The Tutoring Book – Spring 2010 Edition

By the Tutors of the University Writing Center, 2001-2010

Getting Started

Randeep Hothi
Expectations .................................................................................................................................. 5

Iris Ho
Entering the Lion’s Den .................................................................................................................. 8

Leslie Bailey
Drop-ins Can Be Fun! .................................................................................................................. 10

Agnes Stark
Tutoring and Theory: A Narrative ................................................................................................ 13

Collaboration

Alison Moore and Shauna Poovey
Collaboration in the Writing Center .......................................................................................... 16

Meghan Wagner
The Value of Collaboration in the Writing Center ..................................................................... 19

Anne Temblador
Avoiding the Risky Business of Text Appropriation ................................................................. 23

Cynthia Smith
Self Reliant Writing ..................................................................................................................... 27

Dan Bethel
Navigating Academia: The Need for Student Writer Self-Reflection ........................................ 30

Listening, Questioning, and Encouraging

Krysta Tawlks
Directive or Not? Adapting an Approach ..................................................................................... 32

Kristen Smith
Tutor vs. Tutee Expectations: Finding the Best Approach for You ........................................... 35

Denise Pica
Teaching the Writing Tutor to Praise .......................................................................................... 38
Diverse Students and Contexts

Melissa Diaz
Struggling or Stuck? Tutoring Graduate Students ................................................................. 42

Courtney Mazur
I’m GRADually Getting Used to This, Are You? ....................................................................... 45

Evelyn Welborn
Underrepresented Writers and the Writing Center ................................................................. 47

M. Isabel Chavez
Tutoring the Student Not the LD ............................................................................................ 50

Irina Antonenko
disABILITIES: Drop the Prefix ............................................................................................... 53

Kay Barnes
Online Tutoring ...................................................................................................................... 55

Language and Cultural Pluralism

Julia Bursell
Reading Out Loud: An Effective Strategy for ESL Writers .................................................. 57

Jamie Ferrando, Kristina Kellerman, Rexford Osei-Ansah, Vu Tran
Multilingual Students: Who They Are, How They Learn and How to Tutor Them .................. 61

Tatyana Moran, Hyang-Sook Park, Manpreet Devi, and Niccole Scrogins
Worldview: The Continent, Asia and a Testimony from India ............................................... 69

Kristina Kunz
Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern Writers .......................................................................... 77

Niccole Scrogins
African American Vernacular English and the Larger-Than-Academics Problem: Social, Economic, and Educational Immobility and the Loss of Identity ................................................................. 82

Jacqueline Diaz
Chicano English: Understanding a Significant Dialect and its Writers .................................. 88

Academic Discourse and Writing across the Curriculum

Katie Johnson
The Writing Center Catch-22: Helping Writers Succeed While Questioning Our Own Assumptions about Academic Discourse and Standard English ................................................................. 91

Gordon Warnock
It Is Ok. I Am an Expert. .......................................................................................................... 95
Laura West and Beth Pearsall
The Value of Writing Center Tutors as Writing Tutors ......................................................... 98

Leslie Freeland
The Writing Center and the WPJ .................................................................................... 103

Theory

Jesus Limon
A Commitment to Writing Center Theory ........................................................................ 111

Jill Buettner
The Writing Center as a Bridge: The Postcolonial Approach ........................................ 113

Heather Sula
Situated Acts of Writing and Tutoring ........................................................................... 116

General Advice for Tutoring

Lisa Harper
Zen and the Art of Tutoring ............................................................................................ 119

Megan Burks
The Basics of Tutoring ................................................................................................. 123

Eduardo Ramirez
Tutoring at the CSUS Writing Center: A Dialogue ......................................................... 127

James Tarpley
Another Tutoring Book Article ....................................................................................... 130
Expectations

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

Writing Center Expectations

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

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

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

**Writer Expectations**

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

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

**Things that can help…**

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

When entering the world of tutoring, especially tutoring your own peers can be a scary and nerve racking experience. For me personally being thrown into tutoring with little instructions or guidelines was an extremely intimidating experience. I found that as the session progressed on I learned the rights and wrongs of tutoring on my own. You eventually discover the best techniques and strategies for yourself. The assigned readings from the tutoring books and the St. Martin’s source book assisted in the building of my knowledge and methodology of tutoring but there was no pressure in having to use any of the discussed theories and methods in my own tutoring. In your tutoring experience you’ll come across a variety of people, cultures, and academic discourses. My advice to you is to not be afraid to tutor someone in a different major, culture, or educational background than you.

When you open yourself up and allow yourself to take challenges you’ll be exposed to new ideals and knowledge that you would not experience otherwise. In the beginning of the beginning of my tutoring career at the writing center I was especially intimidated by the thought of tutoring graduate students. Tutees who were graduate students were intimidating to me due to the fact that I was still an undergraduate student and I felt that I had little or nothing to offer them as a tutor. To my surprise they needed help because they are still students trying to get that “A” paper like every other student here on campus. I learned to push aside my feelings of inferiority and view my graduate tutees as my peer or fellow class mates and put as much effort as I could in figuring out how I could help them. When you give respect to your tutee they’ll most often return that respect back to you because they are here for your help and not there to prove that they are better or superior to you.

Another important factor to know in tutoring is respecting tutees who may come from a different culture or background and who may have a learning disability or is an ESL student. It is very important to not be judgmental towards these students because this can cause issues for you as a tutor as well as for the student. It is more beneficial for you to build an understanding with your tutee by asking them about their background, home country, or learning situation/ability. This could also break the ice and help you and the tutee feel comfortable enough to produce a productive session. There will be times when you may have a hard time understanding your tutee’s speech due to tutee’s strong accents, but what I found most helpful was asking politely for my tutee to repeat themselves and then listen very carefully to every single word. This method of being patient and listening attentively to your tutee gives your tutee not only confidence but trust as well in you as their tutor. I often noticed that my ESL tutees would open up more and feel more comfortable speaking about their topic or writing. This is a direct result of the effort I put into to show them that they are not going to be looked down upon or be treated rudely based on their status as ESL or disabled.

The last important factor to consider when you’re starting out as a new tutor is not to be afraid to tutor tutee’s whose papers are from a different discourse community or format that what your use to. When I was asked to help with APA format I was taken back because I was never exposed to the style, for my major I have only used MLA format. Despite the unfamiliarity my tutee and I worked together and we looked at APA reference books and even researched it online through Owl Purdue University website. The more I tutored the more exposure I received to
APA format and although, I am not an expert I feel much more comfortable in helping tutees whose works are in APA style.

Throughout my internship I grew to realize that the ultimate goal of tutoring is to help students who need your assistance in their writing, whether it is high order concerns i.e. organization or lower order concerns i.e. punctuations. It is important for as a tutor to not be afraid to accept a challenge when you may not have any previous knowledge or exposure to a tutee’s writing format or subject matter. As a tutor you’ll not only help you tutees but at times your tutee may even help you learn something new or improve your own writing thus, it’s important to keep an open mind and be willing to take risks because you’ll never know who you will meet that will inspire you and or your writing.
Drop-ins Can Be Fun!

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

And then there are the drop-ins.

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

Isn’t this fun?

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

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

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

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

Proofreading

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

Good will goes a long way.

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

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

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

Understanding Teacher Comments

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

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

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

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

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

Regardless of the reason for the drop-in, it is a fun and challenging experience that should
not missed. Good luck.
Tutoring & Theory: A Narrative

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes).

-Walt Whitman “Song of Myself”

Here I sit, past midnight, with a blanket keeping me warm (and eating chocolate), thinking of you as I type. Yes, you, complete strangers. I’m wondering just who my audience is, what the new group of intern tutors at the writing center is like- what you look like, what your backgrounds are, why you’re here. Without knowing you, I know we have much in common. I was once a new tutor, unsure of what to expect, doing the assigned readings, reading articles written by previous tutors in the tutoring book, struggling with the day to day demands of student life (and life in general), while trying to be the best tutor possible… One thing I really like about the structure of this class is the cyclic nature, like the seasons and like the coming and going of generations, where we all get to experience the writing center, do the readings, and then write and publish for the tutoring book. Then you’re somewhat experienced, you move on, and a new group comes in and reads your words…

So, here I am, at the last minute, trying to articulate something meaningful to you. I’m writing at the last minute because, quite frankly, I struggle with what I want to say, struggle with narrowing down my options for this assignment, and I struggle with my own emotions about what I want my written legacy to be. To put it succinctly, my journey as a tutor has been challenging in many ways, yet this doesn’t mean it hasn’t been worth it and that I wouldn’t do it again. But, I don’t want to focus only on the rough stuff; I actually want to share a perspective. This is why I started out with Walt Whitman and with those particular three lines. I think this internship class and your writing center experience may offer you more contradictions than you’d ever thought possible. What do I mean by contradictions, you might ask… I simply mean that throughout the semester you’ll be reading theories and actually doing tutoring- and that sometimes the two contradict each other (theorizing and doing), as well as themselves (theory vs. theory, doing vs. doing). Theorists clash ideas with each other and maybe even with your ideas of the world. Your methods with one tutee may contradict your own perceptions of how you tutor or how you’d like to tutor. What you do in class or what happens as you tutor might contradict your expectations (if you had any) of what you would be doing. I suggest you keep Whitman in mind, when he states, “Very well then I contradict myself,/I am large, I contain multitudes.” No, he doesn’t mean that he has multiple personalities- well, maybe he does mean that and more, but what he mostly means is that it’s okay to contradict yourself… you are more than any one set of ideas or actions…

As a tutor I’ve come across a common assignment given to students in English classes such as English 109M/W, called a “literacy narrative.” I’ve been contemplating this assignment and it seems to me that such a narrative would be useful for you (tutors) to write at the beginning of
this class. Most of you probably find it easier to write academic discourse than the average student. Have you ever wondered why? Have you ever contemplated and written about yourself as a writer—how you came to be such a good writer? I challenge you to write a literacy narrative, however you want to write it—dactylic tetrameter, in elvish, in Klingon or in hieroglyphics—I don’t care, just write it. And absolutely make sure to include your present reasons for being a tutor in this class. Why are you here? What do you want to do? What do you think it will be like? What do you want to learn from your tutees? Be honest. I took this class because I needed it to obtain my certificate in composition, which supposedly will help me get a job teaching writing at a community college. What I wanted from my tutees was the opportunity to help them write better, and in turn, they could help me become a better writing teacher. If your reason for being here is “because,” that’s fine too. Just write it!

This semester will come and go, as semesters do (thank goodness). Hopefully you will write your literacy narrative or the song of yourself, so that you can go back at the end of the term and re-read it and wonder at it. You’ll be able to ask yourself the types of questions that I’m contemplating now, at the end of my tutoring experiences. You may contemplate questions such as: Are you the same person? How did you do? Would you do it again? What did you write your tutoring book article about? What is your legacy? What experiences did you have that bothered you, that gave you pleasure, that taught you something? Did you become a better writer? Better student? Better teacher? Do you hate or love theory, or both or neither or whatever? Do you feel the same way about tutoring, about writing, about the University, about literacy?

I can say that this class changed me—this class helped me become more aware of the possibilities of how to tutor, as well as the implications of and values imbedded within the practice of tutoring or promoting literacy, specifically written academic discourse. I also experienced and learned from being around different tutees with different stories and backgrounds, as well as different fellow tutors in class. Some of my experiences were uncomfortable, some were pleasant, a few very rewarding.

Upon more reflection, the changes I’ve experienced in this class appear contradictory and complex. In regards to the theory we read, I appreciate that now I’m more informed of what I’m doing and how to do it, but at the same time I feel like I’ve lost a bit of innocence. Before the class, when tutoring, I’d go with my instincts and just interact with students and share the love I feel of reading, writing, learning and just existing (believe me when I say that I will soon feel this way again). However, as I read the theories during the semester I felt pulled in every direction. One day, minimalist tutoring was right; the next day directive tutoring; one minute I’m helping students; the next day I’m keeping them down. Yet, in the end, I’ve gained more insight, vocabulary, and theory into the Composition and Literacy discourse communities than I had before. I can also talk to and relate to more students because of these theories we read in class, as well as to adapt to different tutee needs. For instance, I’m collaborating with a graduate student from the Ukraine, currently working on her Master’s thesis in Social Services. She told me that in the Ukraine writers don’t have to add every detail and explain everything as they go, as we do here. She said that readers there wait until they are finished reading the text as a whole, to see the big picture. In America, we put the thesis up front and we develop each point thoroughly as we go— we make the writer do a lot of work! I immediately empathized and understood her, because
in class we had discussed the theme of how academic discourse in America is only one of many possible ways of writing.

Even though we (you and I) have tutoring in common, I know we are really diverse. Your experiences and reflections might be smooth sailing compared to mine, so please just enjoy the process and enjoy the ride! Take some time to write about yourself as a writer, as a way to nurture yourself and as a way to prepare a point of reference for yourself as you theorize and tutor. As for the contradictions, you’ll be fine. You are large, you contain multitudes!
Collaboration in the Writing Center

The first week of tutoring at the Writing Center can be very intimidating because, when you first start, you may feel as if there is an immense amount of pressure and responsibility on you, the tutor. However, the same must be said for the tutee. In tutoring writing, the tutee is equally responsible for the success of a session. This is known as collaborative tutoring.

_Tutoring Writing_ describes how, “All learning is fundamentally collaborative, requiring two people: one who is a member of the club and one who wants to be. They work together with trust in each other and confidence in themselves, and learning happens incidentally to their focus on collaboration” (5). It is not just the tutor who has responsibilities in improving writing, but the tutee as well. It is the tutee’s job to come to each session prepared to work on an assignment. Without proper preparation, there is little the tutor can do to assist in the learning process. This article will serve as a “How To” for successful collaborative tutoring sessions.

Getting the Conversation Started

One thing that you may not think about when tutoring is the importance of conversation. _Tutoring Writing_ the importance of simply engaging in conversation is emphasized. The text states that social constructionism shows “that language is social, a phenomenon of societies, both created by them and serving them” (1). When first read, this may strike a chord with you because it is both obvious and unknown at the same time.

While it seems easy to understand that an individual’s particular social environment influences their language, it may not be something we each think about on a daily basis. But when it comes to tutoring writers, it is important to think about their individual backgrounds when reading their writing.

Since our language is deeply influenced by the type of social environment surrounding us, it is important to understand that the person you are tutoring may be influenced in a different way from you. As the text states, “We use language primarily to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to” (2). In this sense, tutoring writing works as a collaboration of two different people’s language to reach a common goal: successful writing.

This idea ties directly into another theory regarding tutoring writing: collaborative learning. As mentioned before, “All learning is fundamentally collaborative, requiring two people: one who is a member of the club and one who want to be” (5). What is most interesting is that one of these theories directly relates to another. Our language is influenced by the social environment around us and we work together with others toward common goals. In this particular case, the common goal is tutoring writing so that everyone involved succeeds.
Working Together to Formulate Ideas

It is a fairly common occurrence in the Writing Center that a student will come in for help with nothing more than a prompt. For an inexperienced tutor, this can be a frustrating situation because one expects that a tutee will have something written to allow us to work with. It is not just the tutor who has responsibilities in improving writing, but the tutee as well.

It is the tutee’s job to come to each session prepared to work on an assignment. Without proper preparation, there is little the tutor can do to assist in the learning process. However, it is always possible to collaboratively come up with ideas. For example, having the tutee do some type of free write in order to get ideas flowing is one way of working together to formulate ideas. *Tutoring Writing* explains that, “This exercise, popularized by Peter Elbow (1981), liberates the writer from their internal critique and allows pure discovery of thought on paper” (33). You, as the tutor, have given the initial push and the tutee contributes by writing their own thoughts about the question you asked or the topic you gave them. We have found that any type of collaborative effort between you and the tutee works to get ideas flowing; sometimes, just talking is enough to engage the tutee to think abstractly about the topic. Therefore, “The tutor and writer share equally in the conversation, the problem solving, and the decision making” (26). Thus, a collaborative effort is created within the learning process.

