you are looking for a safe place for your family to live? What makes you feel safe? Let’s make a list. She wrote a list of everything she would look for in a neighborhood that makes her feel safe and another list that makes her feel unsafe – that the neighborhood might be dangerous. I said to her when she was done, “You’ve created quite an extensive list on both sides – that’s a really good place to start, but I’m curious; you didn’t include under the unsafe list that blacks and Latinos are in the neighborhood.” She said, “I guess the fact that there are drug dealers, gangs and hookers on
every corner is the real issue, not whether a particular race lives there.” By playing devil’s advocate, I demonstrated to her how a reader might interpret her writing. I then redirected her back to her original topic sentence, in which she wrote about safety, not race. By encouraging dialogue and asking her to make a list, she was able to discover what she really thought was important without my interference.

Tutors will agree that while they often struggle to get their student writers to personally engage in their own text beyond the superficial academic conventions even when professors write prompts designed specifically to encourage cultural voice, it seems nearly impossible when prompts are extremely limiting, both in structure and content. I had a student the other day who brought in a paper for her women’s studies class. The prompt specifically stated that 90% of the paper should come from the textbook, and the essay should be limited to 10% of the student’s opinion. The student explained to me that the instructor was simply interested in knowing whether she understood the text and was less interested in her opinion. How was I to help this student insert her cultural understanding of the text when clearly the professor was not interested in it? My suggestion to her was to paraphrase the information from the text, but to be sure to include a brief analysis after each summary. Furthermore, I suggested that a good place to interject her opinion was in the conclusion. First, I suggested that she imagine a specific reader, (not her professor). Who would be interested in reading this paper? Then ask herself what does she want her readers to understand about this topic? Then I asked her to consider what does she understand about this topic that she did not understand before she wrote the paper? While I am not sure that this strategy limited her opinion exactly 10%, I felt that it would at least give her a chance to construct her specific meaning of the text while at the same time adhering to the professor’s requirement.

Furthermore, students are sometimes afraid to voice their true opinion if they think their professor takes a different stance from their own. Preconceived notions and cultural values can often affect how a student views a particular topic. This is especially true when professors assigns controversial topics and student writing reveals emotionally charged irrationality. As tutors we need to emphasize the necessity to form credible arguments backed up with logical source material. (Given). For example, I had an Indian student come in the other day who wrote in support of the Yes vote on proposition 8. She began our session asking me what my opinion was on the topic. Anticipating that her views did not align with my own, I suggested to her that we go over her paper first, and if we had time, we could discuss the issue. I did not want her to think that my views on the issue would affect how I advised her on her paper. Her paper was on how society perceives same sex marriage. She primarily argued that the majority of Americans perceive the word marriage as a union between a man and a woman. In this regard, she initially presented a good argument. But then she lost focus when she claimed that because people perceive marriage as only between a man and a woman, then the constitution should be changed to reflect this perception. She provided no evidence to make this argument. I explained to her that while she began her argument well by providing good evidence through surveys and voting outcomes regarding the majority perception, she did not provide the same evidence for changing the constitution. After we discussed possible ways to develop her argument, we had an open discussion on the issue at hand. While she and I ultimately agreed to disagree, I was able to gain some insight into how she approached this topic in her writing. Because of my student’s Indian/Hindu background, indoctrinated religious and political beliefs made it difficult for her to see the difference between what arguable evidence and emotional editorializing.
Students not only bring their cultural biases into their writing, but quite often students bring in pre-determined ideas about their own writing. Students who come in for help already defeated often instigate a self-fulfilling prophecy. Ed Jones, in his article, “Predicting performance in first-semester college basic writers: Revisiting the role of self-beliefs” states that several theorists including Bandura, Zimmerman and Pajares argue that self-efficacy is people’s beliefs about their capabilities to produce performances that influence events affecting their lives. Self-efficacy posits that in order to have beliefs about what one can accomplish, one must have beliefs about whether one can accomplish it. Compared with those who have low self-efficacy, those with high self-efficacy tend to take on interesting challenges, set both long-range and intermediate goals, use strategies to attain them, self-regulate cognitive development, work harder, persist in spite of obstacles and show a tendency to experience less task-related anxiety. (Jones 210).

