The Tutoring Book

Fall 2012 Edition

By the CSUS University Reading and Writing Center Tutors

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Helpful Strategies

Tutoring is challenging and rewarding. Remember, before you actually tutor at the writing center, you will gain valuable information and advice that will help you by way of the weekly class meetings. You will learn techniques such as how to start a tutoring session and where to go from there. The articles that you will read and discuss in class are designed to help the tutor, so read them and try to integrate the ones that you feel fit your tutoring style. In this article I will be sharing some of those strategies I found helpful, such as how to start a tutoring session and other tips that worked for me and I hope they will be helpful for you.

Beginning the Session

When I first began to tutor at the writing center, I was nervous and unsure where to start in the tutoring process. I discovered, however, that students were just as nervous and uncomfortable about sharing their work with a stranger as I was about helping them with their paper. I found that introducing ourselves to each other was a good way to begin the session. Sounds easy enough but sometimes we become so focused on helping the student within the half-hour sessions that we forget to think about the person we are working with. Showing interest in the tutee helps to set the tone that you are interested in helping them and that this is going to require them to participate in the process. Asking questions, such as, what can I help you with today, what class is the paper for, have they chosen a topic, or how far along they are in the writing process for that particular paper? This not only helps the tutor to know what to focus on, but keeps the ownership of the paper with the student. This helps both the tutor and the tutee to know where to begin in the session and sets the expectations for the tutee to be an active participant. "I usually say, “Well let’s work together,” and put the paper between us and begin the next process, working with the tutee on their paper.

Guidelines for Student Assignments

Remind Students to keep those handouts that professors give them. Sometimes, writers don’t have a clue as what to write about when they come into the writing center. When that happens, we should start by asking them, what is the assignment? Can you show me the guidelines the professor gave you for your assignment? This is very important. I learned that from personal experience. The tutee was so sure she knew what the assignment was so we worked for a half hour on choosing a subject to write about, organizing how she could present the information and then the next week when she came back to the writing center, she showed me the handout with the guidelines on it. Unfortunately, the subject she chose didn’t fit the professor’s guidelines so we had to start all over again to find a topic that fit within those guidelines. I learned from that experience to encourage the tutee to keep the papers that discuss their assignment so we can refer to them before starting to write a paper.

Don’t Forget the Paper!

Sometimes students forget to bring in the paper they are working on or the assignment sheet with the guidelines. I worked out a method to help them remember. First, I would remind them to write it down in their notebook or write it on their calendar. Then I would say right before they left, “I’m looking forward to working on (whatever paper it was) next week with you.” I found that even with reminders some students forget to bring their papers in the next week. So I began to bring in my appointment calendar and tell them, “I’ll write it in my calendar too so we will be prepared to work on that paper together.” Not only does this reinforce the need to have the student bring in their paper for the next session but it lets them know that we are working together and it is team effort.

Finding Topics

When a writer is having a difficult time deciding on a topic to write about or doesn’t have a subject in mind, we need to help the writer. I tried different strategies listed in our tutoring book and found that
some worked well for me but others, even though they were great ideas, were too time consuming to use with the limited time we have. For instance, I tried a variation of the, “three-by-five card exercise” (Harris 35). What I like about this approach is that it helps the writer zero in on a topic and see the points he or she wants to use to support the main idea. It encourages the tutee to be an active participant in the tutoring session and to take control over their own paper. Unfortunately, I soon discovered that it was too time consuming to use at writing center. However, I still share that option once in awhile with the tutee to use at home when they have more time available. What seems to work the best for me is to just ask the tutee questions about their book or article they need to write about, talk about it and have them write down keywords that they think are important or relate to their writing prompt. Then discuss how they could be linked together and draw lines to the supporting ideas already written down. This approach is part of the mapping technique that you will learn about early on in the semester. One of my regular tutees tried mapping at the beginning of the semester and before long, she moved onto outlining her paper before she wrote it. This worked really well for the tutee and her writing improved dramatically. The bottom line, do whatever you find that works best for you and the tutee.

Focus on One or Two Things Only at Each Tutoring Session
Focus on one or two aspects of a paper to work on for each tutoring session. There are plenty of things to choose from, such as, clarity, focus, thesis, structure, organization, voice, sentence structure, grammar, word choice, spelling, and so forth. The list is long but shows that we must pick only one or more things to work on at a time. When I first began to tutor, I was overwhelmed and unsure about tutoring and thought to myself, where do I start. For me, the best way to start this process with the tutee is to remember to smile, be friendly, positive, and truly interested in helping them. Decide after talking with them what would be the best place to start and let them participate in that decision. So even if we may think to ourselves, “Help!” Just remind yourself that a paper can’t be made perfect in a half hour session.

Working Together to Find Solutions
Every person is unique in the way they learn so as tutors we need to find what works best for each individual tutee and to make sure the paper is written properly. That is when we need to converse with the writer, ask questions, and find out what is confusing them. Sometimes, a writer may be having a problem with the same thing every tutoring session. They become frustrated over making the same mistake over and over again and we as tutors may feel like we have failed them, so find out why a certain mistake keeps happening by listening to them. Let them talk and share what with you what confuses them.

When a student becomes frustrated over making the same mistake over and over again, I try to find out why that happens by asking them questions. An example of this is when a student was having trouble with the tenses, which can be difficult to keep straight for an ESL student; we worked out a way to help him remember. We need to remember that getting used to the English language takes time just like it takes time for any of us to learn another language. I discovered an interesting tidbit that I added to my list of “things to remember.” A student explained to me that in his country, the tenses were not addressed in each sentence. This tutee showed me the words or symbols that are written at the end of the initial sentence at the beginning of the paper. Those word symbols tell the reader whether the sentence is in the past, present, or future tense and until the tense changes again, there was no need to worry about changing the tense in their writing. He was so exasperated over the fact that he couldn’t remember to address the tenses in each sentence throughout the paper. So we worked together and made a list of words in the three tenses, past, present, and future and listed them under the symbols he used in his own language. When he became confused over what tense should he use, we would go back to his list of words and symbols. This helped the tutee to gain control over his paper and gave him confidence by having something to refer back to when needed to. Our team effort paid off and we were both very excited when we found something that worked for him. Remember, this was a very specific technique that was used to help this one individual. So keep the handy tips you learn from the tutoring class and the books you will read in a notebook and try them to see what works best for each person you tutor.
Draw Upon Other Tutors Experiences and Class Readings and Discussions

You will meet once a week as a class and discuss the assigned readings and techniques that have helped yourself or others and discuss any questions or problems you need help with. So prepare for each class and participate in the discussions. You will learn from those discussions and begin to develop a network of fellow tutors that you can ask for advice. It is helpful to know that you are a part of a team and not alone as a tutor. When you tutor at the writing center, you will be able to experience the excitement of a tutee understanding the writing process better after you’ve worked with them or their gratitude when they return the next tutoring session and they tell you that they were successful at applying what they had learned in the previous tutoring session. Once in a while, you will have the opportunity to hear the excitement in a tutee’s voice when they say, “My professor said I’ve improved!” Then you know your work as a tutor has paid off and realize that you have helped someone to become better writer. That will make your day. Now I am not saying everything goes rosy each tutoring session, but enjoy those moments when that happens and remind yourself to glean as much information out of your class readings and discussions. Learn from others what they have found helpful and what they are having problems with. I guarantee that if one person is having a problem with something there will be someone else in the class that is too. So don’t be shy about sharing your experiences and ideas with each other.

Relax and Enjoy Your Tutoring Experience

When you are sitting at the table in the writing center for the first time, don’t let it scare you when the tutees arrive for their appointment. Just remember, they are just as nervous about meeting a stranger who is going to be looking at their writing. As the semester goes by, you will get to know each of your tutees and develop a comradely relationship with them and will enjoy working together as a team.

These are just a few of the many things I found to be helpful. Most importantly, the best advice I can give is to just relax and realize, “Rome wasn’t built in a day,” so don’t expect to become an expert at the blink of an eye; instead, enjoy the experience of working with fellow students to improve their writing and have fun being a tutor in the writing center.
Collaboration at its Finest: A Survey of Your Peers

At the end of every semester we have all heard someone say, “I wish I’d known _____.” What was different about this semester, however, was that we were given the opportunity to turn that question into an article that will be included in the “Tutoring Handbook” for future students enrolled in 195A/410A. When given the task of coming up with an idea for the article, we asked ourselves a similar question to those that we later posed to our classmates: What do I wish this handbook had in it that it didn’t? The answer was almost too simple; an article based solely upon the advice of our peers and fellow tutors. We then posed the following questions to our classmates, asking that everyone answer at least one of the questions.