Active Listening vs. Passive Listening

In a tutoring session, you may find yourself wanting to control a conversation or jump in immediately when you notice an issue with a tutee’s writing. This usually happens when a tutee is unwilling to open up. Our experiences have taught us that a student who does not want to talk in a tutoring session is usually one that is either embarrassed about their writing or confused or frustrated with their assignment.

So far, in order to collaborate rather than control a tutoring session, one of the best ways to attempt to overcome a tutee’s reticence is by asking open-ended questions. In *Tutoring Writing*, it is explained how, “Collaborative tutoring allows the tutor to maintain a flexible posture. The tutor encourages the writer, often with open-ended and probe-and-prompt questions, to engage in off-the-paper, exploratory talk and to expand upon undeveloped themes in the paper” (26).

Some example questions are, “What do you think about ‘this’?” , “What are you trying to say here?”, and even a basic question, such as “This isn’t clear to me; can you explain it in a different way?” This helps to get the tutee’s thought process going and by asking questions about their writing, it allows for them to become a part of the tutoring session as well. Then, you can either refer to a suggestion that has been made previously or point to a specific passage in their essay.

This forces the tutee to engage and actively participate in the tutoring process, rather than just observe. This approach is effective and it allows the student to come to their own conclusions about their writing, rather than listening to what the tutor has said. An example of this occurred during the first week of tutoring. A tutee came in to the Writing Center struggling with a paper for a class in Social Work in which he had to reflect upon a book called "Nickle and Dimed" about the working poor in America. He was reluctant to talk at first, wanting me (the tutor) to read his paper silently to myself. Part of this was probably
embarrassment at having to hear himself read aloud. However, after coaxing him for awhile by asking prodding questions, he was more than willing to talk in the session. He even found that the part of his paper that he felt most passionately about was the part that he had neglected the most. He did this on his own, through use of his own insight, and by talking aloud about what he felt were the strengths and weaknesses of the paper.

This approach encouraged the tutee to talk rather than the tutor monopolizing the conversation. This is an important key to having an effective tutoring session. In fact, the tutee worked on his paper for awhile, and as the session ended, he said that expressing his thoughts verbally helped him a lot more than he thought they would. This shows the tutee that they can make positive changes to their own writing. It helps to empower them as writers, which can ultimately change their entire perspective on writing for the better.
The Value of Collaboration in the Writing Center

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

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

Conversation

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

Organic Atmosphere

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

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

Listening

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

A Chance to Speak

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

**Building Community**

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

**Opinions Matter**

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

**Relaxed Academic Discourse**

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

Team Effort

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

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

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

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

Signs of text appropriation:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Works Cited

Self Reliant Writing

“To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart, is true for all men, - that is genius.”
Ralph Waldo Emerson “Self Reliance”

The CSUS Writing Center functions as a place of learning where students, through their own efforts and the assistance of a tutor, are able to advance their writing process. In order for this to occur, both tutor and student must understand that writers have full agency over their own papers. As Stephen North advocates, tutors “will not write students’ papers for them” (41). Rather, as writing center tutors, we will provide tutees with exercises and suggestions that will enable them to not only improve their writing but also to become self-reliant writers.

Many times, for various reasons, students will attempt to give tutors full control of their papers. Some students are diffident with their writing and believe that the tutor knows best and will comply with every suggestion the tutor gives. Other students may view the tutor in a hierarchal perspective that places the tutor in a similar status to teachers. Through multifarious methods, tutors can put the tutees at ease and help them understand that they have full ownership over their papers.

The writing center is a safe haven where collaborative learning can take place outside of the classroom. As students of writing, both tutor and tutee can mutually benefit from the sessions. Often, as tutors, we rely on the tutee for information on their prompts. By combining the tutor’s familiarity in writing with the tutee’s knowledge of the class and discipline, an equal relationship is created where collaborative learning can occur. Rather than a hierarchal figure, the tutor becomes a “model” or as Shapiro puts it “the ultimate learner” who “assist[s] the students in articulating the texts to themselves and . . . other[s]” (Woolbright, 68). When students see how tutors use academic discourse and engage with composition, they will be able to incorporate those skills into their own writing process.

Throughout the session, it is crucial that tutors show respect to the craft of writing. When tutors demonstrate interest in the ideas, structure, and language of the paper, students will also begin to understand how important it is to spend time with their writing. Praising the students in appropriate places will also help tutees learn that their thoughts and writing does have value, and that their papers deserve to be reread, revised, and treated as an important text of academia. When tutees begin to gain confidence in their writing process, they will start to take the initiative by leading discussions and asking questions. They will begin to challenge their own ideas and look for ways to push their thoughts further.

In order to help students reach the point of self reliance, tutors need to maintain open communication to convey the responsibilities tutees have toward their own writing. At the beginning of the session, I often explain to the students that I won’t write on their paper, rather, I leave that task to the writers because I want them to be able to read the comments when they revisit their paper. “With my messy handwriting,” I joke, “you won’t be able to make out a thing.” All of my tutees have found this reasoning completely logical and don’t hesitate to make
notes on their paper throughout the session. When tutees physically write on their own paper, they tend to naturally take control of the discussion and begin to really engage in the text that they created.

Since tutors play a major role in creating a collaborative atmosphere, one that emphasizes the writer’s agency toward their own paper, it is crucial for tutors to continuously step away from responsibilities that are beyond their control. As students, we generally relate to the pressures of academic life. We understand the importance of maintaining good grades and how throughout the course of the semester, one assignment could be the deciding factor between passing and failing. When our tutees demonstrate genuine persistence toward their writing process, we want to do everything we can to help them achieve their goals. However, it is important to remember that tutors are “pretty busy people” (North, 42). We’re students too and we have our own studies and obligations. As writing center tutors, we are not expected to go beyond the time allocated for each session. Although what we do with our time outside of the writing center is to our own discretion, it is important to set up boundaries.

When I first started interning in the writing center, I often had classmates approach me, asking if I could help them with their papers. Since I only tutor in the afternoon hours, some of my classmates were unable to sign up for my sessions. Many asked if they could, instead, email me their papers and have me go over them during the weekend. Although in some cases this was very difficult (especially with ESL classmates), I decided to decline and refer them to other tutors in the writing center. I knew that I didn’t have time to help others with their papers outside of the writing center. Also through email, I knew that I would be focusing more on editing rather than assisting them with their own writing process which is contradictory towards the very goals of tutoring.

Despite my care in creating boundaries, I had one experience that left me with numerous questions and worries. In one of my undergraduate literature classes, many of my classmates are from other disciplines and struggle with the material. One of these students signed up for weekly tutoring sessions. In our first session, using a combination of minimalist and directive tutoring, I was able to help him understand how to analyze a text. But, I began to really fear for him. We have an essay test the following week and he didn’t know anything about essay writing. With only one thirty minute session scheduled before the test, I had no idea how to help him within such a limited time period.

Not knowing the best method to approach this, I went to my professor for advice. After hearing my story, I expected her to suggest possible pedagogical methods. Instead, her response surprised me: “Don’t worry. His grade on the test won’t affect yours.” I was so relieved! Oddly, I hadn’t considered this to be a concern, but I realized that I had somehow taken on his ‘grades’ as my responsibility. Not only that, but I had become more of a ‘teacher’ rather than a ‘student’ and since I am in actuality a student, this responsibility had presented a conundrum that I couldn’t handle. My professor continued to point out that this student was lucky to have a classmate as his tutor, but if he needed or asked for outside help, to refer the tutee to her. I wasn’t expected to do more than my assigned hours at the writing center.

This experience confirmed to me how easy it is to be, in a sense, too helpful. As tutors who love writing, we can’t help but to want other students to feel the same way. However, the best way that tutors can help tutees with their writing process is to collaboratively model the
importance of being a self-reliant writer. One who respects their thoughts and will take responsibility of their own papers, and the grade that comes with it.

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Navigating Academia:  
the Need for Student Writer Self-Reflection  

By the end of your first semester working in the writing center, you’ll feel you’ve helped a lot of people, and you have. These are people you’ll see at their first appointments pulling their hair out, overwhelmed by the idea that they need to finish an entire portfolio’s worth of writing (or term paper, business project, etc.) in four months. You’ll work through it, paper by paper, and with each session you’ll find another small bit of information get through, something you both happen upon and which makes your tutee a more confident writer. You’ll probably have a student sing your praises to you at some point, saying to you personally that you’ve been incredibly helpful. It will happen. For me, however, when I first heard this I got a little scared. Well, I won’t lie; at first I felt fantastic. Then I felt scared.

This made me ask a question that I can’t really answer: can the writing center be too helpful? Obviously, we want our regularly scheduled student writers to keep coming back throughout the semester and to come back in future semesters if they ever need the extra help, but what if the writing center acts as a crutch for some students? What is to stop them from never applying the skills we put on display, work through, and suggest to them as the semester continues? Why should they ever internalize strategies for their writing process outside of the writing center since we will always be there for them, a service provided free of charge? While I would never condone an overtly directive approach to tutoring, the answer is clearly to find some way to help students internalize these skills as permanent parts of their writing processes instead of being “on file” at the writing center, to be accessed only when needed.

Our long term goal at the writing center is simple: to make our tutees more confident and capable writers. Life in the writing center, however, often seems to focus on the short term: this paper is due in a week, this paper needs to be revised for a better grade, how do I appropriately study for the next WPJ, ad infinitum. Though the list may be endless, these immediate needs are most important for a single, thirty minute session. How can we hope to nurture better writing strategies and processes at a break-neck pace? This question is especially pertinent in the case of drop-in student writers. Luckily, there are a few things working in our favor: we, as writing center tutors, are not teachers; and we, like our tutees, are students. The tutor’s job requirement is not to make our tutees better—we can’t force anybody—we are only to make them more aware writers, to take from their time with us the realization that their thoughts and ideas are worth writing down. We are our tutees’ peers, not their betters and the fact is that the tutor and the tutee are the same thing: student writers.

What aids in one’s growth as a writer during a session is the figurative “passing off” of knowledge from one student to another, to have the tutee assume ownership of the information created in that day’s collaboration. Revelation of improvement through critical self-reflection puts the knowledge completely in the hands of the student writers. This act of reflection, of considering critically one’s own actions and the results of those actions, shows the tutees—the same ones that started the term or session at wit’s end—that they are starting to think like a writer.
Like most of what happens during a session in the writing center, the easiest way to encourage critical self-reflection in a tutee is to be an example. As you’re wrapping things up with your tutee, in the last minute or so of the session, quickly recap the major points of what you both went over that day. For a drop-in appointment looking to have his or her grammar “fixed,” go over the different strategies covered during the session that can help catch mistakes: reading out loud, going through the text in reverse paragraph order, looking for only one type of error at a time, for example. When finishing up a session with a regular appointment, don’t only go over the strategies you tried but also throw in a few mild expectations. For example, I had a Criminal Justice major tutee who was starting very early on his research paper for a Criminal Justice class. We spent the session brainstorming and honing in on what his thesis should be. Knowing this tutee was a self-admitted procrastinator who had two writing-intensive classes to juggle, we agreed that for the next session he’d write only an introduction so that we could have something to look at for the next time. “Don’t even think about the body of the paper,” I told him. “Just come up with the ‘I believe A because of X, Y, and Z’ and from there we can worry about punctuation, grammar, and all that.” The week after that, he went home to only write the “X” paragraphs, then we’d look at those the following week and see if it was a natural growth from the thesis and introduction, doing this all the way through the paper. Breaking the process down into single steps along the way gave him attainable goals that would show him actual, tangible progress. With many of your tutees, you’ll find it’s not as much about being done with a paper as it is the realization that the paper is getting done.

The best way to encourage critical self-reflection in a session is to be an aware tutor. Think clearly about what you and the tutee are doing and think about the next step you plan to take (going forward like this until you run out of time for the day). This shouldn’t be too difficult to keep on your mind since the work generated in the session itself should be in the lap of the tutees and you’re there to keep them on track, ask problem posing questions, and try to work through any questions they may ask. Only when you have a clear idea of what steps (and all the turns) the session took can you whip through events in that last minute of the session. This recap breaks down the events of reality into something mechanical, something considered and organized—three things that many of your tutees think are elusive or not applicable to a process as organic as writing. Sure, you’re simplifying things, but a simplified explanation is an outline from which students can work and expand upon. The actual progress of the session and how you and the tutee guide yourselves through that time is that actual fluid, organic part that’s unpredictable and hard to wrangle. At the end of a session the unaware student writer is conscious that something has just happened, focusing on the resulting product (or the promise of one); it is up to the tutor to show them how it happened. This is part of what separates the tutor from the teacher. The teacher is the person that makes the map that the students follow, the tutor is the person that helps the student plot the course they’re taking.
Directive or Not? Adapting an Approach

My experience at the Writing Center has been greatly influenced by the readings assigned each week. However, the more advice I read, the more I specialize my own approach to tutoring in response to that advice. For instance, I took into account the theory that tutors should take a more indirect approach when working with a tutee by allowing the tutee to have a stronger hold on where his or her paper should go (North, 2008). I also considered a more directive approach, like focusing on grammar and offering advice. Despite the reluctance of writing centers, a directive approach is an essential need for particular students who are still learning important, functional rules of the language (Myers, 2008). These two voices influenced my own approach to the writing center, for even though Myers and North have opposing ideologies of how to tutor students, I believe both ideologies can be adapted to whatever the situation is. Truthfully, I believe both directive and non-direct approaches are essential to a balanced tutoring experience. There are some aspects of academic convention that students may not acquire themselves, and if we as tutors took the time to de-mystify these mysteries of academic writing (setting aside the theory that academic conventions are just another mode of reinforcing superiority), the academic experience will hopefully be more enlightening and "doable." Below I outline strategies pertaining to when it is appropriate to take a more direct approach, and when it would be better to take a non-direct approach in the tutoring session.

The Directive Approach:

There are several reasons for why I allow myself to be occasionally directive in my tutoring sessions, one main reason being that the situation does not always allow for me as a tutor to take the time to be non-direct. Sometimes I meet with a tutee for 20-30 minutes, and I know there is a chance that I will not see this tutee again for whatever reason. Because of my constraints on time, I allow myself to explain more and provide more definitions simply because I don't have the time to ask, "So why do you think you need to be more specific here?".....or... "What do you think you should do after you talk about your evidence?" These are all good questions related to the demystification of why we write the way we do in academic writing, and they might be good to ask of specific tutees even with the time constraints, but asking questions about why students do what they do will most likely close them up because they know we already have the answer. It can easily turn into a guessing game.

Therefore, I have found that explaining to students the process they need to go through while constructing their paper paragraph-by-paragraph, point-by-point, helps them become not only aware of what kinds of questions they should ask for the paper they are writing, but aware of the questions they need to ask for every paper in the future. Good questions tutors can ask their tutees in order to formulate a thesis and brainstorm supporting topic sentences are:

- What is the prompt asking you to do?
- What does the author say in the article (if there is an article)?
- What do you agree with (in relation to the author's argument)?
- Are there any exceptions?
- What makes this important?
- Will anyone be able to argue with my thesis (or is it just an opinion)?
• Do I have main points that support my thesis?
• What kind of support am I using (surveys, statistics, quotes from others in the field...)?...and the list goes on...

Most classes that focus on improving their students' writing have questions like these, but having some prepared ahead of time could help make the brainstorming process go smoother. However, despite having a list of questions to help generate the material students need in order to write a strong paper, they may not know what they are doing that makes their paper strong or effective. So as I read through what my students are doing, I can show them what they are doing. For instance, I might say, "You are analyzing here, you are providing evidence here...etc." This way, students can begin to identify for themselves the process each paper must go through and whether or not they are completing that process.