When a student believes he cannot write well, or when a teacher, either current or past, has confirmed his belief that he is a terrible writer, it is difficult to re-write the message in his head. Jones argues that “failure to get positive feedback from teachers can result in low academic self-efficacy. Furthermore, he states that “[p]rocrastination, tardiness, avoidance of class assignments, and failure to seek help when appropriate” demonstrate a student-writer’s negative self-beliefs. I have a student in my EOP class who was placed directly into English 1A from high school. He claims that he was only placed there because of his high SAT scores. He has a good vocabulary and good reading comprehension. But claims his writing “sucks.” I’ve been asking him all semester to bring in one of his essays so that I can see what’s going on. I finally got my hands on his essay 4 weeks before the end of the semester. His language skills, his vocabulary, his diction are superior. But his development and organization lack any kind heuristic development. This paper was on his family heritage, which he claimed he was interested in researching. But I felt like I was reading the immigration report from Ellis Island. When we reviewed his paper, the wall went up. I asked him how he could make his last few sentences in his first paragraph into a thesis statement. He became frustrated and said he had no idea. As I pressed him a little further, we discussed what constituted a thesis statement, but he just became agitated, saying he didn’t know. I explained what it was, and asked more questions. How could he add his opinion into the statement he had made? After he claimed he couldn’t do it several more time, we finally had a breakthrough. But every comment I made throughout his paper, I had to press him with more and more questions. We were both exhausted by the time we were done, and we barely got through a couple of pages. Jones claims that teachers should “focus on helping [students] become more internally oriented and become more aware of productive and counterproductive academic behaviors, not just helping them academic writing tasks” (Jones 233). This student did not construct his opinion of his writing on his own. Years of bad grades, ineffective comments from his teachers, and lack of encouragement to engage in conversation or express his opinion at home factor into his formulating a defeatist attitude toward his writing.

Multilingual students and those who speak non-Standard dialects have particular challenges adjusting to American academic writing standards. They often feel isolated and alienated by academic discourse. While non-native speakers are placed in classes specifically designed for them, utilizing culturally diverse text, emphasizing grammar, and giving extra time for testing, students who speak non-standard English, particularly Black English Vernacular, are
often enrolled in English courses where their language is not valued in academic discourse. Furthermore, the texts they are given to read and respond to are not culturally relevant, and serve to distance them further from academia. Although the Learning Skills Department on our campus does have a Pan-African Learning Community, this community only serves a limited number of African American students, and is limited to first-time freshmen. One of my students enrolled in my EOP class struggles to fit in with the other students; although he is only one of several African American students in my class, he is the only one from an inner city school who speaks in black dialect. He complains that his English papers come back all marked up. When I look at his writing, I see a very creative style and authentic tone; however, in an effort to sound more academic, he forces language he is not familiar with. Not only does it seem that he is doing what I call “thesaurus writing,” his diction and syntax leave his writing unnatural and therefore does not adequately convey his message. After reading the first few paragraphs, I asked him to tell me what the paper was about. I think he was confused by the question since I had just finished reading it. I turned over the paper, and I said, “Forget about what you wrote, just tell me what you wanted to say.” After he explained to me what the paper was about, I said, “Ah, that’s what you need to say in your paper.” I asked him to do a free write about the paper, disregarding grammar and “proper English.” Although his spelling and grammar did not meet academic standards, his writing was fluid and natural. I told him that for his first drafts, this is how I wanted him to write – that we would worry about grammar for the final draft. I wanted him to get his thoughts down in a language that was more natural to him. Sara Dalmas Jonsberg suggests we must learn not to speak about “‘bad English’ or ‘good English’ but rather different forms of a living and continually changing English. [We] can learn not to talk about “correcting” language but rather about the rule structure of different dialects” (Jonsberg 52-3). When I gave my student permission to write in his own language, he was better able to articulate his thoughts. And when he returned for the final draft, we discussed that everybody changes the language they speak when they change communities. I told him I don’t speak to my friends and family the way I do to my professors, and I don’t expect my children to speak to me the way they do their friends. We have to learn different conventions for each situation we encounter. The same is true when we enter the academic community. Once you learn these conventions, I wouldn’t expect you to go back to Oakland and speak in academic jargon.