1. What is the one piece of advice you would like to pass on to a new tutor in next semester’s class?
2. What is one thing you wish you had been told when you started tutoring?

After analyzing our classmates’ responses, we separated them accordingly, into the following categories: Methods to Maintain Your Emotional Stability, Tutor Expectations, Tutoring Process, Collaboration, and General Advice Concerning Tutees.

**Methods to Maintain Your Emotional Stability**

*What is the one piece of advice you would like to pass on to a new tutor in next semester's class?*

- “I would say that one thing that is really important is to have fun! Have high spirits and wear a smile on your face. Smiling and trying to make the session fun in small ways actually makes the whole situation much better in the sense that your tutee seems more willing to come out of their shell and talk to you more than they would normally” (Bains).
- “I think any new tutor should remember to remain calm and open at all times. Tutoring can be a stressful business if one allows it to be. If you can be the calm eye of a tutee's educational storm, you will be better situated to give that tutee the help they seek. You will face different kinds of challenges with each session, and remaining open to the changing needs of tutees will enable you to adjust your tutoring approach accordingly. Being calm and open may not be the solution to every situation you encounter, but it is an excellent starting point” (Price).
- “RELAX! The students that come to the writing center are just thankful to have anyone at the table with them to help with their reading/writing, so relax. Students come in with an idea of what they need. You do not need to have all of the answers. Do not be ashamed to say you're not sure about something. Working in the writing center is a collaborative learning process. Everyone has something to learn” (Rivas).
- “The nervousness goes away after the first session, so don’t always worry about it being an issue” (Tabrizi).

*What is one thing you wish you had been told when you started tutoring?*

- “I was told the right thing – to relax – but I wish I had believed it right away! I spent the first few weeks at the Writing Center being completely stressed out over every detail, every session that did not happen exactly as I planned it, every moment where I felt I did not present myself as a competent tutor… After a while, I learned that the students were very appreciative of my help,
and that even the sessions that did not seem so stellar had taught some important things to the student and myself. When I realized all this, I was able to finally relax and actually enjoy tutoring! So, even though you will not believe this until you realize it for yourself, try to relax!” (Faye).

- “Don't take the sessions too personally. It's easy to take on responsibility for the student writer, but this often results in distracting the tutor and hinders the session overall. Tutors can't take blame for the student's effort, received grades, or overall quality of their writing” (Kronzer).

Tutor Expectations

What is the one piece of advice you would like to pass on to a new tutor in next semester's class?

- “The one piece of advice I would give a new tutor is to not set too high of expectations for themselves and/or the tutee when starting a new session. Tutoring is a process, both the tutor and tutee are learning through practice. And remember to make learning fun” (Colombo).
- “Flexibility. As tutors, we need to think on our feet because different students require so many different techniques. Even though we read the theory and think we know all there is to know about teaching ESL students, or being minimalist tutors, or how to get passive students to become more active, we constantly meet students who shatter our preparation and expectations. But that’s okay, since it means we do not become machines, and that tutoring will never become a boring auto-pilot activity! Being able to flex one’s techniques, comfort zone, and habits in different situations is the proof of an outstanding tutor” (Faye).

Resources/Materials

What is the one piece of advice you would like to pass on to a new tutor in next semester's class?

- “Read the book... it will help you in many ways” (Ross).
- “Sometimes the way you actually tutor may differ from the way our textbooks tell us to teach, (but) that doesn’t mean your way is wrong. It’s okay to alter the textbook’s technique if your session needs it” (Tabrizi).
- “Check out that little whirly-gig thing with the handouts in it! There might be something in one of those handouts that can really help your tutees! Also, there's a stack of binders in the lounge that have some great resources in there. But I like the handouts in the whirly-gig because the tutee can take them with him/her” (Uttinger).

What is one thing you wish you had been told when you started tutoring?

- “It would be incredibly useful if you had a folder with a handout for how to use MLA, APA, and other citation methods” (Bains).
- “I would have liked to have covered the ESL and students with learning disabilities sections (in our readings) at the beginning of the semester for the majority of the tutees I've been working with fall within those categories” (Colombo).
- “Well, I was told, I think. But I forgot--make use of the WC handouts in that little twirly-gig thing. I wish I would have checked some of these out before some of my tutoring sessions. They really are helpful!” (Uttinger).
Tutoring Process

What is the one piece of advice you would like to pass on to a new tutor in next semester's class?

- “I guess one thing I would tell an incoming tutor is: be creative. This may sound like a vague piece of advice but I think there's something to it. There have been times that, as I worked with a student writer I could tell that the point I was going for wasn't getting through. So, I would tell new tutors to (1) be willing to check-in with students for comprehension and whether they understand what you're saying, and (2) be willing to try different approaches to get through to a student” (Anglesey).

- “Be consistent with your long term students. Of course, every session will be different, and the paper's will all require a unique approach. However, by focusing in on one or two specific areas, e.g. structure, incorporating quotes, etc., you'll achieve a long-term impact on the student's writing capability” (Kronzer).

- “My advice, especially for someone who's never tutored before, is that you will get the hang of it. Applying the ideas you learn in class actually pays off and makes you a better tutor. You are learning just as much in any session as the person you're tutoring” (Parker).

Collaboration

What is the one piece of advice you would like to pass on to a new tutor in next semester's class?

- “Become a part of the Writing Center. Hang out in the lounge, get to know your peers, immerse yourself in the experience. Eat lunch in the break room and do your homework in the lounge... the more time you spend in and around the Writing Center, the more you will become a part of it. The more you become a part of this community, the more support you'll receive, the more you'll be able to share your experiences to help others, the more you will grow as a tutor” (Perkins).

- “I don't know. I've learned many ideas from fellow tutors that it's hard to decipher one idea from another with the advice given. So I guess the best advice would be to listen to fellow tutors, and always be willing to seek advice as much as you give it” (Ross).

General Advice Concerning Tutees

What is the one piece of advice you would like to pass on to a new tutor in next semester's class?

- “Don’t panic when you don’t understand what the tutee’s paper is about on the first read. Relax! It can be difficult to understand what a struggling writer is trying to say when there are so many grammar and punctuation errors in the way. This is when minimalist tutoring skills come in handy. Stop reading those convoluted sentences, and start asking questions. Encourage the writer to tell you what the paper is about. With patience, there will almost always be an “ah ha” moment when you and the writer connect” (Kincaid).

- “The one thing I would want to tell a tutee is that one helpful dictum for not being too directive is that it's ok to direct a tutee's attention, but it's not ok to direct their actions. By all means, tell them clearly and unequivocally that there's a serious problem (whatever it might be) if it's absolutely necessary, but DON'T give them the solution” (Louie).

- “Whether older, younger, different curriculum, or learning disability treat them like a peer you want to get to know. They will appreciate you for it and conversations will become a great student to student professional advice conversation during free time” (Nicolas).
What is one thing you wish you had been told when you started tutoring?

- “You may be asked to help a master’s student with their thesis. If so, try not to panic (I say that a lot, don’t I?) Sometimes the “dumb reader” stance is helpful in this situation. Master’s students are not necessarily great writers. You may not understand their points, not because you are “dumb,” but because their writing isn’t clear. They won’t all admit that, of course. . . And then there are those papers that only an expert in the field is qualified to review. Don’t feel bad if that is the case. They’re master’s students. They should know better than to expect a WRC tutor to provide scholarly, field-specific feedback!” (Kincaid).
- “I wish I had been better prepared for the responsibility of helping tutees with their Masters theses. Revising a five page essay is one thing, but a research project that's been semesters in the making? Well, it's hard to know where to begin!” (Louie).
- “No matter how much you want to help a tutee, mostly how much the tutee learns depends on how much they want to help themselves” (Perkins).