Another instance when it is appropriate to be more instructive with a tutee is when the tutee has obviously not acquired basic strategies most of their classmates already have obtained at that point in their academic career. Offering solutions to this problem can be very tricky because it is a well-known fact that not everyone learns the same. Some tutees are visual, some are auditory learners, while others are kinesthetic learners. Some tutees have to write notes down while others cannot write and listen at the same time (like me). If a tutee does not know his or her learning style, I just offer key strategies that seem to work for most of my tutees. Strategies that may be helpful to students (despite whether or not the strategies are obvious to us) are:

• Create a checklist of what the prompt asks students to do and check each item off as they are completed
• Underline any section of the prompt the student may not understand so that they can ask their teacher (or their tutor) to clarify for them
• Ask students to break their body paragraphs into three basic parts--topic sentence, evidence, and analysis--and ask them if it all connects together
• Or ask them to make a basic outline of the paper in general which includes the thesis statement, the main points or the topic sentences, and the evidence they plan to support it with.

As I go along I hear new strategies offered to me by fellow tutors and even tutees. Sharing strategies can be helpful, and it allows the student to keep his or her voice intact in the paper.

The Non-Direct Approach

Having a non-direct approach is one of the most difficult things I have had to learn as a tutor. Since I like to combine both approaches in my tutoring sessions, I have to constantly be prepared to pull back and let the student take control or step in when the student needs explicit direction. An appropriate time to be non-direct is also related to time. If you know that you will be seeing your tutee again because they have committed to meeting on a regularly scheduled time, there is not as much pressure to point out all the subtleties of academic conventions in one session. However, the reason why taking a non-direct approach can be difficult, is that the tutor has to know what questions to ask that will allow the student the freedom to answer without suspecting there already is an answer. We don't want our tutees playing a guessing game because they suspect we already know the one and only answer.

A good way to approach a non-direct situation would be to ask questions that you really don't know the answers to. I asked one of my tutees about a topic I had virtually no previous knowledge of: a bacterium with a very long name. She opened up right away, often forgetting
about the paper (which is great, because then they are not tied down to what they have already written). By the end of her explanation to my question, she had generated a large of amount of material relevant to her thesis statement. But the funny thing was, none of what she told me had been included in her paper! Sometimes getting the students to just talk about their paper without pressuring them to come up with a thesis statement beforehand allows them to open up with what they already know, and as a tutor, I am able to identify points my tutee makes that could be a great source of discussion in her paper.

Sometimes just having the student summarize their introduction and recite their thesis (without looking at the paper) to me is just as effective in getting them to open up about their topic, because as soon as they mention their thesis, students will want to talk about what they said to support it. I had a student recite his thesis about whether or not the death penalty should be legal, and as soon as he finished explaining his thesis he began talking about all the reasons why it should be legal (I think it was after I asked him "why"--another good question to just keep asking). But like the previous tutee, much of what he told me was not included in the actual paper. So now the problem he had before of trying to make his essay meet the page limit is no longer a problem. Now he has to figure out what points he wants to include because now he has a lot more material to work with.

Adapting

After working at the writing center for a semester, it became clear to me that every tutor approaches tutoring different ways, each unique, but just as relevant as the next. However, I do know that the most important approach should be sensitive to how the tutee learns the best. That is why I have chosen to adapt the two approaches, directive and non-direct. I know that both approaches have an idea of how tutees learn best, but we tutors don’t really know until we sit down with them and work with them and get to know them. Therefore, my strategies may end up being completely different than the next tutee’s strategies because we are all learning and adapting. As long as our strategies put the tutee’s growth at interest, feel free to experiment and come up with your own approach to tutoring.
When I enrolled into this class, I did not know what I was getting myself into. I knew I would be interning in the writing center, and that was about the extent of it. I did have a lot of assumptions, thinking that my tutoring sessions would be similar to a “peer review” session like in most of my other classes. Meaning, I thought tutoring in the writing center was going to be an editing session with some grammar fixes. Just with the first class session I realized how wrong my assumptions were. The first class meeting we all sat in a circle and discussed our fears about stepping into the writing center. As we went tutor by tutor, I became more and more overwhelmed when hearing each fear. I kept thinking to myself that “I had not thought of that” and realized I too was afraid of the same thing. The most common fear was of course that we as a tutor would know nothing and not be able to help the tutee. As new writing tutor, I’m sure you’re walking into this with many fears and an assortment of questions of your own. Throughout the semester you will be introduced to many theories, techniques, and approaches that will help answer some of these questions. However, some of these “answers” might also add to the list of questions. Looking back at the first class meeting, I now know, and hope to convey to you, that the tutee is there for your help and advice with their papers (for one reason or another). If they’re willing to let you help them break apart their writing, and if you’re willing to do so, you can attempt to get them on the path to becoming a better writer.

Welcome to the Writing Center, I will be your tutor today…

The writing center tries to get across to the tutees that we are not an editing service. We are there to help our tutees to become better writer’s overall. However, we are in an era where as students and as people we have become extremely dependent on technology and the idea of “the easy button.” Just because we have Microsoft Word that does spell-check for us, doesn’t mean it finds what’s really wrong with the document. At the writing center we’re more than the underlining service that Word provides. However, you WILL encounter the students that come in for exactly that reason. So – how do we as tutors tell our tutees that’s not what we’re there for? One of the first approaches that my class went into depth with was Minimalist tutoring. In his article, “Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do all the Work”, Jeff Brooks discusses writing centers’ goal: each tutoring session should be about the student writer and learning, not about creating a perfect paper. In Linda K. Shamoon and Deborah H Burns’ article, “A Critique of Pure Tutoring” they go along with the same idea that the tutors should serve as an audience, and a student’s success should be mostly due to their own effort and to the tutors. I believe that by starting with this technique I was able to teach myself to start with a blank sheet every tutoring session and be patient and gage the tutee’s needs. You really have to learn more about your tutee and their writing process before you can determine how to effectively help them. The process is more important than the product, but a tutor has to make that a point to their tutee as well. Like Brooks says, the hardest things for students can be getting it on the page. So, sometimes that process needs a little push, but not necessarily the answers.

After the first week of tutoring was over, as you will find out, each tutee has their own expectations and their own needs. In most of my experience, I’ve also learned that in very rare
cases can you make just one technique effective for a student. Not every tutee can learn by a
minimalist approach, or a feminist, collaborative, etc. So ask questions! You cannot always go
into the tutees history, especially if they’re only there for a thirty minute drop in. At minimal, be
sure that you and your tutee are aware of one another’s expectations. Ask what they want out of
the session. Ask them what they’re mainly concerned about. In the case that the student only
wants you to edit your paper for grammar mistakes, address that – let them know that you will go
over their paper with them to make sure their meaning comes across the way they want, and if
need be you two can come back to that. Especially in the brainstorming and/or rough draft
processes, we should make sure the tutee is able to get their paper onto the page first, rather than
correct it as they go.

Heads up! Some of your Tutoring sessions will fail!

As promising as it seems that a student is going out of their way to come to the writing
center, it doesn’t necessarily mean they are there to become a better writer. At times, you might
not be able to convey to the student that is why the writing center and you are there. Also, some
students need more time than we can provide them. Becoming a better writer can come quick to
some, but it is a learning process that requires trial and error. Especially in drop-ins, time can
constrict what all you can tackle. Remind the student (and yourself) that the writing center is
there to help them, and if they feel unsure/want more help to go over something, we’ll be
waiting.

Throughout the semester I’ve had several regularly scheduled students and many drop-
ins. Both types of sessions can be fun and both require you, as a tutor, to approach them with an
open mind. Halfway through the semester I had a freshmen tutee come in to discuss his paper for
English 1A. We went through his paper, paragraph by paragraph, and his paper had no grammar
mistakes, had well developed ideas, and used the assigned texts. His paper followed the prompt
and we hardly changed anything, yet he felt his paper was missing something. I read through
parts of the paper again, asked him questions, seeing if there was anything we could pull from
what already was in the paper. However, nothing sparked any new ideas or could continue any
that were there. The session was only a half an hour, and there’s only so much you can fit into a
thirty minute session. At the end of the session he thanked me for my help and I wished him
good luck. Although this session did not go as smoothly as others, I still felt like at least one of
us learned something. Failed tutoring sessions, or sessions that don’t go as well as others, are the
ones that you will learn the most from. Tutoring can be a trial and error process, and you will
learn what processes work, and which ones don’t.

Finding the Tutoring Technique that is best for you:

✓ Be aware of what has worked best for you as a writer (what people have said, or advice
offered) and what possibly hindered your writing.
✓ Take a deep breath and approach each session with an open mind. Every session will be
different. Every tutee will be unique. Some papers may be similar, but can lead in
completely different directions.
✓ Be prepared to learn! You probably won’t know everything about every topic. Ask questions if you don’t know something specific your tutee is writing about! They might get an idea about something else to write – and you will broaden your knowledge too!

✓ Talk to your tutee! At times this can be extremely challenging, especially in a half hour drop in. In ALL cases, it’s pretty much a guarantee that a tutee is more experienced as a talker than a reader/writer. So when they come to the writing center they are both allowed to bounce their idea off a peer and receive feedback, but also they are able to at times, hear what they’ve written, and learn from their own mistakes on their own.

✓ Do all the reading! As overwhelming as the many approaches can be, they may introduce you to an approach you did not know or consider before. Even if you may not agree with the approach in a particular article, you will become more aware of what you believe and what works best for you.

✓ Reflect on each tutoring session. Be aware of what worked, and what did not work. Each tutoring session is a learning process for both your tutee and you!
Teaching the Writing Tutor to Praise

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

Neill Brooks (1835-1893)

Paul Diederich, a senior research associate for the Educational Testing Service, once stated that “noticing and praising whatever a student does well improves writing more than any kind or amount of correction of what he does badly, and that it is especially important for the less able writers” to hear praise because they “need all the encouragement they can get” (Deiker155). 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.
Struggling or Stuck? Tutoring Graduate Students

I felt confident as I walked to Rina’s table and sat down. I introduced myself and asked her what we were working on that morning; however, when she pulled out an 80 page thesis, my confidence went out the window. Her cultural studies topic was something I had no knowledge of whatsoever. As I read, I thought, “How am I going to help her with this? It looks perfect.” She reassured me that any suggestions for improvement would be a big help since she couldn’t take it back to her first thesis reader until more revisions were made, but it was as if all my tutoring knowledge left me. What could I help her with? Where do I look? I could barely follow her topic! Inside, I had just about given up.

Although it is rare for students to walk into the Writing Center with a thesis, graduate students regularly come in with advanced writing assignments. This article is intended to help those of you who might face a similar situation to mine, and provide some advice on how to handle these types of graduate tutoring sessions.

To clarify, the graduate students I am referring to are typically native English speakers. While much time and research has gone into L2 graduate tutoring, few studies have focused on the native speakers who seek help in the writing center and what to do in those situations (Garbus 1).

Julie Garbus, professor of English and coordinator of the University of Northern Colorado’s Writing Center, states that graduate students’ writing levels are expected to be advanced. When students enter or return to graduate school they often find themselves struggling with the conventions of their discipline, or the high expectations of their professors, In her article “Tutoring Graduate Students in the Writing Center,” Garbus explains that, “Whether or not they are in a field requiring extensive writing, graduate students must take writing seriously, not just to make themselves understood but because writing in a discipline is intimately linked with thinking, reasoning, and persuading effectively in it” (1). The “serious” nature of the writing at this level leads graduate students to visit the writing center despite the fact that graduate students are often embarrassed about needing a tutor and can initially be resistant to tutoring, as John Farrell points out in his article “Some Challenges to Writing Centers Posed by Graduate Students” (4).

In “Peer Tutoring,” Gregory Waters states, “because students often emerge with a variety of needs, the system of instruction should be flexible enough to accommodate itself to the needs of the individuals served. Some students require hours of instruction to improve their scribal fluency; others are already masters of their personal style” (749). Graduate tutees often fall in the latter category, having a greater sense of control over, variety, and sophistication in their writing. Waters’ suggestion that you have to realize that the needs of writers you will work with will vary holds true: ironically, however, graduate tutees require help on issues such as higher order concerns just as much as less experienced writers do. Difficulty arises for the tutor because their issues might not be as apparent as those of less experienced writers, making it challenging to locate them. The results of a nationwide survey performed by Judith Nelson and Jane Powers
revealed that graduate students who are native speakers most often asked for help with organization, style, and content not like the less experienced writers or L2 writers after all (p #). Knowing that your advanced writers struggle with similar problems as other writers should aid in lessening your anxiety about working with them and make handling their papers less overwhelming.

Despite the fact that their struggles are similar, there are also two fundamental differences in graduate level writing. First are the high expectations mentioned earlier and the other is the knowledge of writing in their specific discipline. The tutee’s discipline will demand expert knowledge of a particular writing style and its conventions and he or she maybe be unaware how to identify or use them. As a tutor, you will work with students from disciplines ranging from business and engineering to nursing and social work, or in Rina’s case, cultural studies and anthropology. At some point you will be asked to help them with a style you are unfamiliar with, but don’t worry. There are things you can do to help your tutee find the writing information they need. For example, if you are unsure how civil engineers format their essays, you can look up example essays online, ask colleagues in the writing center, or ask the coordinator for help finding resources.

In addition to looking to colleagues for help, the following tips will help you if you find yourself stuck.

• First, remember that regardless of how advanced the writer or writing, there is always room for improvement. Writing that looks perfect can always be better, and experienced writers can work on new elements of writing.

• If you are having difficulty with the discipline conventions, take some time to familiarize yourself with the conventions early in the semester. You might also consider studying the citation or formatting styles you are less familiar with, which will benefit all of your tutoring sessions. Having some knowledge about conventions will give you confidence as you tutor.

• If the terms that your tutees use are unfamiliar, don’t be afraid to ask for clarification. After all, we work with tutees from various disciplines, and it is highly unlikely that you will be familiar with every subject they present in their writing. Keep in mind, that our tutees are writing for particular audiences who may have an established knowledge base on the subject. Ask the tutee about the audience, and

• Finally, just like you would an undergraduate or less experienced writer, look for higher order concerns (HOC) first followed by lower order concerns (LOC). HOCs include thesis or focus, audience, purpose, organization, and development; meanwhile, LOCs are sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and word choice (OWL). You always want to start by looking at the big picture first, and work your way down to smaller sentence and word level issues, regardless of the tutee’s writing level.

Armed with this mental checklist, I have since felt ready to ask questions, give advice and suggestions for improvements where I can, and finally, I feel confident in my graduate tutoring
sessions and most tutees will appreciate any help or insight you can provide.

I read Rina’s thesis aloud, paying no attention to the content, as I struggled to think about what I would help her with. Finally, I stopped reading, sat back, and asked her to talk me through the topic. As she explained it, the content started making sense and I began thinking that I could follow along.

Feeling better, I read on; however, this time I paid close attention and recalled my thought process for tutoring less experienced tutees. I started with HOCs and before long, I noticed a section where Rina wrote about characteristics, results, and then more characteristics. Even though I still did not understand exactly what those characteristics were or meant, I could tell that they seemed out of order. It turned out that while Rina has an excellent writing style, perfect formatting, and citations, her organization needed work. She admitted to struggling with organization in the past too. Before she left she thanked me for pointing that problem out for her. As I walked away from the table and back to break room, I was thankful that I was able to help her, even if just a little.

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I’m GRADually Getting Used to This, Are You?
A tale of an Undergrad taking on the BIG BAD WORLD tutoring and Grad students

On my first day of English 195A not only did I find out that I was going to intern at the writing center for 5 hours a week on top of my other courses and non existent social life but I was in a class with graduate students. This all seemed very intense to me at the time. I always had this vision of grad students as boring, uptight, business suit wearing, critical thinking, theory lovers. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the grad students in my class were fun, laidback, dressed hip, and often challenged the theories presented in class. I thought I would get annoyed having graduate students in class but by the end of the course I really enjoyed their company. Not only did it give a different perspective on various topics but the class was significantly bigger than it would have been if it were just strictly undergrads.