My intention in writing this essay is to demonstrate through specific examples of tutoring sessions the way in which writing center tutors can guide students to become critical and thoughtful writers, while at the same time, achieving academic success. Although it may seem that writing center tutors have little authority to change what constitutes academic writing, a tutor who is conscious of the lens in which she views her students as writers can guide student writers to access the knowledge which they already possess and to skillfully integrate their cultural insights into their writing. However, tutors must also understand that these techniques may meet with some resistance from students who just want his tutor to just “fix it,” rather than asking them questions that seem irrelevant and time-consuming. My only suggestion is to be persistent; they may not even thank you now, but some time down the road, they will return, and say “Thank You for making me think.”
Works Cited


Avoiding W.P.E Writing Anxiety – Be Prepared

Lorraine Flynn
Spring 2000

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

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

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

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

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

4) Read the passage carefully annotating as you read. (25 minutes) Underline important words or sentences and write comments or words in the margins.
5) Start writing (60 minutes) by brainstorming ideas either by free writing or by listing: Ask yourself what do I believe and why?
   I suggest for the WPE to make a list with pros on one side and cons on the opposite side. Whatever technique the student uses, the goal is to generate ideas.
6) Take a firm and clear position. Form a tentative thesis sentence, which will help the writer stay focused. This sentence is the central idea; an idea preparing the reader for the supporting details that will follow. Don’t worry about writing a perfect thesis sentence, as you can change the wording as you are writing the draft, or during the editing process.
7) To cluster your ideas, write the thesis in the center, draw a circle around it, and surround that with related ideas from your list with arrows to the thesis statement. Each idea surrounded by the thesis is the supportive reason or evidence telling the reader why you are taking this stance.
8) Develop the topic sentences for each supporting paragraph from the cluster.
9) Begin the draft with the introduction. The introduction will tell the reader what the paper is about. Begin with a few sentences that will engage the reader and conclude it with the thesis statement. Ideally, the sentences leading to the thesis should hook the reader, perhaps with one of the following techniques:
   A question
   A description or vivid example
   An unusual fact or a startling statistic
10) Write each body paragraph starting with the topic sentence, which will help to keep the thesis in focus. These paragraphs are the support for the thesis.
11) Write the conclusion, which should echo the main idea, without repeating it. It simply drives home your ideas and perhaps poses a question, offers advice, or proposes a course of action. To bring readers full circle, consider including an example, a quotation, or a detail from the reading. Whatever strategies you use avoid new ideas in the conclusion.
12) Spend 30 minutes editing to correct spelling and grammar errors.
7 EASY STEPS TO W.P.E. SUCCESS

Manage your time

First, read the question

5 minutes

Read and annotate the passage
(25 minutes)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

THE CLASSICAL ARGUMENT STRUCTURE—SOME WOULD CALL IT MAGIC

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**SETTING YOUR CALENDAR OR TIME IS OF THE ESSENCE**

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Ask Others for Help

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

**Dispel WPE Myths**

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

**Discover Strengths and Weaknesses**

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

**Engage the Writer in Writing**

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

Practice Reading Aloud

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

Discuss the Elements of Failure

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

Provide Continuous Encouragement

Encouragement is a natural enhancer for confidence. Even though we must point out problems and concerns in writers’ work, do not forget to point out areas where the writer performed well or what the writer is strong in. Writing can be a difficult challenge, especially for those students who have not had practice in the subject or who have been told they are bad writers. This pressure to communicate is then emphasized when they are told to write within a time limit. The challenge may appear to your writers as a permanent obstacle that will keep them from graduating. Writers then need to be continuously acknowledged for not only their writing skills, but for the insightful and thoughtful comments that they write about.
A Writer’s Example of a Timed Schedule for the WPE¹

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

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

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