The best advice we can give you is to not be afraid to ask questions; of your classmates, your fellow tutors in the writing center, Professor Melzer, etc. We hope that this survey has helped to answer a few questions that you may not have asked, or may not have needed to ask at this point in the semester. We would like to thank our classmates for collaborating on this article; without their input, this would not have been possible.
Fearless Tutoring

When I was a young child, back in elementary school, I encountered a wonderful technique called tutoring. Because I was in accelerated classes, I was given the option to tutor other students who were in lower grades and had fallen behind. I didn’t think much of it at the time, but it seemed enjoyable and participated in the last summer after I had graduated. I started to tutor along the way in school, from middle school, to high school and in community college. Every new student was a new challenge. I didn’t know about the various theories that were involved with tutoring, or the strategies that came behind it, all I knew was that I had to tutor. Somebody came up with a different approach, or saw the material in a different way that made me rethink and consider a new strategy. It happened all the time. Older students, younger students, some that believed they knew more than you, while others that were completely lost. I didn’t have a set plan, other than to adapt to the situation. Every session was new, I didn’t know about specific theories; I went a long with what fit the situation best. Everybody needed to pass, and as a tutor, I took that as my job. From my experience, it worked well, and had many come back and thank me for the help; but sometimes they never came back and that was ok for me as well, because I knew that I had worked all the angles possible and could do nothing more. As I got older, I still tutored, when I had been dismissed from another university and had gotten laid off from my job, I offered my services as a tutor to make ends meet. From the experience that I had developed earlier, I knew that my student had to receive the best possible tutoring in order for them to continue coming back and gain a better understanding of the material and retain the knowledge. If I didn’t put forth my best skill, they wouldn’t come back, and that meant not receiving pay. In the end, it was not about the money; I learned that it was about using the skill set I had acquired to push forth the best session, in order for the tutor to gain the most out of it. This is the same mindset I apply at the University Writing Center and Sac State. I am not depending on tutoring to make ends meet, but I know I have to do everything that is allowed in order for the student to get the most out of the session.

When you come in, and it’s your first time tutoring, all the fears run through your head: what if the student doesn’t like you, you might not do a good job, and you run into a problem that you can’t overcome. My suggestion? Don’t worry about it. Tutoring is about helping the student to your best ability. If it’s your first time, you aren’t going to know everything about tutoring. It’s a skill that gets acquired through time. The best thing to do is to start with what you know and go from there. From forming a thesis in an essay, writing a clear statement in the form of a sentence, and have organization in the paper just to name a few. You have already made it this far in your academic career, so relax. As a tutor, you can’t possibly teach them everything in a half hour or hour session but address the issues that are the most important.

For the optimum results, the tutor must be able to adapt. Without this, the tutor is lost. It can feel like it’s frustrating, but if the tutor is able to adapt to the situation, then anything is possible. With adaptability, you don’t conform to one style, there are many open to you. But as a new tutor, you don’t know many options out there other than some of the theories from textbooks and online resources. Act natural in the setting, bring in the studying techniques you already know, but don’t just switch from one technique to another too quickly. Switch in a transition that is comfortable for you and your tutor. It’s not frowned upon if you tutor more casually with others, it depends on the student. It’s best to go into the session without knowing any of the theories. See how it works without them and just use personal experience to guide you through. But if you run into anything you can’t handle, go back to the books and reread the techniques that will help you out.

Everything that is worked on is for the benefit of the student. Without the student, there can be no tutor. It is a symbiotic bond that both parties need. We need to tutor, and they need help. Make it possible to get through. So how can you approach this situation? Don’t try to be somebody else, be yourself. The student is going to be just as nervous as you are, probably even more so because it may be their first time
receiving tutoring. But don’t let that bother you. You’re here to tutor, put everything aside for the moment and concentrate on the person first.

It’s not a bad idea to get to know the student first. Break the ice. It’s a casual formality that puts you, the tutor, in their place. There will be times that this isn’t possible. A good majority of the students you’re going to encounter say that their paper is due the next day or in a couple of hours. Don’t worry, turn it around. It’s going to sound cliché but make the negative into a positive. Make lemonade. Try to use the most time as possible to work on the techniques they do not understand. Thirty minutes isn’t a lot of time to get to know the student and look over the entire paper, but address the problems they don’t understand, go through a few examples, reiterate it to them, and move on the next obstacle. Again, it’s not going to work for every tutor, but start out with this, and if doesn’t work try another technique. Maybe it’s something that you picked up from another class. But the most important thing to remember other than adaptability is to learn who the student is.

Without knowing who the student is, there is no basis for an understanding or how to adapt to them. By knowing who they are and what they expect out of the session, the tutor will able to assess how to student writer learns and what they will expect. Don’t just base the learning style from the personality, talk to the student and see what they understand and don’t understand about the paper. Ask how they are able to see the information in a clearer way and go with that. If there is another way they are able to learn such as being visual or interactive, and try that option as well.

Most of the students want editing in the writing center. But we can’t edit a student’s paper right? If we would just do that, then the student writer wouldn’t have learned anything in the process. We would just be a crutch, while they continue to make the same mistakes in the future. Work around it. Make the student edit it themselves. I know this sounds easier said than done, but don’t worry. It takes time and practice. One thought to keep in mind is that there isn’t just one technique that is going to work. So once you have gotten to know who the student is, ask them different questions that lead into the work. Such as if the student writer’s biggest concern is organization, finding a thesis, or they might be struggling with grammatical errors in the essay. Write the sentence over, read it aloud to them, or find the errors in the paper by showing them examples and letting them tell you where they are. Every technique is different. It’s not solely dependent on just the tutor’s knowledge; it’s what the student can bring in as well.

Again, these are just a few options that could be used to tutor. But the driving point is to get to know the person and adapt to their learning style. Every situation is different. There isn’t going to be one method on how to attack a situation; just have an open mind and allow different methods to be developed and used as you tutor. There are hundreds of ways to tutor, but sticking to one method is going to be the same for every student, everybody learns at a different pace and in a different method. Finding it and knowing which to apply is the key to a successful session, and the sessions in the future.
Through the Looking Glass: the Tutoring Experience through the Tutee’s Eyes

On the first day of class, we were asked to share what we feared the most about tutoring writing. My greatest concern was knowledge. Did I have a solid knowledge foundation that would enable me to support my fellow students? This fear was allayed my first day of tutoring for it was clear I knew enough about writing and problem solving to assist my tutees. As I met with each student and I fought against my fear of ineptitude, it became clear they too were dealing with fear. In some cases, this fear was debilitating for students. It prevented many students from fully participating in reviewing their work. As I tuned in to the nervousness of the students, I felt I understood where it was coming from, but I wanted to experience what it felt like to sign up for a tutor and have your paper reviewed by a peer. What fears and prejudices did I bring to the writing table? What prevents a student from settling in and becoming comfortable with a tutor and what prevents them from coming back? The purpose of my experiment was threefold: 1) to locate ways in which the writing center tutors could gain improved retention of student writers, 2) to implement practices which would make my own writers feel more comfortable in the Writing Center, and 3) to become a better writer myself.

I walked nervously to the front desk. I felt silly for wanting to know what my writers were experiencing. I felt silly, like I was crossing an invisible line. I chose a tutor and time slot and hoped for the best. I imagined this experience was similar for students. As I waited for my appointment, I began to grow increasingly nervous. I looked at the papers I had to work on and mentally listed their weaknesses. Was I really going to let a stranger, in a close, intimate environment read my papers? What if he thought I was the worst writer on the planet? What if he thought I was an idiot in general? My insecurities gradually built until the time of my appointment. My tutor laughed when he saw me. As I explained what I was attempting to do, he smiled and agreed to be my tutor. I discovered from this first interaction how important a smile is in alleviating the nervousness of the student. However, as we began to work, I found that I was uncomfortable as he reviewed my work silently. I experienced difficulty expressing my thoughts when he questioned the goals of my essays. I felt flushed and embarrassed and absolutely wanted to turn all control over to him and defer to his judgment regarding my papers. From this initial meeting, I understood fully what my tutees were experiencing and why they had trouble explaining their goals and why they felt the need to push their papers towards me. It seemed like a natural thing to do in the setting. Already, we were arriving to the session with preconceived notions of hierarchy. I assumed he had knowledge I did not have.

The next session, I got over my stutter, but not the feeling of being a bad writer. It seems when I entered the writing center as a tutee, I feared the tutor would judge that I needed help because I was a terrible writer. Since writing is a creative endeavor, the student may feel personally threatened or over critical of their work. Consider a time when a tutee of yours said something deprecating about their work. It was not until my third session that I felt comfortable with my tutor. He exhibited no hint of admonition for poor writing. I began to trust his judgment and recognize that his suggestions were sound. I began to want to own my work and looked eagerly over it with him. From this experience, as it applies only to regularly scheduled students, I discovered that it takes time for the student to warm up to their tutor. As it applies to tutee retention, this experience shows that the discomfort surrounding the first and second meetings may negatively affect the student’s decision to return to the Writing Center.