Tutoring a classmate... Oh My!!!

I had an interesting experience of tutoring one of my fellow classmates from tutoring class which happened to also be a graduate student. I was really surprised when I saw I had an appointment with her. Tutoring a classmate can be awkward enough but one from the class where you are learning about tutoring, top that! She said that she wanted to work on making sure her paper was clear because she wanted to get a really good grade. She had taken it to her teacher and she said it was in the B range. It was a subject I didn’t know really anything about (which is usually the best way to see if the paper is clear or not). I just piped in when I didn’t understand something and we brainstormed on how to make it clearer. She told me a week later that she got an A on the paper we worked on. Both undergrad and grad students want to get good grades in their courses. You’ll be told in class at the writing center we don’t aim for grades but instead progression of skills. So how do you get around the tutee’s wants and their needs (no matter their class level)? It’s all about give and take. It’s trying to find a balance of giving them everything they want and the things they need. I would suggest a good yoga class for this. But seriously it’s just something a tutor has to find their own way of saying. You can be frank and come right out with it bluntly or be sly and be a little passive aggressive in your actions. So even though we don’t aim to improve grades in the writing center but rather the writers, it is still satisfying to know that you were helpful to the tutee. But grades are instant gratification if we help them develop their writing skills and practices those skills will help them beyond their college years.

A Partner in Crime...

I was also a tutor during the evening library hours. My partner in crime, as I like to call her, was a graduate student. I learned a lot form observing her in my down time during the late hours of our shift. One night, I expressed that I felt like I wasn’t very good at tutoring. She said that’s something you have to figure out for yourself. I was thinking well that was helpful! Actually it was, before I was fishing for a complement but I got a wake up call. Tutoring can be
an intimidating task and there can be a lot of doubt in yourself. But you have to believe in your abilities as a tutor. If you run into a problem, you have to realize that you aren’t Wikipedia and you don’t have all the answers.

**A Difficult Encounter of the Grad Kind...**

I had one grad student tutee in particular that I felt like I was being totally interrogated by. “Do you know APA? Are you an undergrad? I told them I needed a grad student that knew APA.” I was like well why don’t we take a look at what you have and we’ll go from there. She gave me a paper to look at she didn’t have the actual directions with her so I had to go off of what she told me. Her main concern with her paper was if it was in correct APA. Her professor was very strict and if any little thing was wrong she would lose points. I told her that I didn’t know APA off the top of my head but it looked good to me. I suggested why doing you check you APA style book, “I didn’t buy it because I think it has errors in it.” I didn’t even attempt to argue with her the importance of buying the class materials especially a class she was struggling in. Instead I suggested that she use the online version. She said she had but she basically wanted an “APA editor” to double check her work. She was so intimidating and demanding in our session. She used language that suggested that she was superior. I actually didn’t matter that I was an undergrad after all because one of my graduate student colleagues had the “opportunity” to tutor her and she wasn’t happy with her suggestions either. You’ll run into students like this whether they are a graduate, undergrad, young, old, male or female if the student doesn’t get exactly what they want they won’t be happy. It’s all about finding a balance between doing everything they want and doing things that need to be done.

**My View, no Barbra Walters Here!**

The one major difference I have noticed between tutoring undergraduate and graduate students is the graduate students seem to know what their weak areas are. Whereas undergrads just say “I am a horrible writer,” when they might just struggle in certain areas but are unaware what they are. Graduate tutees knew what they struggled with and what they excelled at, even if they were brutally honest about it like the difficult encounter from earlier. I also noticed the similarities between myself and graduate tutors. Graduate tutors also seem to know what their strengths are as writers and can apply it to tutoring. I personally felt like it took me a little longer to find my strengths. I’m not saying all undergrad students struggle with not knowing their strengths, it could happen to any student really.

**The Bottom Line, Conveniently Located at the Bottom of the Page...**

The difference in class level is definitely significant while tutoring. Whether it holds a big significance or a small one is up to you. Either way, tutoring is a learning experience. Use your class time and tutoring sessions to learn from one another. Grad students have things to teach undergrads and visa versa. Utilize your classmates and support one another. Some of the biggest lessons I learned in 195A were from my classmates. This is a job where you never stop learning and you continue to grow as a tutor and a person everyday you do it.
Underrepresented Writers and the Writing Center

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

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

1) Value the writer and their writing

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

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

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

3) Discuss audience awareness

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

4) Be prepared for teacher comments

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

5) Encourage academic reading

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

6) Encourage the writer to keep writing

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

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

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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.
No one can prepare you to walk in somebody’s shoes, unless you have walked in them yourself. As you can already tell by my use of the cliché, I don’t have anything enlightening to share with you. No high-polluted language or smart sounding theories here, but I figured you’re most likely tired of those by now anyway. What I want to share with you is something that I encountered in my first days as a tutor and that left me wondering for the rest of the semester; something I had to piece together for myself from my hours as a tutor.

Just like all of you, I was thrown into the writing center at the time when I wasn’t exactly sure of what I was doing. At that exact time, my second or third day tutoring, I ended up having a session with a student who left me wondering for the rest of the semester. I was scheduled to help a graduate student with her thesis in my first few days at the writing center, that fact alone should let you know how confident I was going into the session. What I didn’t expect to face is the disability that the student brought in with her. Just like any tutee, she sat at one of the tables waiting to get started on her paper…except I noticed that she wore dark glasses and had a guide dog by her side. The tutee was visually disabled. She was ready with a hard copy of the thesis paper in her hands. I just froze with uncertainty.

The session turned out better than I anticipated. The tutee was very friendly and more helpful than I expected. As we got going with the paper, I was able to picked up a few things and go along with what seemed to work for the student. My biggest concern was knowing how much the tutee could take in or do. I didn’t want to push her too much, but at the same time I didn’t want her to feel like I was underestimating her either. How would I go about helping a student without making them feel stupid or incompetent because my expectations were way too high? At the same time, how would I keep the boundary of not hitting the babysitter’s mark if I don’t want to completely underestimate the student? These were some of the concerns that this session opened up my eyes to. Questions that kept me wondering throughout the semester.

A lot of students come to the writing center; students who we, as tutors, do not have a chance to get to know at a very personal level. Some come in with signs we can pick and associate, others are not so evident. Whether it is a physical disability or a mental disability, the tutors are there to accept the student as he or she is and do their best to help them with their writing. Let me just tell you that fear and shock are not the best tools to take with you. The main thought you should remember is that those students deal with their disabilities on daily basis. They come in contact with people who might not know how to act around them and the chances that they dealt with someone insecure like you are very high. The truth of the matter is that they are aware of the present barrier. The good part is that the person who knows how to work around the barrier the best is there to help you out. It’s your own tutee. Their experience of living with the disability will make your session easier than you might expect because they are aware of what you are facing and feeling. And they won’t leave you helpless either. If they see a way they can make it easier for you to give them that help, why wouldn’t they lend you a hand? They came to the writing center to seek help from you to start off with.
Begin working with these students like you would with any tutee. You need to start somewhere. As you go along, you will pick up certain things that will help you be more effective with the tutee’s situation. Common sense will go a long way as well. For example, if the student is having visual disability, you obviously can’t use any gestures to point things out. Just verbalize everything. If you are working with somebody with hearing impairment, you will probably be more successful with a heavier visual approach. If you notice that someone is spacing out or can’t seem to follow you, keep redirecting his or her attention to the work at hand as frequently as needed. Consider making quick recaps of what you already accomplished; reiteration will help the tutee keep track even if they are zoning out often. If the student is dealing with memory loss, you might consider recording things. Written notes or even a tape recorder could be good things to start with. Remember that you are trying to help your tutees the best you can. If it means that your first three or five strategies fail, don’t be discouraged. If it takes five, then five it is. If not, then move on to the next one. What matters is not how much you fail, but how much of a help you turn out to be in the end.

Another strategy you might want to use is as simple as asking. If you’re stuck and don’t really know how to go about something, just ask your tutees what they think would be the best way to go about it. If a visually disabled person asks you for the writing center’s phone number, ask them if they want you to write it down or call it out to them. If someone is having a difficult time keeping track of things or with organization, ask them if they would like to try color coding. Throw ideas out, but allow your tutees to make the choice of what they prefer or just give them a chance to share a strategy with you. After all, they are the ones who know what works best for them.

When you tutor, do not let the student’s disability to influence the way you regard his or her intellectual competency. The worst you can do is underestimate the student’s capabilities. So, I suggest that you would be safer off giving the tutee an opportunity to show how much they can handle or how well they go about something. The best way to do so is overestimating their abilities. Give your tutees the chance and if you see that they are struggling, then come to their rescue. But do so without being very obvious. The last thing you want to do is have your tutees leave the writing center with a feeling that their disability overshadowed their intellectual abilities. After all, we will never know what it’s like to live with a disability unless we end up in a similar circumstance. The best we can do is contemplate on how it would feel if we were in that situation and how we would want to be treated if we were in those shoes. We have to admit that sometimes those shoes aren’t very comfortable to walk in, so as a tutor do your best to help out. It’ll make your day as much as it’ll make theirs.
Online Tutoring

This article shall not be formed in the typical manner that one would normally expect. No, instead it shall consist mainly of homicidal cats posing as alarm clocks, pseudo-braining incidents that involve a computer desk, and spiders. Yes, we must not forget those amazingly deceptive creatures that I am completely terrified of. In all seriousness, these three items have been an important learning tool in my first semester of online tutoring here at Sac State; in fact, they have been such a great tool that I will be using what I have learned from them in all my tutoring sessions in the future. Saying this, let us move on to the main point of this article: online tutoring sucks if you are not prepared for it.

Being prepared for online tutoring can mean many things to many different people. To some, it may mean starting the program two hours early, having a list of helpful websites or reference books on hand to give to the tutee, using those websites or reference books during the session, et cetera, et cetera. However, my approach to online tutoring is if the tutoring occurs in the morning, have a dependable alarm clock that is turned on. I am not trying to be cute or funny when I say this. I depend on my cell phone to multitask and work as my alarm clock, so when I forget to charge it, my alarm clock goes out of commission. One of the first tutoring sessions I had, I had a bum battery in my phone and, as a result, had nothing to wake me up...except my cat. My cat is one of those felines that demands to be fed at a certain time or else he will hate me for the rest of the day. On that fateful day, my cat decided to allow me to sleep in for an extra hour. As my luck would show, that extra hour I received is usually spent feeding Spaz, getting ready for the day and preparing to tutor. So, to make a long story short, I was unable to do all of these things and had a very spiteful cat swiping at my feet during the entire tutoring session. The point of this little story is to say that when one tutors online at home, one must have a good time schedule or else the session will quickly disintegrate into madness.

Now this brings me to the second point of this article: the one about spiders. The message I am trying to make is simple: put all distractions away and leave them far out of sight until the session is finished. Have precautions in place just in case something goes afoul during the session, have back up plans for the back up plans, and most importantly, don’t make such a big fuss over something that can be handled calmly. Take my fear of spiders and my troublesome feline companion for example. In both cases, one would think the smart thing to do would be to put the cat in another room or to tell the tutee to wait a moment and feed the darn thing; but what did I do? I ignored him. That was mistake number one. Mistake number two came from continuing to ignore my cat. His fussing became so bad that, half an hour into the session (that had already started a bit late), I had to make some excuse to my tutee and then took care of the distraction. Now for the spider incident. All I really had to do was unplug my laptop and move into another room. However, I freaked out like I normally do when I see a spider and startled my tutee with my shrieks of “Back you thing from the darkness! Back!” Needless to say, that session wasn’t one of my best sessions.

An important lesson (not the most important mind you) I hope to make is the lesson involving the materials one uses to tutor with. Having dictionaries, writing utensils, scrap paper, a helpful website list or whatever it is you use to tutor is a sure sign that you are taking your job seriously. However, you must never forget to have these thing on hand. Don’t place them on a shelf next to your bed. No instead have then right next to you where you can easily reach them.
Again, I am being serious when I say this. You won’t believe how many times I have hit my head on a corner of my desk trying to reach for something or a pencil has flown out of my hand and precious time is wasted trying to find it under my bed. This may be obvious to some; I certainly thought so, but as you can see, the obvious isn’t so obvious if you don’t think about it.

Finally, we get to the most important lesson I have to teach you readers about online tutoring. This last lesson deals with the program you will be using to tutor with. The lesson is universal so the name of whatever program you use doesn’t matter; however what does matter is how you use it. Make yourself familiar with the program a few days in advance so that if you have questions about it, you have the chance to ask said questions. If you have tutorials available, utilize them! Do them many times so that you are absolutely sure you know how to maneuver yourself around the program. Also, something that I thought up late in the semester is to place yourself as the tutee and have someone help you figure their side out. It is a good idea to be able to answer question that the tutee may have if you actually know where they are looking. The last thing I have to say on this subject is this, if you are using a program that requires a microphone, make sure both of you have one that works.

As for the ‘nuts and bolts’ of online tutoring, one must be aware that some things will ultimately change. I hope this doesn’t scare any potential online tutors. Change is a good thing here. What I have noticed throughout my time as an online tutor is that only the little things change. How many times I go off on tangents drastically reduced in number was one of those changes. Other things I noticed were things like how personal I got with my tutees, how much time we spent getting to know each other, and how much the focus of the sessions were more relaxed. Personally, my style of tutoring didn’t change too much. I am normally all smiles and ‘how was your day so far’ in my face to face sessions, and I kept that mentality for my online sessions. A word of advice though, if you feel less than enthusiastic about a session, your tutees will more than likely pick up on it from the sound of your voice. So, try to be happy or at least learn how to fake it. To touch on being too directive or taking over the session, it all really depends on the tutor. If you are a person who likes to talk, you may need to work on letting the tutee speak up, but again, it all depends on you.

Now, I think I have exhausted my brain with tips and words of wisdom for you future tutors of the writing center, so I will end in a serious note: know what you are getting into when you start online tutoring and be prepared for it. You will look like a dork if you don’t.
Reading Out Loud: An Effective Strategy to Engage ESL Writers

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

I often felt that a similar statement could be made about tutoring: We learn to tutor if we are members of a community that values interaction, and usually only if we are able to learn from one another. I started this semester with many questions. Although I still have questions on what the best approaches to tutoring may be, this semester has been a success largely because writers I worked with shared their time and their ideas about writing. Each of them taught me something about 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.
Multilingual Students: Who They Are, How They Learn and How to Tutor Them

Background of Multilingual Students at Sac State
(by Vu Tran)

A lot of native speakers are unaware of the complexity of speaking and writing in two languages. Becoming fluent in one language is a difficult task alone, but to become fluent in two languages is even more difficult. Recent research shows that it takes more than 10 years to become academically fluent in a second language. Many native speakers view the grammatical errors of multilingual students’ writings at the university level as something that is a deficiency, and not a unique process. In fact, one can say that it is an accomplishment for multilingual students to have made it this far academically.

Speaking and writing English has never been a strong skill for me while growing up (for most of my life) in an impoverished neighborhood filled with street violence, gangs, crimes, and poverty. I, along with other immigrant children in my neighborhood, suffered from the perennial condition of not having enough food, clothes, and resources available in order to maintain good hygiene and function sufficiently on a daily basis. Consequently, education took a toll on me and became secondary to my human basic survival needs (e.g. food, clothes, and immediate resources). My parents’ primary objectives were to work and bring money home to feed and clothed us. However, even that became a dilemma, for the language barrier immensely hindered their progress to acquire a decent job position. They would often work as menial farm laborers, custodians, and janitors; jobs that required long hours per day and paid appallingly minuscule in return. The thought of overcoming this poverty-stricken situation, coupled with learning a second language in alien environment, was nearly impossible.

The education that I had received during my high school years did awfully little to help ease my deprived circumstance at home. During my senior year, I began asking myself questions like: Did learning about grammar rules help provide food and clothes for my family? Did writing an essay about endangered species provide my family the resources we need to survive at home? My family was still in dire condition, prone to violence, crimes, and poverty that prevented us to climb up the socio-economic ladder. However, with my parents “nagging” at me constantly about the importance of education, I knew that graduating from high school and attending college was not a choice, but obligatory, and the only means of overcoming our impoverished situation. Therefore, the need to speak and write fluently in English at the University level became a means to an end for me.

Many of the multilingual students at Sac State are experiencing this dilemma as we speak. They come from a diverse range of linguistic, cultural, economic, and educational backgrounds. I recently conducted a study in several of the multilingual classes here at Sac
State, and found out that many of the students were either 1.5 generation or immigrants coming from different cultural, economic and educational backgrounds in various cities across California. Many of them shared similar experiences and outcomes. Based on the questionnaire, they view their writings thus far at the university level as more of an accomplishment than a deficiency, and that teachers/tutors should be amazed by what they can do in two languages, rather than what they cannot do. Out of all the multilingual students that I have tutored throughout the semester in the writing center, there was one that truly made me appreciate how beautiful and gifted multilingual students are. I was not only amazed by the tutee’s ability to write in English at the university level, but was even more astonished by the fact that English was his fifth language. He told me that he was forced to learn five languages because his parents’ jobs required his family to relocate frequently to a different country, which required learning an entirely new language and a different writing system each time. Personally, learning a second language throughout my adolescent years was unbearable, but the thought of having to learn five languages and become fluent in all of them is something that should be highly valued and praised by us all as an honorable achievement, and a talent that only multilingual students are capable of accomplishing.

The Differences of Second Language Learners
(by Kristina Kellermann)

ESL. EFL. Multilingual. Bilingual. Generation 1.5. Immigrant. International. There are many different labels given to students nowadays who speak another language besides English, and just as there are many labels, there are many levels of proficiency, as well as language and cultural backgrounds for each multilingual student out there. But what do all these labels mean? How does a tutor identify what kind of multilingual student they are working with? And perhaps, most importantly, how best to help them?

We all know as tutors that there is a wide variety of students who come into the Writing Center, and this variety is in no small part due to the diversity of multilingual students who come seeking help. But one multilingual student is not always the same as the next, and at times, it is difficult to not only identify that your tutee is a multilingual student, but also what their proficiency in English is and how best to help them with their writing. Though we are loathe to blithely categorize students into finite groups, it is helpful to know that there are three distinct general kinds of multilingual students who fall into two more general classifications of learners. Understanding what kind of learner you are working with is not only helpful for you as the educated tutor, but also helpful for both you and the student together so you may help them in a more efficient and conscientious manner.

Many of them may be very new to the country, and others may have lived here in America their entire lives. Many speak their first language (L1) at home and/or with their home community, and others may actually be more proficient in English as their second language (L2) than in their first language. Many multilingual students are better at speaking English than writing in it, and for others, it may be the reverse. In general, multilingual students, from brand-new freshmen to seasoned graduate students, are much like English native-speaking students: they study in many of the same degree programs, they enjoy a lot of shared interests, and they are engaged in common extracurricular activities and sports.
The multilingual students who come to the Writing Center have historically come from several language backgrounds: Spanish, Chinese, Russian, Hmong (an Asian language), Korean, Hindi, and others. For many of these students, English may actually be a third or fourth language, though they may have varying proficiencies in their other languages. There are three general categories of multilingual students here in the United States, and all three are represented here at Sacramento State University: international students, immigrant students, and Generation 1.5 students. Each group has its own unique learning needs.

International students have come from other countries to study at the university for varying lengths of time, often for one semester or an academic year. Many of these students have been well-educated in their home country, and their study may be financially supported by their families, universities or government. Most international students have studied English for at least a few years before applying to study abroad, and have had to pass rigorous standardized tests like the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) which is a requirement for admission at most American universities and colleges. In studying English, most international students have learned a lot of English grammar and are very good at reading, but their writing skills as well speaking and listening skills are often at a much lower proficiency. This is often due to lack of opportunity to practice both latter sets of skills, as many have had non-native teachers or they have not had the chance to interact with many native speakers. As they have largely learned English through what they have seen, namely studying vocabulary and grammar, they are considered “eye learners”. Almost all international students deal with culture shock in some degree or another when they first arrive in the country, and the amount of English they are exposed to on a daily basis increases exponentially, and may be at times overwhelming. On the positive side, as they come from cultures and language backgrounds different from our own, international students often have diverse opinions and points of view on topics, which tutors may see reflected in their writing. An important point to remember as a tutor is that when working with an international student, you are dealing not only with a student who is still learning a new language, but is also still learning a new culture, and all of its obvious and not-so-obvious idiosyncrasies. While they may be educated and comfortable in some aspects of the language, they may not be very familiar with social and rhetorical conventions, not just in writing, but also interpersonal communication.

Immigrant students arrive in America from other countries often as refugees, having left their home countries to escape political unrest, prosecution or simply to make a better life here in this country. These students are sometimes sent ahead of the rest of the family to live with relatives or friends. They vary greatly at times in age and educational background, and many have had interrupted or inconsistent schooling in the past. Sometimes they may be the first in their family to attend college. Most immigrant students have limited proficiency both in their first language and English, though many are at least orally proficient in their first language. There may be considerable gaps in their education, not just in English, but other areas as well. Immigrant students might struggle with lack of literacy and reading experience, and their understanding of grammar rules is sometimes hampered by inconsistent schooling. Spending some time to ask a student about their background and language proficiency, both in their first language and English, will often provide a lot of insight for tutors who work with these students.
Because it is not always easy to know where a student is coming from, both literally and figuratively, it is important for tutors to remember too to be patient and respectful of all students.

Between the general categories of international and immigrant students, and sharing characteristics of both is the very diverse group of Generation 1.5 students. These students are so-named as many of them are the first generation in their families who have been born here in America to parents who have emigrated from other countries. These students’ first language is not English but rather the language of their family. They first began to learn English generally from an early age when they first entered school at the preschool or kindergarten level. They acquired English not just in school though, but also on the playground, from their peers, as well as hearing the language from television, movies, the Internet, and interaction with other native speakers. As they have largely learned English through what they have heard, they are considered “ear learners”. They grow up learning both languages, most predominantly in oral form, and by the time they arrive at the university, many are considered to be fairly proficient in speaking both languages in some degree. But there is a lot of variety in this group. Some Generation 1.5 students may be more comfortable and adept in English than their first language, and yet others may not feel that they are fully fluent in English nor their first language. If asked to label themselves, a lot of Generation 1.5 students see themselves as bilingual or multilingual, but still others may not even consider themselves to be multilingual students. A lot of these students can pass for native speakers in terms of speaking proficiency, but their reading and writing abilities are often not as advanced. Their writing contains a lot of the colloquial and idiomatic language they have acquired in hearing English, and careful analysis will reveal systematic errors that reflect their spoken proficiency in English. Many Generation 1.5 students live between two languages and cultures as well, creating an identity that encompasses traditions blended from those of their own family and community, as well as the academic and social environment they are immersed in here. Tutors may see the writing of Generation 1.5 students also often reflects influences from their first language, in word choices or word order, for example, and at times it may difficult to address and correct. It can be confusing to tutors to work with students who seem to speak a certain level of English whereas their writing shows a very different level of English.

How the Proficiency of L1 Affects L2
(by Rexford Osei-Ansah)

Tutoring in the Writing Center can be more effective and productive in providing assistance to students if the educational, cultural and socio-linguistic background, and more importantly the L1 of the students are made available. Every individual begins to talk from infancy before learning to speak other languages. This language of infancy is the first language (L1). The second language (L2) is the language a person learns after the first language (L1). Human beings are born with the ability to learn and form associations so a child acquires language form by imitating what he hears the parents speak. Adult L2 learners who learn a second language begin from scratch and in the learning process, they find different ways to facilitate the mastery of the language. An example is repetition which is similar to a child’s first language learning process.
I am writing this article based upon what I observed from an analysis of a Russian-speaking ESL student’s writing as a requirement for one of my TESOL classes and from my personal experience as an ESL student so many years ago. In the course of the analysis, I noticed that some error patterns which I found to be the result of transfer from L1 which is the Russian language. This student had difficulties with the use of certain elements of the English language that are not in the Russian language. I would like to point out that Russian is a case language whereas English is SVO (it follows the “Subject Verb Object” order of arrangement). For example, “Peter kicks the ball.” Peter is the subject, the verb is kick, the action performed by Peter, and the ball is the object that received the action.

By analyzing the errors, I found out that errors occur often due to the difference between L1 and L2. For example in Russian, the definite and indefinite articles “the” and “a” do not exist. In a sentence like “Peter is a boy”, the student wrote “Peter boy”. By writing “Peter boy” the student is transferring directly from Russian because they are not familiar with the use of the definite and indefinite articles. Certain errors were made in the use of auxiliary verbs as well. I noticed structures in which the student wrote “that why” “he the boy that came to the school”, “I been” etc. Another one of the characteristics of the Russian language is that the auxiliary verbs “to be” and “to have” don’t exist. For this reason, the student deleted “is” from the sentence - another example of transfer interference.

When I lived in Ghana, Twi, one of the Akan languages, was used together with English from first grade through the eighth grade. Because of its limited use in the classroom, there was limited opportunity for students to practice the use of English language through direct interaction with people. I came to United States as an international student only to realize how handicapped I was in the use of the English language. I could write well, but in the middle of conversation I got lost when others spoke fast. I was classified as “biliterate” because I already had a basic education in my L2 but I had many deficiencies as far as grammar, structure and organization were concerned. I had a hard time adapting to writing styles in America. Even though I thought I had considerable words in my English lexicon, some of them were spelled differently. For example in America, words like “defence” and “labour” are spelled ”defense” and “labor” respectively. Also, I found out that in high rise buildings, people use an “elevator” but not a “lift” to move from one floor to the other. Words like “lorry” and “articulated truck” have been replaced by “truck” and “eighteen-wheeler truck”. The transfer from the Twi language (L1) into English language (L2) contributed to most of the linguistic differences.

Ear Learners vs. Eye Learners
(by Jamie Ferrando)

As previously mentioned, there are two terms that describe how multilingual students learn. Based on the status of the learner (International, Generation 1.5, or Immigrant) they will usually fit into one of the two categories. Ear learners most likely are students who have had little formal training in their first language. These learners have learned English by being immersed in the second language by television, native speaking friends, and places like the grocery store. They have learned English by hearing it spoken around them, and not necessarily by formal classroom instruction. Most immigrant students are ear learners. Some characteristics of their writing include conversational style language and often misspelled words that sound
different than they are spelled. For example, when a native speaker says the words ‘first of all’ an immigrant student might write ‘firstable’ in his or her paper because that is how some immigrant students hear native speakers say that phrase. Since they have no formal classroom training, they write words how they hear them.

On the other hand, eye learners have often had extensive formal grammar instruction, but they may not have the oral fluency that generation 1.5 or even that immigrant students have. The reason for this is that they often visually see language with their eyes, but rarely have the opportunity to speak or listen to authentic English language. International students often fit this description. They know grammar rules, but often lack skills in listening and oral proficiency. These students often have problems with understanding English idioms and American culture. In addition, these students might have problems forming paragraphs because their prior language training most likely consisted of single sentence exercises versus writing and drafting essays.

Still, there are generation 1.5 students who fall somewhere in between ear learners and eye learners. As previously mentioned, generation 1.5 students usually began learning English in elementary school, but depending on their parents’ first and second language fluency, these students might or might not have had formal training in either their first language or in English. Most likely generation 1.5 students are ear learners.

Suggestions for Tutoring Eye Learners and Ear Learners
(by Jamie Ferrando)

It might seem rude to ask a tutee their background information, but the information above should help you distinguish at least the international students from the immigrant students so you can decide which of the following suggestions to help them become more fluent writers. Since an ear learner has learned English by hearing it spoken around them, an ear learner would benefit from reading his or her paper out loud, or by having someone read it out loud for them. Often times, they will be able to correct their own mistakes simply by hearing what they wrote. They will not be able to explicitly tell you why the sentence is wrong grammatically, but they might just say “it doesn’t sound right.”

International students might have “perfect” grammar; however, they might lack transition phrases. Also, their papers will often be shorter than the amount required by the teacher. For international students, going over the prompt with them and helping them expand their ideas will help them become proficient English writers. They might misunderstand the teachers’ expectations because of their lack of listening skills. In addition, you might have a problem understanding their ideas when speaking to them, but having them free write or brainstorm might help them “verbalize” their ideas through writing. A majority of these students also rely heavily on their first language, and sometimes they transfer this prior knowledge to English. An example of this could be that the word form is wrong, or the sentence structure is backwards. If you suspect transfer, a dictionary, preferably one from their first language to English will help them be more concise in their words choice.

Immigrant students, again, vary within the two categories, but some of the mentioned suggestions will help you find a way to aid these students in becoming better writers.
My Personal Experience with Tutoring a Generation 1.5 Student
(by Jamie Ferrando)

Even though I am aware of the differences between eye and ear learners, it wasn’t until this semester (Fall 2009) that I was able to work one student who demonstrated the previously mentioned characteristics of an ear learner. During the beginning of the semester, I had a drop-in whose first language was Hmong. She was a Generation 1.5 student who began learning English in elementary school. She admitted that she uses her first language the majority of the time with her family and friends, and that she considers English her second language. When I began reading her paper out loud, as I do with most of my tutees, she began fixing most of her grammatical errors. Although she was not able to correct all of them, she learned that by reading her paper out loud, or by having someone read her paper to her, she could correct the majority of her errors. Her content, for the most part, was organized and cohesive, but it was the strategy of reading out loud that really gave her a different perspective of her writing process.

My Personal Experience With Tutoring an International Student
(by Kristina Kellermann)

I’ve worked with a number of multilingual students in the Writing Center, mostly Generation 1.5 students, but also a few international students. One student I tutored came to study here from her home in China. She was also in a tutorial I taught this semester, so I had worked with her before with speaking and listening skills, but not writing. She needed help at the time writing a cover letter to accompany the portfolio she would be submitting at the end of the semester for her English class. We reviewed the assignment prompt together, going over each individual requirement, and checking in the letter to see if she had covered them all. Her writing was relatively easy to read, with simple neat sentences that indicated to me that she had taken time and care to construct them. She was aware of some of her problems, namely run-on sentences, development, and some minor grammatical issues. We specifically discussed these issues as she had identified them earlier in the semester, and what strategies she had learned to correct and avoid these errors in the future. For the most part, she had followed the prompt, and I praised her organization and clarity. When conversing, I reminded myself to speak a little more slowly and clearly, and I checked with her a few times to be sure that she understood and to see if she had any other concerns. In the end, she said she felt more confident about the letter being nearly ready to present with her portfolio.

I think having a previous rapport established was helpful in this case, and I feel my student was relaxed and not overly self-conscious working with me. While my situation with her was a little unconventional from typical experiences with international students in the Writing Center, I do certainly recommend getting to know the student a little before beginning to work. Taking my time, being patient, and remembering respect are all key points that I endeavor to keep in mind any time I work with a student, multilingual or otherwise. I also remind myself that a lot of multilingual students, especially international students, are not only dealing with the challenges and workload ever-present in the academic environment that faces every college student, but are doing so in their second language. Trying to handle all this in one’s first language is difficult enough, but I have immense additional respect for those students who do it
all in a language other than their first. Every time I work with a multilingual student, it’s a 
humbling learning experience for me as well. So when my student thanked me at the end of the 
session, I simply told her, “Xie xie. Thank you.”

For Future Reading

residents (language minority) students. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, (70), 17-27.