What I enjoyed most about being a tutee was brainstorming ideas for papers. It is my favorite part of tutoring. The collaborative atmosphere allowed me to see my tutor as an equal. He made no attempt to hijack my ideas and force his own upon me. I realized, through collaboration, that I had been silly to be afraid in the first place. There was no harm here in the writing center. They were just students like me who wanted to become better writers. This was a place to practice writing not bash it. My tutor
helped me see that. As a result, experiencing the Writing Center from the tutee’s eyes made me a better tutor.

This experience taught me that rapport with students takes time, students hold preconceived notions regarding hierarchy in the Writing Center, and silence makes a nervous tutee more nervous. I used my experience as a tutee to help students feel more comfortable during our sessions. I adopted a confident, approachable, and friendly demeanor through tone and body language. In this way, I was able to win trust quickly and create a more enjoyable session. I addressed notions about WC hierarchy as soon as the tutee deferred control to me. I would use phrases like, “you are the boss,” “you are the one driving this train,” “how do you feel about changing this to incorporate a more academic tone,” “altering this would be a style choice, it is up to you.” I learned from my experience with my tutor that silently reading my essays only heightened my anxiety. My brain was unengaged and left to wonder wildly about the value of my work. For a student who is incredibly nervous, silence can be their worst enemy. It is important to remove their fears immediately and let them know that they have come to a safe place, where we value growth not criticism. A simple and sincere “getting to know you” conversation is extremely helpful in making the student feel comfortable. Also, to combat silence, I read their paper to them. The writer’s mind is fully engaged in what I am reading to her, because it belongs to her. Reading aloud also encourages her to actively participate with her own text as she hears its effect unfold.

What Tutees Like and Don’t Like

Throughout the semester in this class you will read numerous articles on how to tutor—what works, what doesn’t and all the different ways to handle a tutee when they come to the University Reading & Writing Center (URWC). However, you will not read anything about what the students who come to the URWC for help actually like and don’t like that the tutors do—until now.

For this article I created a survey and had it distributed during one full week of tutoring sessions in the URWC. The goal was to find out what our tutees like and don’t like from the sessions they have with us. Other articles you will read in this class deal with topics that of course will be useful to you like how to tutor different types of students (ESL vs. Native speakers) or how directive to be or not to be, and also how to help writers find their own voice while still adhering to the prompt of their Professor. Eventually you’ll learn that all tutors will have their own way of tutoring. It may or may not be exactly what the experts say, but I believe it will be to the benefit of future URWC tutors to know beforehand tools that they could use that will help and patterns to say away from during their sessions.

First off, the students who partook in this survey all said they liked how positive, encouraging, polite, respectful, understanding, friendly, kind, and helpful the tutors they had were. It may seem like a given to be all or some of these above characteristics but it’s nice to know that these qualities are in fact noticed and appreciated by tutees.

Tutees also enjoyed how their tutors were approachable to ask questions. Many tutees liked how their tutors were all well informed about writing but more so how they explained the organizational structure, quotations, citations, sentence structure, and brainstorming tasks to help generate ideas. One student wrote in their survey, “I like how my tutor doesn’t give me answers, but helps me find information” this is something we hope to achieve in the URWC—giving students the tools they need to identify issues regarding their papers instead of simply telling them what they need to fix.

Finally, you’ll learn in this class that every tutor is different and every tutee is different, not all methods of tutoring will work for every single tutee you have. Adapting your approach to suit the situation you are in is what makes someone an even better tutor. One tutee wrote, “I like how my tutor gives me and my paper personal attention, that there is no script to follow” it is important to realize that better tutoring sessions come from treating tutees individually rather than collectively.

Even though I feel like it is enough to share with you what tutees liked that our tutors did so that future tutors can incorporate some of these things that tutees like into their own tutoring sessions; I feel like it is a good idea to also mention several of the things that tutees felt were not helpful so that future tutors can steer clear of them.
Tutees do not like when their tutors go off on random tangents not related to the topic and waste time. They prefer if their tutees would say “I don’t know” about something they were unsure about rather than give them bad advice. You think it might may you look incompetent if you do not have an answer to all their questions but here’s the reality: you are not expected to have all the answers. Uncertainty is okay; if you feel like you can find the answer of course try but if by the end you don’t know let the tutee know. You’re only expected to try your best to help your tutees and there’s no shame in saying “I don’t know” and the results of this survey show that tutees prefer that response over one that you guessed at.

It’s one thing to read about all the different ways to tutor and what the experts say about what works for tutees but it’s another to actually hear from the tutees themselves about what works and what doesn’t. My hope for this article is for future tutors to get a glimpse of where their tutees heads are at in regards to their tutoring sessions—helping you to better help them.
One Time Wonders: 30 Minutes to an Hour

I am going to illustrate for you a common occurrence in the writing center. You are sitting in the writing center lounge waiting for your next writer to arrive. They are late. It is now five minutes passed the time your writer was scheduled to appear. Fortunately, there is a system in place that aids tutors in just your predicament. This system will often produce for you a student who has not made an appointment. A student who is often arriving at the writing center mere minutes before their assignment is due. A student who is depending on you to do your best to save them from their state of panic. It may seem like a lot of pressure at first. However there are strategies you can use to make these drop-in sessions, not just less frightening, but fun!

Although there is not much probability for you to meet an hour long drop in, there is a high possibility that you can have a one-time hour appointment. Despite the fact that you do have that extra 30 minutes, remember that he/she is not your regular and the goal is to either convince him/her to become a writing center regular or give them tips to improve their overall writing so they understand what to be aware of as he/she continues to write. Tutoring Writing discusses many ways to approach and tutor a tutee. Although there are many methods to tutor, finding your own niche is highly recommended.

The following list contains advice that can be applied to both 30 min drop in sessions and 60 min one-time appointment sessions. This article is now twice as useful!

Positive Attitude-
More often than not, drop in writers will come into the writing center nervous about their assignment and worried about what you will tell them about it. In fact, most of the time, they will be far more nervous than you are. So try to relax! If you can maintain a friendly and positive demeanor as you approach the session, you will have better luck putting the student at ease. This will result in a more productive session. This will become easier over time as you become a more comfortable and experienced tutor. You must remember that drop in sessions are gifts to you from the writing center. Every drop-in session is a learning experience that will help you become a better tutor.

Personal Introductions-
Thankfully, Sacramento State is a diverse community, so each individual you will come across will be different; just start out by introducing yourself. Many may be nervous and/or embarrassed for even signing up for help. Approaching them with ease, as you would your own friends, can help create a comfortable environment for them to openly talk about their paper.

Prompt-
One of the biggest things you can do for a drop-in writer is to make sure that they understand and have followed the prompt for their assignment. If they have the prompt, read it over and do a quick check list of where they think they addressed it in the paper. Whether the writer has a prompt to show you or not, you should ask them questions about their assignment. What is the main focus of your paper? What goal do you think the professor is trying to accomplish by assigning this paper? The more they can explain to you about what they are supposed to be doing, the better chance you have of guiding them in the right direction.
Choose What to Focus on-

Before you start on the paper, always ask what they are looking to achieve today, it just may range from ideas, grammar, structure, examples. The Tutoring Book suggests that you address High Order Concentrations (HOCs) before Low Order Concentrations (LOCs), but I suggest that you should be aware of HOCs while keeping in mind what your tutee wants. If your tutee wants to focus on grammar, and the overall problem is the grammar, well, I’ll leave you to ponder on the answer. It may be a good idea to divide the session and focus on a couple different areas. The goal here is to spend some time dealing with the concerns of the writer so that they feel good about their major concerns, and also to cover areas that the writer might not have thought about.

Addressing Sentence Structure-

A good handful of students (if not all) will ask about sentence structure and grammar. Read the paper aloud for them. It helps to hear what your paper sounds like if someone else reads it as opposed to their brain accepting the paper the way that it is. During these times you can give a little grammar and syntax lesson to be aware of as you read throughout the rest of the paper.

Addressing a Concern-

Address any problems right after you finish a paragraph. This is your chance to address any concern about organization flow, supporting evidence, or even how the paragraph relates to the writing prompt. If you have a question about a body paragraph then ask questions. Stick with questions like “why did you say this?”, “how does that relate to this?” That way the tutee can explain and understand what he/she is trying to achieve and if it is really working. Also, don’t be afraid to offer a few revising suggestions; you might have ideas they would have not thought about.
**No Draft? No Problem!**

Writing doesn’t just magically happen. You can’t pop open your laptop or your notebook, think a happy thought, and have an A+ paper appear. Writing a successful essay takes careful planning. All sorts of different writers come into the Writing Center, each with an assignment that is in a different place. Some writers show up with a pretty polished third or fourth draft. Some come with what they think might be their final draft. And some come empty handed, with nothing but a flurry (or not!) of those happy thoughts in their heads. It is these writers who need to get those thoughts down on a manageable piece of paper—and you can help!

Early in the semester, I found that a few of my tutees knew exactly what they wanted to write about. They came with outlines, notes, and even the beginnings of a first draft. These writers had a clear idea of how to execute their professors’ prompt—sometimes because the prompt was pretty limiting, and other times because they had that “perfect” idea they just had to get down onto paper. But other writers…not so much. They, too, had prompts, but sometimes their prompts were of the open-ended variety, allowing the student a lot of latitude for choosing the direction of their paper. So it becomes the task of the tutor and tutee to help get some ideas down on paper for these kinds of assignments. This initial “getting it down on paper” can often become the foundation of a strong outline, a sturdy thesis, and eventually, that successful paper. With that in mind, you and the tutee have a few brainstorming tactics at your disposal.

**Respect the Prompt**

Probably the single most important thing to keep in mind when your tutee comes in without a draft (or even with a draft) is the professor’s writing prompt. Oftentimes, the prompt sets up specific instructions that the professor expects the paper to follow. The prompt might say something like, “compare and contrast such and such.” Or, “discuss and analyze this and that.” And maybe, “define,” “argue,” or “give examples.” Determining what the paper requires might help you and your tutee decide on a brainstorming strategy to use when coming up with ideas. If the paper is a compare/contrast essay, for example, then that might determine what sorts of things you and your tutee might find pertinent to the brainstorming session. Sometimes, however, the prompt is just not that easy to work with, so below are just a few brainstorming ideas you might use with your tutees when they have no idea where to begin.

**I’m Free, Free Writin’**

Free writing is a simple, yet effective tool for brainstorming. Free writing allows your tutee to just slap down on paper whatever comes into her head. Just have your tutee spend about five or ten minutes quietly writing down the words or ideas that relate to the paper topic. For the first few awkward minutes your tutee might just sit there and stall over what to write. Just remind your tutee that there’s no right or wrong when it comes to free writing. It might be helpful here to be quiet and give her some space to let her thoughts roam. There’s no judging or weighing over the “good” and “bad” at this point; it’s all about the words, associations, and maybe images that come to the tutee’s mind when she considers the topic. Before your tutee begins, you might look over any notes the tutee has taken in class on the subject in order to jumpstart the process. It may be that your tutor will be surprised by how much she really knows about the paper topic. After the five or ten minutes is up, look at what your tutee has come up with. Together you might find repeating themes or ideas, or a cluster of related ideas that your tutee keeps coming back to. Circle or highlight those—they could be the beginning of the paper’s outline.
Rubric’s Cube

Cubing is another brainstorming strategy that might appeal to you and your tutee. Cubing is when you look at the same topic from six different angles—like the six sides of a cube. Like free writing, cubing is a timed exercise. Have your tutee spend three to five minutes responding to each of these six prompts about the same topic:

1. Describe it.
2. Compare it.
3. Associate it.
4. Analyze it.
5. Apply it.
6. Argue for or against it.

Keeping the prompt in mind is important when using the cubing exercise. For instance, if the prompt asks the paper to compare and contrast some idea or theme, use what you’ve found in the “the cube” to isolate the ideas that are the most relevant to the assignment. Or, if the paper is pretty open-ended, you and the tutee might choose the “side” of the cube that interests the tutee the most, or on which the tutee has the most written and begin crafting an outline that reflects that “side.” Cubing works well when the tutee has to grapple with an abstract concept or when the tutee knows what topic she wants to address, but doesn’t know which “angle” of the topic would most suit her needs.

Hip to be Square

Many papers in lower division writing classes ask the students to reflect on some aspect—or all aspects—of the rhetorical square. The rhetorical square looks a little like this, only more “square”:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Message</td>
<td>Persona</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

You and the student might begin looking at the paper’s topic with these ideas in mind. You might ask your tutee to consider what is the purpose—or goal—of the assignment or the chosen topic. Maybe look again at those specific “instructional” words in the prompt. Look also at the paper’s audience. Obviously, the first audience is usually the professor. Now might be a good time for you and your tutee to consider how the professor views his or her role. Is the professor asking the student to treat him/her as the paper’s sole audience? Does the professor expect the tutee to write as a member of a certain discourse community? Or does the professor want the tutee to write a more personal, reflective essay? Perhaps the professor has intimated that he or she would like to see certain things in the paper (such as no first-person pronouns). But depending on the assignment, the paper might be designed for other students (much like this paper) or for a specified group of people in a certain discipline. Many papers in 109 classes ask students to focus on the concept of the rhetorical square; this exercise might be perfectly suited to a student who is writing in such a context. Persona is also a good thing to review with your tutee.Persona is, in simplest terms, your tutee’s voice. Some papers lend themselves to a less formal sort of writing style; other papers require a more sophisticated vocabulary. But in all writing, your tutee will project a persona or voice. With your tutee, examine whether or not it is an appropriate voice given the context of the assignment.
Casual conversation is probably the easiest—and one of the most effective—tools you have for helping your tutee brainstorm. Like with the other exercises, start with the prompt. Read it and make sure all of the words and concepts make sense to your tutee. Then start asking questions. Ask your tutee what she thinks about the prompt, the topic, or the idea she’s supposed to be writing on. Ask what sort of ideas she’s already got kicking around in her head about the topic. Ask “why?,” “how?,” and “so what?” questions. The goal is to get your tutee talking and thinking out loud. Your job is mostly, as with the other techniques, as a facilitator. You’re keeping the conversation focused and moving. Since talking usually comes naturally for most of us (at least more naturally than writing), you might find this the best way to work with a tutor who is unsure of her blossoming skills as a writer. And because of time constraints, since most tutees only have about 30-60 minutes, conversation is a great way to generate some relatively quick results. Have a piece of paper and a pen handy so that you can take notes of what you and your tutee discuss (or have your tutee jot down ideas as you talk about them). When you and your tutee feel that you’ve exhausted the conversation, take a look at your notes. Can you and your tutee see a natural outline or thesis emerging from your conversation? Oftentimes, it’s there: related ideas, repeated phrases, and natural progressions of thought can easily wind up being a helpful working thesis for your tutee.

Prewriting is a critical stage in the writing process. And unfortunately, many uncertain and unpracticed writers skip it. Sometimes, you might hear a tutee say she just sits down and starts typing. Generally (though not always), that’s a recipe for disaster. A paper crafted in such a way can lose focus, wander away from the prompt, and create logistical nightmares as the student later tries to revise. Though brainstorming takes time up front in the writing process, it’s an investment that usually pays off later. Brainstorming allows your tutee to take a step back and grapple with the assignment in a productive, but non-threatening manner. She can break down difficult, esoteric concepts into manageable pieces that lead naturally into other strong organizing and content-controlling tools: outlines and theses. As you can see from the examples above, there are many ways to approach a brainstorming session. Some of these techniques are more helpful than others, depending on the tutee and the situation. It might take a little trial-and-error to find the best brainstorming exercise for you and your tutee. If you have a shy, retiring sort of tutee, maybe the quiet free-writing exercise would suit her best. Conversely, if you have a tutee who is extroverted and excited about her topic, the conversation route might be your best bet. And sometimes, you just won’t have time to try one of the more time-consuming exercises, like cubing, with your tutee. That strategy might work best if you see that tutee on a regularly scheduled basis. Some techniques might work great one time and not so great another—but don’t give up! Remember, brainstorming pays off! So try one or more of these strategies when your tutee comes in scratching her head over her latest essay; you both just might surprise yourselves with the bones of a really great paper.
The Grammar Conundrum: Effective Ways to Incorporate Grammar Into Tutoring Sessions by Building Connections Between LOCs & HOCs

As new tutors, we are introduced to a variety of theories, strategies and techniques for effective tutoring. Beginning my first semester as a tutor, I strove to understand and incorporate much of what I was learning in the internship course into my tutoring sessions, desiring to provide the best possible tutoring to students coming into the CSUS Reading & Writing Center. Yet, when I attempted to apply specific strategies relating to grammar to my tutoring sessions, I noticed a gap between the theories and techniques presented and the difficulties faced by a number of students in their writing. In the St. Martin’s Sourcebook for Writing Tutors, authors Christina Murphy and Steve Sherwood introduce several theorists and their views on the ‘grammar’ conundrum in writing centers. In Stephen M. North’s essay titled “The Idea of a Writing Center,” he voices his frustration over the beliefs expressed by other academic professors and theorists who view writing centers as nothing more than “some sort of skills center, a fix-it shop” for remedial writers with “special problems in composition” (33-34). To dispel these misconceptions, North is a strong proponent of a “student-centered” approach to tutoring that takes the emphasis off lower order concerns (LOCs) or ‘local’ writing issues and puts the primary focus on higher order concerns (HOCs) or ‘global’ issues in students’ writing. In the text Tutoring Writing by Donald A. McAndrew & Thomas J. Reigstad, HOCs are described as “features of a piece of writing that exist beyond the sentence level” including: clarity, development, structure, organization, voice and tone. In contrast, LOCs are described as “features within a sentence, at the level of individual words and punctuation” that include: sentence structure, punctuation, grammar, spelling, syntax, etc. (25). Placing the emphasis on HOCs rather than LOCs, students coming into the university writing center are informed that it is not the tutor’s responsibility to focus only on grammar concerns or to edit student papers.