Reid, J. (1997). “Eye” learners and “ear” learners: Identifying the language needs of international 
student and U.S. resident writers. In P. Byrd & J. Reid (Ed.), Grammar in the Composition 
Classroom: Essays on Teaching ESL for College-Bound Students (3-16). Boston: Heinle ELT.
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>Continental (German-Romanic) tradition</th>
<th>Anglo-American tradition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Think”-texts</td>
<td>Problem solving texts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources in the foreground</td>
<td>Problems in the foreground</td>
<td></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>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on concepts and theories</td>
<td>Emphasis on methods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation (preservation) of traditional culture</td>
<td>New understandings, evaluations, and actions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contingent epistemology</td>
<td>Controlled, purposeful epistemology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Numerous points, claims, conclusions, around the subject</td>
<td>One point, one claim, one conclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often non-linear, discursive structure</td>
<td>Linear structure</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digressions allowed</td>
<td>Digressions discouraged</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic writing as art and inborn ability</td>
<td>Academic writing as leaned craftsmanship</td>
<td></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.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Testimony of an Indian Working with Diversity
Manpreet Devi

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

Making the Student Feel Comfortable

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

Reading Out Loud

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

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

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

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

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

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Asian, South Asian, Middle Eastern Writers

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Grammar and Mechanics**

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

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

**Chinese** (all Chinese dialects and other Asian languages)

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

An initial, and lasting, significant difficulty for Asian students learning English is the alphabetic script. Learning and writing the letters is not difficult – especially compared to memorizing and writing thousands of characters, but students find the amount of space a word to use – it’s length in letters – a challenge. Ideograms present a word in a relatively compact space, so reading in English can be both physically (because the eyes are not trained to read in strings) and cognitively (because of the time and sound memory needed) demanding. (Chang 310) Even in more advances years of study, Asian students may struggle with comprehension of texts that are longer or convoluted (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 writers’ work. Asian students tend to have great respect for teachers and consider them persons of authority, so students may find it difficult to express opinions or share their own ideas. Memorization is a popular learning tool, and Chinese students are especially adept memorizes – probably due to the ideogram writing system that must be memorized (Zhong 7). Unfortunately, memorization skills may not serve students well for writing activities where analysis and explanation are needed. It is also important to note that Asian students are extremely industrious and hard working (Chang 322). A tutor should never assume that a written draft is a 1st, 2nd, or even a 3rd. These students pour over their work and are reluctant to show anyone work that is not their greatest effort. I spent about two years, over a dozen papers, tutoring and working with a Laotian student and never saw a draft fresher than 5th. It is important for tutors to be aware of their responses to these papers that have already been through rigorous readings and rewritings to prevent from making detrimental comments.

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

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

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

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

Grammar and Mechanics

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

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

Learning and Writing Styles

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

Works Cited


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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

- Double prepositions are often used.

- Apostrophes are often not included.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

References

Chicano English: Understanding a Significant Dialect and its Writers

Here’s a Story

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

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

Passive Bilingualism & SSL Speakers

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

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

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

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

**Some Common Characteristics of ChE**

**Spelling Notes:** While English has eleven stressed vowel phonemes, Spanish only has five (i, e, u, o, a), so in both speech and writing, words like read and rid may sound and be written the same way (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, 419). This means that when ChE writers attempt phonetic spelling in SAE, they may have some difficulty seeing or hearing the difference between their spelling and the standard spelling of a word. ChE spelling and speech may also use ch and sh interchangeably, resulting in words like chow for show and share for chair. The same is true of the letters b and v and c, s, and z (1998, 419). Another spelling difference between ChE and SAE that you may see, is called word-final consonant simplification, where past tense suffixes are deleted, for example, I star school at 2pm or she marry him yesterday (1998, 420). The words for to may also be used instead of only for or to since in Spanish they are more often strung together. An example of this would be a phrase like, we are ready for to go on the trip.
**Syntactic Differences:** Fromkin and Rodman note that “in Spanish, a negative sentence includes a negative morpheme before the verb even if another negative appears; thus negative concord is a regular rule of ChE syntax” (1998, 420). The written and spoken result of this rule may be sentences like *I don have no more* or *he don know nothin*. These linguists also point out that there is a regular difference between the “use of comparative *more* to mean *more often* and the preposition *out from* to mean *away from*. The resulting ChE sentences may look like *I want to get out from my apartment* or *She uses cilantro more* (1998, 420). Something else that may appear in ChE writing is a habitual use of the words *the, that* and *to*. Since in Spanish masculine or feminine markers usually precede nouns, ChE writers may insert *the, that* or *to* to compensate for the lack of SAE markers. For example, a sentence may read *In that book, The Awakening the mother to commit suicide drown herself*.

**Approaching ChE Writers**

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

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

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

1As 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.

2In Fall, 2004, 44% of CSUS students identified themselves as Caucasian, 17% as Asian, 14% Hispanic, 6% African American, 1% as Native American, 3% as Foreign, and 16% as Other. 59% of CSUS students are women. While ages ranged from 13-84 years, the median age was 23 years of age. See “Institutional Research” in list of works cited.
It Is Ok. I Am an Expert.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Works Cited


The Writing Center and the WPJ

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

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

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

Choosing the WPJ

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

Understanding the WPJ:

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

- students will be given 30 minutes to complete this portion of the test

Once the test is complete, students will be placed into the writing course that fits their level of writing best:

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

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

**Choosing the 109M/W Course**

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

**Benefits in Choosing the 109M/W Course:**

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

**Choosing Between 109M or 109W:**

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

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

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

The Role of the Writing Center and the WPJ

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

Appendix:

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

1. I read frequently
   I do not read frequently

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FEEL MORE TRAINING/EDUCATION NEEDED</th>
<th>TO MAINTAIN/INCREASE EARNING POWER DURING NEXT FEW YEARS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Based on ever employed)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>Yes %  No %  DK/RF %  Total %  NI %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>53    45    2    100    (100.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25 years</td>
<td>80    20    0    100    (125)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34 years</td>
<td>65    34    1    100    (219)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-44 years</td>
<td>59    40    1    100    (283)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45-54 years</td>
<td>28    73    1    100    (127)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 and over</td>
<td>18    78    4    100    (136)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than H.S.</td>
<td>42    57    1    100    (79)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. grad.</td>
<td>52    47    1    100    (365)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voc./Community college</td>
<td>65    31    3    100    (131)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some 4-year college</td>
<td>65    34    1    100    (141)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College grad.</td>
<td>48    51    1    100    (328)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Less than one-half of one percent.


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

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

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

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

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

--Associate's degree holders average $8,000 a year more than high school graduates.
--Workers with bachelor's degrees make nearly $23,300 more a year than high school graduates.
--Master's degree holders average $11,300 more a year than bachelor's degree holders.

http://www.classesUSA.com

Make More Money!
Earn Your Degree Online.

- Earn Your Degree While You Work
- Convenient Online Classes
- Accredited Colleges & Universities

CLICK HERE
Essay #2 (30 minutes/60 minutes for MLi)

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

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

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3 units</th>
<th>4 units</th>
<th>6 units</th>
<th>10 units</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>3 units</th>
<th>4 units</th>
<th>6 units</th>
<th>10 units</th>
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</table>

**Identifies and articulates a focus arising from the prompt:** sets a meaningful task that addresses the readings provided.

**Articulates writer’s own position in analyzing a significant issue:** meets the expectations of academic audience(s) with regard to establishing a controlling idea that is analytical.

**Develops an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion that analyze major ideas surrounding the issue:** produces a developed and cohesive academic composition employing conventions that are appropriate for the genre selected.

**Develops writer’s position appropriately for an academic audience by incorporating support using specific details and examples:** cites the readings provided, adequately integrating them into text.

**Provides evidence of awareness of writing as a process:** demonstrates awareness of or reflects critically on writer’s own literacy history and practices.

**Demonstrates awareness of conventions of academic discourse:** makes appropriate rhetorical choices regarding purpose, format, evidence, tone, conventions, and organization, and genre.

**Displays evidence of editing with adequate control of grammar and mechanics appropriate to an early draft.** Errors do not slow the reader, impede understanding, nor seriously undermine the authority of the writer. Grammatical errors, inappropriate word choice, or incorrect usage may occur throughout the essay but rarely interfere with effective communication.
A Commitment to Writing Center Theory

My first experience with theory took place the first semester of my English Graduate Studies. I was taking a literature class on the Ethics in African-American Aesthetics and rather than just diving into the actual literature, we spent the first class meetings reading and discussing literary theory. Then, as the course went on, we continued to read articles of theory alongside the literature. I hated theory. It was intangible, dense, and didn’t really seem to relate to the material of the course. The articles on theory felt like a complete waste of time. After just a few weeks I stopped reading the theory articles and focused mainly on the literature. Even though literary theory is not a part of this course, I can see how a student could be put off by the theoretical material that is presented in a course that requires actual practice, a course like this one.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Read to understand**

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

**Focus on the parts that make most sense**

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

**Discuss the theory with your peers**

Nothing has worked better for me than working with a group of my peers to collaboratively make some sense of a theoretical text. When working with a group, you can discuss the parts that made sense to you and question the things that didn’t make sense, and perhaps one of the things that one of the group members understood was the thing that had questions about. Overall, talking to people about a text, whether I understand it or not, helps me develop a better understanding of it.
The Writing Center as a Bridge: A Postcolonial Approach

One of the most frequent questions we, as writing center tutors, get is, “What exactly do you do here?” I think the fact that question gets asked is key to what we do here. Students know that we are not teachers, but we can provide writing help and instructive advice. We’re students, but we’re not beginning writers either, so what are we? We are not easily pegged, labeled, or identified within the hierarchy of the academy. In some respects, we function both within and without the university. We exist in a space somewhere in between—a “Third Space,” if you will. (I have further evidence of the writing center as a third space because it is the only place on campus where delicious free snacks magically appear without fail. That may or may not be related to what I’m going to talk about, but it’s definitely an added bonus.)

In “Post-Colonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center,” Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski argue that because of the writing center’s physically and politically peripheral place—marginalized from and yet part of the university—...the writing center is an ideal place in which to begin teaching and practicing a critical and self reflective form of acculturation, what Edward Said calls ‘critical consciousness’...[T]he writing center can become what Mary Louise Pratt has termed a ‘contact zone,’ a place in which different discourses grapple with one another and are negotiated. (81)

There is a lot going on in this passage, so let’s unpack some of these ideas. Postcolonialism has to do with structures of power, and so a Postcolonial approach to writing center pedagogy examines power relations within the university. Because the writing center exists on the edge of the university power structure, it is a useful space to teach students to critically examine the university and their place in it. We get students from numerous cultural and linguistic backgrounds and of all different writing levels, so we truly are an amalgamation of discourses.

Numerous scholars have given the type of space Bawarshi and Pelkowski are describing different names. In The Location of Culture, Homi K. Bhabha compares his notion of Third Space—a contact zone in which the constructed nature of cultural systems is brought to light and fixed notions of identity are challenged—to a bridge or a stairwell. As he describes it:

the stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity... (4)

The stairwell is a workable, though temporary space between binary oppositions. For us, these binary oppositions may manifest themselves as academic discourse versus Other discourses, teacher versus student, beginning writer versus advanced writer, etc. And yet, we all come to the
same place to write and communicate, dissolving the boundaries that binary constructions rely upon. As tutors, who are neither teachers nor students, exactly, we challenge the binary oppositions created by academic power structures. Though Bhabha’s idea is highly theoretical, we can act as a sort of interpretive “bridge” between teachers and students when we help students understand writing prompts, can’t we? We can also function as a “stairwell” between academic and home discourses by creating a safe space where students and tutors can grapple with academic concepts, using informal language that is comfortable to us and defining terms in ways that we can understand.

Other theorists have different names for this hybrid space that we’ve begun to define. Gloria Anzaldúa, for example, calls this between-space a “borderland,” introducing the identity of the mestiza as the embodiment of a hybrid or mixed identity. We don’t really need to worry too much about wrapping our heads around these theoretical descriptions of Third Space, however, because we tutor at an actual place that embodies these theories in a practical, observable way.

So, how can we actively make the Writing Center a bridge or a borderland—an effective place in which writers with different backgrounds and discourses can communicate?

First, I think we need to make clear, as Bawarshi and Pelkowski express, that academic discourse is not the be all and end all of writing. Academic discourse is not better, higher, or more laudable than other discourses; it just is the type of discourse we are required to use in academic contexts. It is important to suggest to students that “good” writing is situational—it depends upon the rhetorical context in which it is written.

We can then pose the question, “Ok, if this is the academic standard, who sets the standard?” For example, students may wonder why we cite sources in a certain way for MLA formatting and why the formatting requirements change so frequently. They may wonder why we use commas in compound sentences and not in simple complex sentences (even if they don’t have the language to identify the sentence structures as such). I have explained to students that grammar rules are not mystical things that exist out there in the ether. In fact, they are decided upon by a group of people who have the power to set the standards. There are exceptions to grammar rules, and rules change. In explaining this, we are helping to demystify academic writing, and we’re beginning to help students critically analyze the university and their roles in it.

I have another example from my own experience of how we can create an effective contact zone in our tutoring sessions. I recently had a new nursing student who was frustrated because she was struggling with her writing assignments in the nursing program. She explained, “I always got positive feedback on writing before, but now I’m getting low grades. My teacher says I’m not structuring my papers in the right way, and I’m using words wrong.” I tried to encourage her to not be so hard on herself. I said, “You’re entering in a new discourse community, in which ways of writing and communicating are different, right?” I gave a quick explanation of what I meant by discourse community.

“Yeah,” she replied thoughtfully. “Yes, I guess I am. I feel like I’m learning a new language.”

“Yeah! You are,” I said. “So, sometimes when you’re pushing yourself to reach a new level in your writing, or to write a new way, things get harder before they get easier, and we find ourselves making more mistakes. But that’s totally ok! It’s shows that you’re pushing yourself and you’re growing.”
She nodded, and I sensed a mutual understanding. I felt like this was a successful tutoring moment. As Bawarshi and Pelkowski put it, “Critical consciousness encourages students to be aware of how and why academic discourses situate them within certain power relationships and require of them particular subject positions. The goal of such critical pedagogy is not to subvert academic discourse or to suggest that students reject it, but to teach them to consciously use it” (83). I believe that’s what we were doing at this moment. We were thinking about this student’s position in a new academic discourse community. The key, I think, to applying postcolonial theory to the writing center is to help students gain critical self-awareness of themselves as writers, thinkers, and members of the university.

Work Cited

Situated Acts of Writing and Tutoring

At this point in the semester, you’ve probably met with several different student writers and, furthermore, you may have found it useful to adapt your tutoring methods to meet the various needs of each particular student. For example, you may have played the uninformed reader to a student in a different major, asking largely content-related questions, or you may have taken a more directive approach regarding subject-verb agreement issues with an ESL student. You have probably even changed your style in different sessions with a recurring tutee, depending on which stage of the writing process they are engaged in – if it is a brainstorming session, perhaps you’re more likely to just let the writer talk through his or her ideas, occasionally asking problem-posing questions, or if a draft has organizational issues, you might make more concrete suggestions as to what might ensure clarity. Just as we adapt our tutoring style to the needs of the student at hand, I think that it can be beneficial to view writing in a similar way: as an act of adaptation to a particular rhetorical context. With that in mind, we can also view tutoring as an opportunity to help students recognize, question, and negotiate these contexts.