With all of the above in mind, I made a concerted effort when I first started tutoring to focus on HOCs. But what I soon realized was that some of my tutees, whether or not their primary language was English, were struggling at the LOC level in their writing. These students had issues with ‘grammar.’ So much so, that the grammar issues were affecting HOC concerns, inhibiting their ability to achieve clarity and focus in their writing, to cohesively organize their ideas and supportive evidence, and to present persuasive arguments. The grammar issues also affected other LOCs as with the structure of sentences, often resulting in convoluted, fragmented and/or run-on sentences. I quickly surmised that neither HOCs nor LOCs could be addressed to the exclusion of the other. I’m sure some of you may have already or will soon run into similar disparities between HOC and LOC priorities in your tutoring sessions. Determined to bridge the gap between HOC and LOC priorities as they relate to grammar, I decided to address the needs of each individual tutee, focusing in on their specific writing issues. The following two examples are taken from my own tutoring experiences with the hope that, in sharing these experiences with you, you might find some idea or bit of information helpful and apply the idea(s) to your own tutoring sessions.

One of my first tutees was an ESL student majoring in Biochemistry. She came in for her first session requesting assistance on a research paper. I began the session with an open-ended question, “What would you like to focus on today in your paper?” She responded emphatically, “Grammar. I have many problems with grammar. My professor not understand my paper.” I continued on with the session, attempting to focus in on HOCs. She continued on with the session, only interested in her primary goal, the correction of her grammar. I had her make notes throughout the session on her paper so she could refer to my wonderful insights into improving clarity, structure, paragraph cohesion, etc. later during her revision process. The tutee was enthusiastic and determined, just like I was. Our next session began the same way, the tutee even more anxious about her grammar. When I reviewed
her paper, I noticed she hadn’t applied any of my HOC suggestions in her writing. It dawned on me that my original approach wasn’t working. So I commented,

“I realize that grammar is an important issue for you. I do want to point out that even though you have some grammar that can be improved, your ideas are sound. I don’t consider your grammar issues ‘errors.’ Your paper reflects the fact that you just lack some grammar knowledge. Once your grammar improves, your paper will be clearer to readers.”

“Yes, but my professor grades me down for grammar.” She handed me a paper she’d received back from her professor; and sure enough, comments made on the paper reflected the professor’s focus on grammar. The grade the student received reduced by half due to grammar issues. Yet, she was also graded down for content, clarity and cohesion. It was clear to me then that the student’s grammar issues were creating a rippling effect that negatively impaired other factors within her writing. I went home and researched further. In the text *ESL Writers, A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, in an essay written by ESL professor and author Ilona Leki, titled “Before the Conversation,” she describes the perspectives of ESL students’ struggling with grammar issues,

If students realize that their professors are relaxed about grammatical perfection and do not penalize L2 students for errors, the students respond by focusing less on those features of their writing. If they experience the opposite, they ratchet up their own fretting over accuracy, often to the detriment of the substance of their writing. (9)

Wow! This was exactly what my tutee was dealing with. Because her professor was so focused in on grammar issues, she felt grammar was the most important part of her paper needing to be addressed. I went to the next tutoring session with new insight regarding the tutee’s situation. I began the session with,

“How about we try something new today. I would like you to read each paragraph aloud. I will listen and provide feedback on the ideas I think you are covering within that paragraph. Then we can go back over each sentence, one by one, to see where you might be able to make some changes that will help present your ideas in a more clear and concise way. Ok?” The tutee was excited. She began to read. As she read, I noticed that she often verbalized the words, phrases and/or sentences correctly. After she read a sentence, I pointed out where her verbalization differed from what she had written. In this way, she was able to begin connecting her reading to her writing. I suggested to her that, as she revises her papers, she take this same approach. She was encouraged by the session, feeling that she now had a tangible technique she could use on her own when making revisions. This is not to say that I didn’t direct her attention, occasionally, to particular grammar concerns that were repeated throughout her papers relating to the use of noun/verb construction, articles, conjunctions, etc. Yet, the collaboration within our sessions improved considerably by just applying this simple oral reading technique and some positive reinforcement. By the next session, the student was more relaxed and more receptive to focusing in on the HOCs within her paper.

Though the tutee made progress in her writing over the semester, the progress wasn’t strictly linear. As she focused first on grammar and then on specific HOCs in her writing within each session, she neglected other writing issues. The development of her writing can be compared to learning a new tennis stroke. When tennis players are developing their forehand stroke, they tend to concentrate on only one or two aspects of the stroke in the beginning. They may focus in on just the grip, or the grip and their foot stance, doing so to the detriment of the overall stroke. They may get frustrated, because they aren’t hitting the ball each time, over the net, or in the direction they intend. Yet with continued practice, they incorporate more and more parts of the whole. Eventually, the separate parts become a cohesive whole, and the stroke becomes more natural. They begin to hit an effective forehand stroke with consistency. As tutors, we need to give our tutees and ourselves the latitude to make adjustments, when and wherever needed, to be patient with the process, and willing to accept that practice will eventually produce a natural consistency in the tutees’ writing.

On another occasion, a student came in for a drop-in session. He walked up to the table, sat down, and handed me his paper, saying,
“I want my paper to be right. I don’t want to sound stupid; I want to sound intelligent.” His sense of urgency and overall demeanor told me that he most likely was feeling frustrated and discouraged about his writing. I began the conversation with,

“Can you tell me what you think the most important issues are that we need to work on today in your paper?” He focused right in on grammar,

“I need help with my grammar. People can’t understand what I’m trying to say a lot of the time. My sentences don’t always make sense.” I felt focusing immediately in on the specifics of his paper would not necessarily encourage him, so I said,

“Well, before we start in on your paper, why don’t you tell me about the paper prompt. Then you can share with me briefly what the primary topic and ideas are in your paper.” He agreed and proceeded to give me a clear description of the paper prompt and his ideas. He talked and I listened. When he was done, I shared,

“Your ideas are interesting. You definitely come across as intelligent when you speak. How about we work to more closely align your verbal communication with your writing. We’ll look at your paper, make a few changes here and there.” He smiled for the first time in our session. I knew we were on the right track. Upon review of his paper, I noticed many of his sentences were run-ons. He appeared to be trying to include too many ideas or repeating the same ideas within many of his sentences. His paragraphs lacked clarity and needed to be organized more effectively. He was determined to focus on grammar. I realized that until he could see the HOC issues in his paper for himself, he wouldn’t be receptive to my suggestions. I asked him to begin with the first paragraph and read each sentence aloud. I then followed with directive questions,

What do you think the primary subject is in this sentence?  
What is the idea or ideas being expressed?  
How does this idea(s) help to support the main idea(s) in your paper?  
Does it seem like any words or phrases are being repeated?  
How do you think this sentence connects to the sentences that came before this one in the same paragraph?  
Does this paragraph seem to follow a logical progression when you look at the paragraph that came just before it?

He soon began to see repeated issues within the structure of his sentences, often correcting each sentence as he read. He started to make bigger connections between ideas within sentences, how those sentences were organized within paragraphs, and how each paragraph was organized within his paper. Theorist, Patrick Hartwell, in his essay “Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar,” describes this tutee’s experience, “Most students, reading their writing aloud, will correct in essence all errors of spelling, grammar, and, by intonation, punctuation, but usually without noticing that what they read departs from what they wrote” (366). This tutee did just as Hartwell described. In addition, once he felt his initial concerns over grammar were addressed, he was able to focus on HOCs. Though we were only able to cover a portion of his paper, he left that first session encouraged.