A way to facilitate this discussion is through the lens of the postmodern conception of writing as “situated.” Many scholars have discussed this concept, but I think that Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, in her article on post-process pedagogy, sums up the discussion nicely when she says that “writing must correspond to specific contexts that naturally vary” (115). In the case of writing, a context is the rhetorical situation that the writer is working within (or, in some cases, around or against), which includes but is not limited to: tone, audience, form, language use, and so on. While these issues themselves should always be considered while writing, the specifics of what they are will always change from writing task to writing task, from context to context. For instance, in a personal narrative, the tone might be somewhat casual and personable and the form may follow that of a traditional plot with a climax and denouement, while a sociology essay might require a more formal tone and a decidedly thesis-based form. There is no one universal rule in writing. The “rules,” like language itself, are arbitrary, socially constructed, contextually-bound, and changeable. This broad view of writing is known as “situatedness,” and it “refers to the ability to respond to specific situations rather than rely on foundational principles or rules” (115). Writing is not a matter of knowing how to do it “right,” but of determining what is appropriate for the situation.

As tutors, we can help writers navigate the tricky terrain of situatedness by allowing our own experiences and knowledge of writing in various contexts to inform, and, conversely, we can allow ourselves to be informed by our tutees. An example of this is a simple knowledge exchange. If you happen to be a literature major and are very good at integrating quotes, you might be able to give your tutee some ideas of when that might be considered appropriate or how it might stylistically be attempted. Or if your tutee brings knowledge of the way data is often presented in a scientific research paper, he or she can break that down for you, which serves the
dual purpose of adding to your own general knowledge and reaffirming their own knowledge and expertise. Any new, context-specific knowledge of this sort adds to a writer’s knowledge of writing in its various forms, and gives a writer a broader knowledge of writing as a whole. This aggregation of knowledge hopefully makes it easier for a writer to shift fluidly between disparate rhetorical contexts.

Another skill tutors can bring to this process of discovery is the knowledge of what kinds of questions to ask. And usually, the questions that are deceptively simply will yield the most complex, yet perhaps fruitful answers. Freirean, open-ended problem-posing questions, in particular, can be applied to almost any writing situation with deconstructive and demystifying results: why, what, when, for whom, and how? Asking these questions encourages writers to both examine and question the conventions of the writing tasks assigned. For example, one of my tutees this semester was getting frustrated with APA formatting, so we had a fifteen minute discussion about it, asking why we thought this system was created in the first place, why it was so intricate, why citation was so valued in American academia, etc. While the conversation understandably didn’t alleviate all of her frustration with the format itself, she was able to discern that there was a logic and reasoning and values system behind it.

These kinds of questions can also help the writer move beyond simple conventions into thinking about their writing in ways they might not have considered before. For example, another of my tutees had an assignment for a writing class in which she had to research a rite of passage in a different culture, and she was having a difficult time moving beyond regurgitation of the facts. So we started problem-posing. Why do you think the teacher assigned this particular essay? How is this topic relevant to you? How does your cultural vantage point affect how you view the subject matter? How does the cultural practice you’re writing about make you rethink or validate your own cultural views? And so on. These questions served several purposes: they allowed the writer to consider, and even accept, to an extent, the teacher’s reasoning for the assignment, making it feel less arbitrary, they required her think of the assignment in direct relation to herself, consequently making it more personally meaningful, and they asked her to question her own cultural assumptions, which is one way to encourage critical consciousness. As Breuch notes, “rote learning of subject matter, without understanding its relevance to one’s situation and the world, does not improve one’s education” (119). Engaging in this problem-posing is perhaps one of surest means of self-reflection. I think that it is a good idea not just to ask these questions, but encourage writers to ask these questions themselves, beyond the context of the writing center.

Viewing the world, language, and writing as contextually situated can also help us to negotiate the seemingly adversarial relationship between academic discourse and a student’s home discourse. For this course, you’ve probably read an article or two about the Postcolonial pitfalls of academic discourse, about how it assimilates students into an academic culture. This argument, while occasionally hyperbolic, is not entirely off-base: while we may value a student’s home discourse in the writing center, in the majority of academic writing situations, they must ultimately adapt to the language and conventions of the academy. While the fairness of our
academic situation is up for debate, it is the reality we currently face, and for some writers, it can be quite daunting. I think that taking a step back and viewing academic discourse as man-made allows us to see that it isn’t necessarily “right” or “better” than one’s home discourse, but simply a different rhetorical context. As theorist Patricia Bizzell notes, academic discourse is really just a series of conventions established “by consensus of the community this discourse unites. Academic discourse conventions derive their authority more from their status as conventions than any inherent superiority” (139). Of course, this doesn’t make academic discourse any less complex or difficult for writers to adapt to, but it emphasizes the fact that it is not intrinsically more valuable than one’s home discourse. As tutors, we are placed between these home and academic contexts, and hopefully we can be effective mediators by helping writers negotiate the differences and similarities of these contexts so that they can successfully and critically operate within both.

Works Cited


Check your Ego at the Door Please

One of the great things about tutoring in the writing center is that you do not have the pressure of an instructor or an expert. You are not expected to know all the answers and you get to be the good guy, the hero, the coach, and the motivator. But there is one caveat—you must check your ego at the door. In a peer-to-peer relationship there is no room for a strong arm. The writing center is all about treating people as individuals and respecting and nurturing their goals, concerns and ideas. Most tutors really want to help and most are pretty good writers with a broad knowledge base. Most tutees understand this and look to the tutor for guidance and sometimes ‘the answers’. The challenge is to encourage and explore processes and ideas without co-opting the tutee’s ideas.

It’s all about Service

There will be lots of talk about Higher Order Concerns (HOC) such as organization, thesis, development, vs. Lower Order Concerns (LOC) such as punctuation, grammar and spelling, and you will feel challenged when a tutee comes to you wanting to address LOC’s when everything you’ve been taught is to focus on HOC’s. You will feel conflicted. You will feel pressure to ‘do as you are told’, but fear not—The Force Is With You. It is OKAY to look at LOC’s and this especially true with ESL students. In Sharon A. Myers, “Reassessing The “Proofreading Trap”: ESL Tutoring and Writing Instruction,” she explains:

Writing is denser than speech and in academic settings requires very high levels of reading comprehension, a formal register, sophisticated paraphrasing ability and a specialized vocabulary. Very few ESL students who walk into a writing center are likely to have such high levels of proficiency…it is not realistic to believe that [ESL students] should have put their second language problems behind them and [are] ready to take on the challenges of the composition classroom without further support (qtd. in Matsuda 715). (221)

Consequently, ESL students, and some non-ESL students, really need help with grammar, vocabulary and punctuation. Don’t get me wrong, it is important to address HOC’s first, simply from the time management aspect of writing a paper, especially if there are development,
organizational, thesis, and etc. issues. But some of the most rewarding tutoring experiences develop when tutoring is approached as a service oriented process that fosters a mutually beneficial relationship, where the needs of both parties are respected and addressed.

Tutees come to the writing center for help, and of their own accord, with certain expectations. Many students are worried about grammar and punctuation. What I have found is that if you explain that the paper is still in a developmental stage in the writing process, while you are perfectly willing to address grammar and punctuation at that point, you might end up making these corrections on a section of the paper that you may not use because HOC’s still need work. Then you’ve wasted all that time. For most students time is precious, and once explained this way, they will be happy to address HOC’s first and grammar and punctuation a little later.

**Laugh A Little**

Don’t take it all so seriously. Writing can be a stressful business and even the best of writers experience doubt and insecurity about their abilities. Many students who come to the writing center are still learning how to write basic essays using specific and unfamiliar academic discourses and formats (APA, MLA, Chicago Style, etc.) and they can be stressed to the max. For these writers, writing can seem like slow torture. This is especially true the first time someone comes in to use the writing center’s services. One way to break the ice and help create a relaxing atmosphere is to lighten up and laugh a little. Laughter has healing properties, lightens the heart and connects people in a way that words cannot, creating a universal moment of mutual understanding. It also acts as a stress release, which paves the way for creative thought.

**It’s all Greek to me….**

There will be times when you will feel like you and your tutee are speaking two different languages. And maybe you are. People have different communication styles that are influenced by learning preference, learning disabilities and cultural expectations. Some people are visual learners, some auditory and some more kinesthetic. If, through talking with the student, you can identify these characteristics such as some one who prefers to read aloud, or someone who prefers to use a clustering exercise or someone who is more physical and free writes, this will enable you as the tutor, to tailor your tutoring methods in a way that facilitates communication. “Identifying learning styles as a basis for providing responsive instruction has never been more important than now, as educators meet the needs of a diverse student population” (California 88). This can be especially relevant when working with a student with a learning disability, an ESL student, or a student from a different cultural background. In “Cultural Conflicts in the Writing Center: Expectations and Assumptions of ESL Students,” Muriel Harris explains:

> Working on rhetorical qualities of good writing is even more difficult [than addressing grammar and vocabulary] because we are less aware that some are culturally determined, not universal. For example, while Americans value conciseness, directness, and clarity, work in contrastive rhetoric has shown us that these qualities are not necessarily valued in the discourse of other languages. (215)
Thus, as a tutor, being sensitive to differences in communication styles and cultural expectations becomes paramount to having a successful tutoring experience for both parties involved in the process.

**Theory! Theory! Theory!**

Post colonialism, feminism, post modernism, minimalist tutoring, directive tutoring—aaaaaahhhhhhhhh! It can all seem overwhelming. The good news is that as tutors we are peers and not expected to teach these theories to our tutees. However, it’s good to have some knowledge of the different approaches and theories of tutoring. It’s kind of like going to a seminar for work. You will listen a lot, hopefully they have some good snacks, and maybe you’ll meet some cool people. But really, if you can get a little out of it, learn something new—maybe have an ‘Ah Ha’ moment or two—it will have been worth the experience. One of the subtle ways I have contributed to feminist theory is when I see a tutee use the pronoun ‘their’ in a sentence where the writer requires a singular neuter pronoun for a person, which we do not have in English. For example, “A student who visits the writing center would like help with their paper.” This is when I jump in and explain that a singular subject requires a singular pronoun and that it is up to the writer to chose which singular pronoun to use—either ‘he’ or ‘she’. Not surprisingly, every female I have explained this to, chooses the pronoun ‘she’. One pronoun at a time, I feel I am making a contribution to feminist theory.

**Yak, Yak, Yak**

Students will come to the writing center at all different stages in their writing process. Often they will come in without a draft and need help brainstorming and flushing out their ideas. Some of the most enjoyable tutoring sessions I’ve had are conversation oriented. Most of us are much more comfortable expressing our thoughts and ideas verbally than writing them down. In a conversation, it’s easy to jump around and experiment with many different approaches to a topic and to discuss different ‘lenses’ from which to view ideas. Additionally, talking provides an opportunity to get to know the tutee and to find out her interests, goals and weaknesses. It can also ease the pressure of attempting to produce a ‘correct’ piece of writing on the spot.

**Tutoring is Like Bartending**

The tutoring center is like a lively pub full of patrons with different personalities, who come from a variety of cultures and backgrounds, with different expectations, fears and goals. As a tutor, you play the role of bartender. In this role, you will wear many different hats. Sometimes you will act as psychologist and just listen while offering support through a sympathetic ear, sometimes you will get straight down to business (give me a beer and a shot), and other times your patron may not know what he wants and you will need to ask some questions (What do you like? Sweet? Sour? Something fruity? Something to go with your meal?) As a tutor, you will encounter many different personalities. Some people will know what they want and will be all business others will need more of your help. But regardless, it is your job to make your patrons (tutees) feel comfortable and to help them achieve their goals and hopefully they will enjoy themselves and come back.
Work Cited


The Basics of Tutoring

By now, you may have read and discussed several theories about how to tutor and what a Writing Center should be, and you will read a whole lot more, but it is important to realize that not all theories are presented to change the way you tutor. Instead, they are there so you will have different tutoring options when different situations arise. Halfway through the semester, many of us felt overwhelmed by the conflicting ideas of what it meant to be a great tutor. Some claimed that we should only fix the student, not the paper, while others argued that both could be done simultaneously. Some discussed learning disabilities, multicultural students, feminism and post colonialism, and by the end of it, many of us could not help but overanalyze and scrutinize every word that came out of our tutee’s mouths. Finally, around the seventh week of tutoring, many realized that we had known all along what it meant to be a great tutor, and that it took us questioning our methods for us to understand that we were doing it right. So, in order to save you a little time and self doubt, here is what I believe is important when tutoring:

Teach When You Have To:

Some will argue that tutors are not meant to teach students, but sometimes it is unavoidable. I do not want you to lecture your writers on the importance of academic discourse, but instead give them the skills to be a better writer through a combination of teacher-centered tutoring and collaboration, which are well defined in Tutoring Writing a Practical Guide for Conferences. I was surprised to realize that some of the students I met were not capable of writing a successful paper because no one had taken the time to teach them. As students, we have the ability to relate to our tutees in a way that teachers cannot. While professors have to zip along curriculum at the risk of leaving some behind, tutors have the privilege to spend time with their writers, which allows them to focus on anything the writer feels they do not understand. We can ask questions “about mechanical errors [while] supplying alternatives and reasons for them” and still be able to discuss with them different methods for brainstorming, an easier way to organize research, and that mismatched tenses and poor grammar can ruin a paper with stellar Higher Order Concerns (McAndrew and Reigstad 26). Because we are students, we know how frustrating it is when it takes an immense amount of time to write a paper, how stressful it is to complete assignments to your professors liking, and how humbling it is to ask for help. Because you are also a student, you will be able to work with your students through collaboration, and because of this, you may learn something from your tutees in return.

Ultracrepidarians? Don’t be One:

Ultracrepidarians are those who act or speak outside of their experience, knowledge or ability. Sometimes a student will ask a question that you do not know the answer to. In this case you have one of two options: 1) Admit that you do not know the answer and look it up or 2) admit that you do not know the answer and refer them to someone or something (like a website) that does. As tutors, we feel that we need to have all of the answers in order to be helpful, but in reality, we do not. Sometimes we just have to know where to look. For example, many students need help formatting their essays in APA, which I know little about, so I either grab a formatting
handbook or refer the students to Owl Purdue (/owl.english.purdue.edu/), which is an extremely helpful website for formatting questions.

**Trick Them into Being Confident:**

I know it sounds terrible, but sometimes you have to trick your students into having confidence. There were several instances where a student would state that they were horrible with grammar and needed someone to fix it for them. I would read their paper aloud, exactly as written, discuss mistakes when they came up, and from there I would become less and less vocal, so that eventually the student would be correcting most of the ‘mistakes’ without my help. The key to this approach is to know when to step in and help, and how to praise the progress they make. You want your tutee to know that they can fix their problem areas outside the Writing Center, as long as they review their papers by carefully reading them aloud.

**Order Your Priorities:**

One of my fellow tutors told me about a student who walked in, set down their essay and announced that they needed help with grammar. The tutor took one look at the paper and realized that grammar was the least of their worries. There did not seem to be any kind of structure to the paper, they had a paragraph that had nothing to do with their thesis and the paper was in the wrong format. Sometimes you will encounter a problem like this. When you do, you need to let the student know that you will discuss their particular issue if there is time, but first you need to focus on the structure of the paper. I am sure that you have read about Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) and Lower Order Concerns (LOCs) by now, so I will not give you another lesson. Instead, I want to warn you that sometimes you will have to put your tutee’s concerns on the backburner in order to help them with their paper, which means that you have to feel comfortable being somewhat authoritative. Additionally, you have to be able to articulate why some things are HOCs and why some are LOCs in a way that your student will understand. Lastly, try to fit in the initial concerns of the tutee if possible, but realize that sometimes, due to time constraints, all you can do is make another appointment for them.

**Reflection:**

Take a moment during your session to reflect. Are you listening more than you are talking? Are you being patient and friendly? Are you helping the student? If so, continue. If not, maybe it is time to try a new approach. It seems to me that the majority of the Writing Center theorists are trying to convey that each student is different from the last, so rarely will you have two very similar sessions. Sometimes a session will not be a successful one, and it is not because you are a bad tutor or the student does not care, but instead it could be that you have a different learning style than your writer. The key is to keep trying to communicate with your writer until you find a style that fits both of you and keep in mind that some sessions will be more fruitful than others will.