The above situations are examples of tutoring sessions in which I encountered students who expressed that grammar issues were their biggest concern in their papers. By focusing in on tutees’ LOCs (when necessary), instead of ignoring those concerns and attempting to steer them directly to HOCs, we, as tutors, give tutees agency over their own writing. By viewing each tutoring session on an individual basis, letting students voice their concerns and applying techniques such as oral reading and reader-response methods, open-ended and directive questions, constructive feedback and positive reinforcement, tutees can overcome their grammar fears and expand their perceptions. They begin to view their papers, not as separate disconnected parts, but as parts of a cohesive whole. Blending theoretical approaches and techniques, we can develop specific strategies to meet the individual needs of our tutees. And by remembering that within the writing center, we are on an equal footing with our tutees, we can act as
mentors and sounding boards for them, giving them the opportunity to share and develop their ideas within a collaborative learning environment.

WORKS CITED


A Guide to the Many Web Resources for Tutors and Tutees

Your first couple of weeks as a tutor may be a little disorienting and, if you are like most of us, you will have the fear of not knowing enough to be a successful tutor. But chances are you are a competent writer and student, and when you do not know how to do something, you know where to go for resources. When you get a question from a tutee that you cannot answer, it is beneficial to share your resource finding strategies with them in order to make them independent writers.

Of course, you may not always know where to find resources for your tutee’s specific problems, especially if it is an issue you have never encountered (for example, formatting guidelines outside of your own major’s discourse). There are many resources a tutor or tutee can access for help with writing and this article is intended to be a guide to those resources. So, whenever you find yourself stuck, with no time to flip through each book on the Writing Center shelf or no time to read through multiple Web pages to find what you need, it may help to take a quick look at this list.

The following Web resources are provided in the Web Links section of SacCT. I will briefly describe what each page contains and how they might be used in the Writing Center.

CSUS University Reading and Writing Center (http://www.csus.edu/writingcenter)

This site provides concise and important information for both CSUS students and faculty.
On this page, the top link leads to a PDF of the Sacramento State Student Writing Handbook. This is an invaluable resource for CSUS students, but for use in the Writing Center, this document is best used in print, which can be found on the Writing Center reference shelf.

Also on this web page is a list of links for specific help with:

- The Writing Process
- Grammar and Editing
- Research Processes and Citing Sources
- Reading Processes
- Writing For Specific Disciplines (English, Philosophy, Natural Sciences, Social Work, Sociology, and Theatre)
- Writing a Thesis or Project
- Writing Resumes and Cover Letters
- Writing Beyond Sac State

These resources have been created by Writing Center tutors and CSUS faculty, so the advice, tips, and guidelines found here represent the established CSUS writing program and should be a helpful site for tutees.

In the links that run across the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Web page, there is a link to the GWAR webpage. You will probably have tutees that need information on the GWAR and this is a great link to share with them.
It includes a detailed explanation of the process, FAQs, and something my own tutees have appreciated receiving, the GWAR Workshop Packet. Of course this packet is disseminated at the GWAR workshops, but for tutees unable to attend those workshops, this packet provides very helpful information including a sample WPJ, a grading rubric, and test dates.

Other Useful Sac State Web Links:

- List of Writing Intensive Courses ([http://catalog.csus.edu/current/first%20100%20pages/ge.html](http://catalog.csus.edu/current/first%20100%20pages/ge.html) [Click on “Writing Intensive”])
- Writing Center Online Tutoring information ([http://www.csus.edu/writingcenter/writingcenter/online_tutoring.html](http://www.csus.edu/writingcenter/writingcenter/online_tutoring.html))
- Tutoring Book Archive ([http://www.csus.edu/writingcenter/writingcenter/tutoringbook.html](http://www.csus.edu/writingcenter/writingcenter/tutoringbook.html))
Every college student should be familiar with the Purdue Online Writing Lab. This Web site is abundant with topics relating to all things college writing:

- General Writing
- Research and Citation
- Teacher and Tutor Resources
- Subject Specific Writing
- Job Search Writing
- ESL (English as a Second Language)
- OWL Exercises

Links to some of the more popular resources that will no doubt be of use to tutees, can be found at [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/).

Here is a list of the most popular resources:

- OWL Exercises
- APA Formatting and Style Guide
- MLA 2009 Formatting and Style Guide
- Avoiding Plagiarism
- Writing the Basic Business Letter
- Developing a Resume
WAC Resources from Colorado State OWL (http://writing.colostate.edu/guides)

The Writing@CSU Writing Guides Web page is very well built in that it includes descriptions for each subtopic allowing for quick navigation of the pages. The usual topics of academic writing are addressed in this site, but it additionally includes less touched on elements such as “Working Together” and “Designing Documents.” This site also includes in-depth guidelines for a variety of disciplines including business, science, and engineering. Altogether this is a helpful resource for students looking for specific instruction.

Here are some of the areas in this site you or your tutee may want to explore:

**Writing Processes**
- Preparing to Write
- Starting to Write
- Conducting Research
- Reading & Responding
- Working with Sources
- Planning, Drafting, & Organizing
- Designing Documents
- Working Together
- Revising & Editing
- Publishing

**Writing Documents**
- Composition & Academic Writing
- Argument
- Writing about Literature
- Scholarly Writing & Research
- Business Writing
- Science Writing
- Writing in Engineering
- Writing for the Web
- Speeches & Presentations
WAC Resources from UNC Chapel Hill OWL (http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/index.html)

This site provides an index to the many helpful handouts and links the UNC Chapel Hill OWL has to offer. The assistance offered in these pages is in great depth, which may be a little overwhelming, but each resource on this page has a quick introductory paragraph allowing the user to quickly assess the usefulness of the resource. Also, this web site has done well by including resources to recurring issues brought up in the writing center.
I have included a few of the resources you may want to refer to in your sessions:

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This site includes the archived issues of *The Writing Lab Newsletter* (the current issue is only available through subscription). This newsletter focuses on the practices of writing centers with essays on tutoring theory and methodology, handling ESL issues, and using tutorial theory and pedagogy. Whether you are looking for quick tips, in-depth analysis, or more examples of actual writing center experiences, you will want to check out this site. The search box on this page makes finding specific information very easy, and chances are you will have large returns on your searches. You can search newsletters going all the back to 1976!

International Writing Centers Association ([http://writingcenters.org/](http://writingcenters.org/))

Being a part of a writing center, you may be interested in looking around this site sometime, but in the interest of giving you practical resources, I want to introduce you to two very helpful pages within this site.

Resources for Writers ([http://writingcenters.org/resources/resources-for-writers/](http://writingcenters.org/resources/resources-for-writers/))

The International Writing Centers Association has put together a list of excellent writing resources from various universities and education professionals from all around the country. At this site you will find resources related to:

- Starting Out
- Organization
- English as a Second Language
- Language
- Writing Style
- Citation
- Grammar and Usage
- Reading

Peer Tutoring ([http://writingcenters.org/resources/peer-tutoring/](http://writingcenters.org/resources/peer-tutoring/))

Because there are as many unique situations in tutoring sessions as there are unique students, exploring a page that keeps this in mind is comforting. In this site you will find peer tutoring blogs, manuals, videos, and a bibliography.
The WAC Clearinghouse ([http://wac.colostate.edu](http://wac.colostate.edu))

This site is meant to be a resource for teachers who have some element of writing in their courses and since this is a very wide focus, the resources found here can also be useful to tutors and tutees. This site is home to a variety of open source, professional publications. Graduate tutors or teacher candidates may be interested in the WAC Clearinghouse Journals, which include, naming a few:

- *Across the Disciplines*: exploring the intellectual, political, social, and technological complexity of language, learning, and academic writing.
- *The WAC Journal*: Writing across the curriculum (WAC) educators exchanging WAC practices and theory.
- *The Journal of Basic Writing*: articles on theory, research, and teaching practices related to basic writing.

The Open-Access Books on the WAC Clearinghouse Web page might surprise you as well. Here you can find 38 books free to download or view, all devoted to academic writing. As a tutor, and really as a student as well, you will find that ‘open-access’ here does not mean these books are of lesser value. Here is a list of some of the series available now:

- *Perspectives on Writing*: series editor, Susan H. McLeod, University of California Santa Barbara.
- *Reference Guides to Rhetoric and Composition*: series editors, Charles Bazerman, University of California Santa Barbara; Anis Bawarshi, University of Washington; and Mary Jo Reiff, University of Tennessee-Knoxville.
- *NCTE on WAC*: series editor, Mike Palmquist, Colorado State University.