**Investigate the Three W’s (and one H):**
I typically use the three W’s (and one H) approach in my tutoring sessions. After I sit down with my student and engage in a little chitchat (to get to know them), I ask what brings them to the Writing Center. This question typically tells me what my student is working on and what they need help with. I then ask what the prompt is and if I can see a copy, because it is difficult to help a student without knowing the parameters of their assignment. After looking over the prompt with my student, I usually ask them when the assignment is due. Doing so allows me to know whether we can discuss their paper over multiple sessions or if everything has to be crammed into one 30-minute session. In addition, this will allow us to prioritize more effectively. Lastly, I always ask my student how they feel towards the end of the session. It may sound corny, but I want to know if my student feels confident with everything we have discussed, the changes that have been made, and whether they feel they will be able to implement the tools given to them when they are alone.

**Nonverbal Communication:**

Nonverbal communication is more important than you might think as your body language may be saying more than you mean to convey. For example, if you are a tutee and your tutor is slouching with their arms crossed while frowning and refusing to make eye contact with you, you may feel uncomfortable and even a little hostile. However, if your tutor is facing you, or better yet, sitting next to you with their body turned towards you while smiling and making eye contact, you will most likely feel more comfortable with them and more accepting of any suggestions that they make. Asking for help is difficult to do, especially when someone seems reluctant to offer it, so try to make your writer feel at ease by keeping your body language as friendly as possible.

**Get Help:**

You may have a student who is difficult, if not impossible to deal with. They may be stubborn, refuse to listen, have a learning style that you do not understand or are down right hostile. For example, I had a student who seemed impossible to work with. When he sat down, he would thrust his paper at me and tell me to fix it and no matter how much I tried to engage him, he would sit silently and stare at me. If I did manage to engage him, he would reject any advice I offered or reply simply with “I don’t know”. It was extremely frustrating, but luckily, I was not alone, and you won’t be either. I realized that I could talk to my fellow tutors, classmates and professor in order to get advice on the subject because many of them had experienced something similar. When you are frustrated or perplexed by a writer, turn to the GACs, your professor, your fellow tutors and your classmates because they are more than happy to help you. If you find that there is just no way that you can work with that writer, than talk to your professor or the GACs and they will reassign the student or speak with them for you. However, if you want to try to work it out with the student, but have no idea how, bring it up in class. Often your fellow classmates will have some insight that will make your difficult situation tolerable.

This is only a short list of things you need to know, but there are additional things that you should keep in mind. First, you can actually help the writers who come into the Writing Center, even if you do not believe that you have anything to offer them. Sometimes all someone needs is a little support and guidance and you will be surprised by how much you have to give. Second, you will learn how to work with students with disabilities, and those whose second
language is English, but it is important to remember that they are people, not categories. While an ESL student may require a different kind of tutoring that a student with a learning disability, they all require us to walk into a tutoring session completely unbiased and ready to help them. What do you need to know about tutoring someone who is not a native English speaker? Be patient, listen more than you talk, and be flexible because our tutoring styles should fit around our writer’s specific needs, not the other way around. Lastly, as I have stated previously, one set rule for tutoring will not work for all students, so you need to be flexible.

For many students, writing is like learning how to drive a car, as it can be frustrating, complicated and sometimes terrifying for them. As the tutor, we get to decide what kind of instructor we will be. We may choose to be a Minimalist Tutor, which can be like having your Driver’s Education teacher sitting in the backseat talking on the phone, or a Teacher-centered Tutor, which can be like having your mom drive you to school. While our mere presence may reassure some student drivers, thus making them more confident, it could leave others feeling like they are completely on their own when they are not getting the help that they feel they need. On the other hand, you cannot drive the student around and expect them to learn how to drive solely as your passenger, which can happen when we take a teacher-centered approach. Instead, we need to seat ourselves right beside them with our own brake and steering wheel, ready to support them in the directions they go, but at the same time be able to guide them if we need to. While we ultimately get to decide how to tutor, it is important that our tutoring strategies should change from person to person, with us leading those who are completely lost, and sitting back and relinquishing control when all our students need is a little support.
Edwin and Araceli, both intern tutors at the Writing Center, converse on a Monday afternoon in the backroom of the Writing Center while eating leftover pie and stale cookies.

Edwin: Hey Araceli! You done tutoring for the day?
Araceli: Yeah. Hey, have you submitted your tentative thesis assignment and essay outline for our Shakespeare class?
Edwin: Of course I have…..not. **Chuckles as he bites into a cookie** It’s all good though, I’ll finish it today. It’s not due till next Tuesday anyway. I already have my tentative thesis. Have you written yours?
Araceli: **Nodding her head as she rolls her eyes** Yeah I got it over with. You know what, we English majors are so used to incorporating a thesis into our assignments that we almost never think about the importance of it.
Edwin: I don’t know about you, but I do. **Laughs**
Araceli: **Sighs** Earlier today in one of my sessions I was working with a writer and the first thing he said was, “I need a good thesis statement for my essay.” He had not yet started writing the essay and he seemed very frustrated. I got the impression that he felt forced to compose a thesis and put it somewhere in his essay.
Edwin: I think many other writers that I have worked with feel the same way. They look at a thesis statement as some sort of obligation. So what did you do?
Araceli: I helped him develop a thesis but I also explained to him the importance of a thesis statement and why we use it. A thesis is meant to provide clarity and structure to an essay. It also serves as a guide to formulate your essay and to convey certain points.
Edwin: Wow Araceli! Nice speech, you’re right though. I’ve also encountered similar situations with some of my writers. I have also noticed--and this happens even to me at times--that writers sometimes have clear and specific ideas they want to write about, but trying initially to come up with a thesis hinders their writing. In a situation like this I sometimes suggest start writing the essay first, and then come up with a thesis later. Sometimes going back and rereading their essay and looking at important ideas they discuss helps them come up with a thesis. For some writers it’s just easier to approach a thesis this way.
Araceli: True. Apart from coming up with a thesis, deciding on what to write about or initiating an assignment could be confusing or frustrating for many writers.
Edwin: That’s very true Araceli. That’s why I’ve relied on dialogue so much.
Araceli: What do you mean?
Edwin: Through dialogue, I make sure that both the writer and I understand the assignment to the best of our knowledge. This is important because any misunderstanding could lead the writer off-track. Sometimes when it’s hard getting writers to talk, posing questions—or I should say, probing questions, like the theorists call them--about the assignment is a good way to get their thoughts going. You know, a question like: How does this assignment relate to previous or current class lectures or discussions?
Araceli: Yeah. It is also often the case though when we, tutors, don’t understand certain vocabulary or ideas presented in our writer’s assignment. This happened to me the other day when I was helping a student with a Civil Engineering assignment.

**Enters Sharon, also a tutor in the Writing Center, takes a seat, and interrupts the conversation**
Sharon: What?! Laughing What kind of a tutor are you Araceli? You can’t even help your tutees.
Edwin: You and your encouraging comments Sharon.
Araceli: I know! Anyways, as I was saying: I think at times we must rely on our writers to explain those ideas or vocabulary to us so we could better work together. If I see that they’re still indecisive about what to write, I suggest free writes, probably the method that I use the most because free writes-like McAndrew in *Tutoring Writing* says-liberate the writer from her internal critic and allows pure discovery of thought on paper. When done, my tutee and I look at the writing together and pick out intriguing ideas or attractive, surprising phrases that might form the basis of a thesis for a full paper, topic sentences, or any other important areas of focus.
Sharon: Did you memorize the entire book Araceli?
Araceli: Jajaja. No!
Edwin: Yeah, that’s why I like free writes. When writers are given various assignments to choose from, I usually suggest deciding to write about the one they know more information about or the one they feel is most interesting; then I suggest free writing. But one of my regular writers is not comfortable at all writing free writes. I’ve suggested drawing outlines, clusters and any form of brainstorming but really nothing worked. After a couple of sessions I noticed that extensive dialogues were our best strategy for coming up with ideas. Most of the times we meet, I ask very specific questions to which she has no problem responding. I even often take notes for her since I’ve noticed that she loses her train of thought when she tries to talk and jot down notes.
Araceli: Yeah, that seems like a good strategy. I guess.
Sharon: Yeah, the questions and comments the tutor makes are at the heart of the success of the tutoring session.
Araceli: To Edwin But what exactly happens with those notes you take? Does your tutee take them with her? I wonder how useful they are since your handwriting is horrible.
Sharon: Bursts of laughter OMG! I so agree with you on this one Araceli.
Edwin: Look haters, I not only write down her answers to my questions, but I also reiterate them to her so she could retain her ideas. I also strongly advise looking back at the notes I take for her if she later has trouble remembering her ideas.
Araceli: That seems like a useful strategy--assuming she could read your sloppy notes, that is. I do something similar when my tutee and I try to come up with topic sentences. I usually ask what this section or paragraph is about. Or I ask writers to write a one sentence summary of the paragraph. This allows writers to pick out main ideas from each paragraph and then form a topic sentence. After we come up with a few sentences, we read a few paragraphs aloud to see if the sentences provide a nice flow of ideas.
Sharon: My tutee with whom I met earlier today also wanted us to work on topic sentences. She was doing this paper on rhetorical devices. She read an article and she had to discuss in her essay what rhetorical devices the author used and how the author used them.
Araceli: Was that assignment from an English 1A class? I think I worked with a few tutees with the same assignment.
Sharon: Yeah it was. I don’t know. I felt like that session didn’t go so well. I know what rhetorical devices are and how and why they are used but I couldn’t seem to give her any examples. And it’s not like I could read the article she was analyzing because it was like twenty pages long.
Araceli: I really didn’t have to explain or give examples to my tutees that were writing the same paper. They already had a draft and knew exactly what rhetorical devices they were analyzing. Hmmmm. I don’t know what to say Sharon.

Edwin: Well, let’s look back to our composition classes and try to remember rhetorical devices we used and still use but we might not acknowledge.

Sharon: No thanks. Jk, jk. Please continue Dr. Edwin. Both Sharon and Araceli giggle

Edwin: Rhetorical devices could be any methods you use for persuasion or to communicate with your audience. Devices such as, short stories, personal experiences, analogies, voice, persona, laws, historical facts, etc… are all different rhetorical devices that writers use to communicate in academic discourse. And rhetorical devices are found not only in academic discourse but in other discourse communities as well.

Araceli: You’re such a nerd.

Edwin: All you got to do is put yourself in the writers’ situation and you could better understand assignments sometimes. You could also always refer to the CSUS Student Writing Handbook that Professor Melzer put together.

Sharon: You are a nerd Edwin, and one that makes a lot of sense—I must admit.

Edwin: Speaking of discourse communities, do you guys know who was voted number one rapper of the year?

Araceli: Lil Wayne?

Edwin: Nope.

Sharon: 50 Cent?

Edwin: You both are wrong. The best rapper for 2009 is D-Money!!!

Sharon: I didn’t know you were into rap music.

Edwin: Well, he does have great rhetoric. Laughs

Araceli: He’s sick! He’s a total sensation right now! In the latest edition of Time Magazine he was compared to hall of fame rappers like Snoop Dogg, Notorious B.I.G., Dr. Dre, and Tupac.

Sharon: I think he’ll become the best rapper to ever come out from the streets of L.A. He got this sick tattoo on his back that says, WC, for his new video. He’ll be totally repp’n the West Coast now.

Edwin: I saw it and I thought of getting one of those; but mine will serve a dual purpose. It will not only denote West Coast, but also, Writing Center.

Sharon: Laughing I would die to see that…..
“Another Tutoring Book Article”

With tutoring in the writing center, I didn’t know what to expect. I worried I would not be able to help anybody or I would hate it. My worries proved unfounded. I actually ended up helping some people, I think, and loving my experience. Early on, though, I was nervous and sometimes afraid that I made things more confusing for the tutee. But I eventually overcame my fears and became more comfortable, with one of my tutees even remarking about how much more at ease I seemed. I am sure every tutor’s experience will differ and be unique to them, but I am also sure others will start out and end up the way I did-- I started out feeling unprepared and scared, just hoping to get out alive, and ended up loving my internship in the writing center so much I really regret it had to end.

Basically, tutoring in the writing center turned out like every job I ever had-- the training is mostly on the job, the making of rookie mistakes is unavoidable, and the learning is more from trial and error than training. And that is all any one needs to know about working in the writing center, so you can stop reading this article. The rest is just my self absorbed rambling about other stuff that does not really matter to tutoring or to any thing real, really.

So while I enjoyed my time tutoring and even the slowly figuring out of what worked for me, I did not enjoy, so much at first, reading all the articles by theorists, who contradict each other about what a writing center should be or could do. I felt that many of the writers we read look at the writing center as the weak link from which they can breach the academy. They are like a pack of lions that see the writing center as the vulnerable young wildebeest on the periphery of the herd (the university). And the writers who do not view the writing center as the best place to initiate change are the ones who have already dragged off the carcass and are trying to protect their kill. As a new tutor just trying to figure out what I was doing, I felt like I was being pulled in different directions. I felt like I’d become the young wildebeest they were after.

My heresy

Primary among the group who has already heavily influenced writing center practices is Stephen M. North. His essay, “The Idea of a Writing Center,” which pushes a non-directive minimalist approach, seems to be the closest thing to a writing center bible. North’s main commandment is-- *thou shall help the writer not the paper*. But the commandment goes against the primary way I learned, and I felt like a heretic for questioning his gospel. I always learned by professors fixing my papers and, thus, modeling the “correct” way. Of course, my professors fixed my papers only after grading them. Still, I learned from the changes they made, and by fixing my paper, I feel they fixed me, which is why I questioned North’s commandment. I think the problem for the writing center is that the fixing happens before the reward/punishment incentive of grades has been given, thus, disrupting the system. The theorists silently walk around the problem by talking about things like *usurping ownership* while I figure students are
not interested in owning papers that suck (are total lemons or likely to receive a poor mark). Ultimately, no matter what is fixed in the writing center-- the writer or the writing-- the professors are responsible for showing students their errors, and I wonder how many students care about their papers after they have been graded? North’s idea of fixing the writer and not the writing leaves it to the professor to fix the student’s paper, and I wonder if that is too late for some students.

While at first I did not enjoy the articles by the theorists because they were a distraction to the practical business of tutoring, eventually, they became entertaining, like a bunch of circus clowns juggling ideas for my entertainment. But as amusing as they are, the theorists do bring some useful ideas to the table or highlight some issues worth thinking about. The problem for me is that too many theorists, by using thick ideological lenses, often obfuscate any useful insight, which makes it difficult keeping all their bull from burying the good ideas they do have, and sometimes it is difficult because their writings are nothing more than exercises in intellectual or theoretical masturbation, with the theorist seeing what they want to see or what they’re looking for-- the feminist sees the university as a patriarchal institution; the post colonialist sees a system that acculturates the other; the cultural studies proponent sees tutors as supporting a racist and classist agenda (04). And all the theorist see the writing center as the place to affect change to the system, while I thought the writing center was just a safe place for writers to seek help.

Using Theory without a license

Talking about theorists made want to theorize instead of proselytize. So I used some of their theoretical lenses to look at my parents, and I am shocked at what I found. I discovered that they acculturated me and usurped ownership of my voice, forcing me to use their discursive style, thus silencing my true voice and completely controlling my sense of myself. Because of these discoveries, I now propose that the pre-school and kindergarten classrooms are optimally placed to critique the institution of the family and to encourage students to recognize and challenge parental hegemony. Pre-school and kindergarten teachers can help kids escape the oppressive system and find their own voice. So when little Johnny calls Janey a f---ing poo poo eating cootie headed smurf, the teacher should not send him home to have his parents wash his mouth out with soap. The teacher should encourage Johnny’s voice and verbal creativity, and not oppress the child by forcing him to use the accepted discursive style privileged by the hegemonic parents and the oppressive school system. Just a thought.

Works Cited