**Other Recommended Sites**

ESL
- [http://a4esl.org/q/h/grammar.html](http://a4esl.org/q/h/grammar.html)
- [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/540/01/)

CITATIONS
- [http://citationmachine.net/](http://citationmachine.net/)
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. In *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.
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

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...)?

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 tutees 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.
A Word about Being Directive

One of the biggest struggles as a new writing tutor is negotiating that thin line between giving non-directive, facilitative advice to our tutees and being overly directive, appropriating their ideas to fit into our own schema of what makes a good piece of composition. This may sound a little discouraging, but this is a problem that will persist throughout your tutoring career. The purpose of this article is not to give you some sort of secret model for how to be a non-direct, facilitative writing instructor, but rather to reassure you that there is nothing wrong with being direct and straightforward at times.

Reading through the tutoring handbooks, you have no doubt already been exposed to a number of different theories on how to conduct the ideal writing session. And if you tried to incorporate every theory that you encounter over the course of the semester into one tutoring block, your head (as well as your tutee’s head) might possibly explode. One essay tells you to work collaboratively, coming to rhetorical decisions together with your tutee as two “knowledgeable” peers. One or two essays might tell you to be non-directive and “minimalist” in your advice and questions, allowing the student to come to the answer through their own intellectual exertions. A number of essays insist that your primary goal as writing tutor is to reveal to the student that her paper is not her own, but that it is actually a cultural construct, or perhaps a post-colonial “middle discourse,” shifting between the language of academia and her own particular discourse community. Ok. Now try and incorporate all these tutoring methods into a thirty-minute timeslot. Wow! This isn’t possible, nor should it be encouraged.

Now, to be even more incredibly reductive of the writing theories and practices you will encounter over the semester, I would say that the vast majority of the essays generally urge tutors to take a non-directive, facilitative approach when addressing a student’s writing. And I would absolutely concur that this is the ideal way to conduct a tutoring session: the tutor acting as a knowledgeable peer, giving helpful advice, asking constructive questions, but not necessarily tampering with the ownership of the tutee’s text. However, this ideal situation is rarely, if ever, the case. In fact it is often a great struggle to keep the reins of the paper in the hands of the tutee. Often these writers are more than happy—if not eager—to have their “knowledgeable” writing tutor rhetorically “hijack” their papers. They see the writing center as a place where their papers will be revised and redirected by the careful hands of a “master of writing.” This is a dangerous, but common situation; and often when you meet with a new tutee, a good portion of your first session will be spent explaining that editing and aggressive revision are not the responsibility nor the desire of writing center tutors. Krista Tawlks, a former Writing Center Tutor, has written an excellent article that weighs the pros and cons of directive versus non-directive approaches to tutoring. She gives very helpful strategies and suggestive questions to ask when “adapting a particular approach” (Fall 2009). (If Dan hasn’t assigned this article for the semester readings, I encourage you to look it up in the archives.) Again, the rationale behind my article is not to gainsay or undermine any of her valuable advice, but rather to encourage you not to always be concerned if you feel that you are being too directive or prescriptive.

It’s Impossible Not To Be Directive:

If you think about it closely, it is impossible not to be directive. Almost any suggestion that you make to a tutee is directive in some sense, however overt or subtle. Any comment you make about an aspect of a paper, any question that you answer or deflect with another question is directive. Even when you make suggestions or you draw attention to a certain portion of the paper that is confusing, you are suggesting that something needs to be changed. Even if you are not supplying the student with a
particular solution, you are still causing them to modify their paper in a particular way. Even in asking
general, open-ended questions, you are usually leading them towards a particular idea or learning goal. In
fact, in *A Guide to Peer Tutoring*, Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner point out that question-posing can
actually end up being quite directive: “The tutor is primarily trying to lead the writer to her interpretation
by asking questions (evidence that questions aren’t necessarily a nondirective form of tutoring)” (112).
What is so interesting is that minimalist approaches still encourage this type of questioning. In fact, these
leading questions are exactly what Jeff Brooks calls for in his essay on “Minimalist Tutoring.” He
encourages “minimalist” tutors to “ask questions—perhaps ‘leading’ questions—as often as possible”
(171).

I am not bringing up this seeming contradiction to lampoon the idea that facilitative, non-direct
tutoring should be a desired goal. But I would contend that while we should strive to be as non-directive
and facilitative as possible, if you find yourself drifting into direct, prescriptive advice, don’t suddenly
veer away from your particular point or suggestion; but rather use this moment as an opportunity to
explain why this particular rhetorical decision seems important.

For example, perhaps you are asking the student a general question about the structure or
organization of his paper. Let’s say that his conclusion is an almost word for word repetition of his
introduction. You might continue to ask peripheral questions around this issue.”How do you feel about
your conclusion?” “I like how your conclusion is on point, doesn’t go off track.” “Is this a summary?”
“It’s really similar to your introduction?” Eventually student the will realize that something is amiss.
You’ve started being a little directive. You could continue to ask questions and seemingly non-directive
riddles. But at this point you may have “blundered” your way into having to explain the difference
between conclusions and summaries. And why not? They may have heard this before in a teacher’s
lecture, but why not take a moment to describe a particular habit or preference of academic writing. Yes.
You are being direct telling them why a particular academic move seems important. But you are not
revising their actual conclusion. You are giving them helpful rhetorical strategies as a “knowledgeable peer.”

*Trying to Be Direct but Not Directive:*

One thing to keep in mind, as you continue your first semester as a tutor, is that you are as much a
colleague to these students as you are a tutor. You are as much a peer as you are a teacher. I think that this
gives us a lot more freedom to bridge the gap between the varying discourse communities that separate us
from academic writing. We too are experiencing the challenges of adapting to academic writing. It is not
as though our own papers are written perfectly, or that we have achieved a mastery of the academic
dialect. In her book on the post-modern writing center, Nancy Grimm argues that “Writing center tutors
can also be much more direct about academic expectations without being directive” (34). She gives an
example of Rebecca, a former tutee that eventually became a tutor in Grimm’s writing center. She praises
Rebecca’s direct style of tutoring, because Rebecca knew “first-hand” the struggle to understand the
peculiar dialect of the academic discourse community. She argues that “Rebecca’s habits of directness,
which stand in contrast to the elaborate hedging of middle-class practices, make her a good writing coach,
and I reclaim that directness” (51). While our own personal experiences acclimatizing to academic
discourse are all quite varied and not directly comparable to Rebecca’s, I would venture to say that
academic discourse is not our first language. And I think that as students we share the helpful quality of
being able to stand outside of the institution—to describe academic moves in terms external to purely
academic discourse. We are able describe things and relate to the students needs to an extent that the
professors often can’t. And while we should never attempt to take directive control over a tutee’s paper,
we should feel confident in giving them direct answers to direct questions.
**Know When to Hold ‘Em, Know When to Direct ‘Em**

When you tutor in the writing center, you will encounter a variety of tutoring situations and a diverse array of students. You might tutor a student with a learning disability, or a second language learner, or a drop-in, or a frustrated student, or, instead, a student that frustrates you. Through each tutoring session, your most effective tool is something intangible. That is, it cannot be touched or grasped, like a hammer, but a tool it is, nevertheless. Each time you tutor, but especially when you begin, if you have this intangible tool at your disposal, you will be prepared and equipped to tutor any tutee.

The readings you analyze in class coincide with your tutoring. They better prepare you, and theorize the act of tutoring. You will read about tutoring in a non-directive manner, that it’s the only acceptable way to collaborate with a student, or instead that you need to be more directive with students if the situation calls for it, or to only address higher order concerns, and so on and so forth, until, at some point, it may seem as if these arguments can't quite keep up with what you learn from first hand experience. When you reach this point, the advice you read is not obsolete, but rather the knowledge you've gained through tutee/tutor interaction relegates the readings as more supplemental than primary, in your development. What I mean is, the optimum way to learn as a tutor is to be attentive to the student and adapt your approach to suit their needs. The tool/intangible I've found to be most effective, not only through personal experience, but also from listening to other tutors, is attentiveness. This particular tool will serve you in the beginning, through the middle, and to the end of your tutoring experience. It are always helpful and necessary in understanding each student you tutor, and will aid you in the acquisition and development of other tools.

What if you sit down with a student and they say, "I just need you to look over my paper for grammar." You should know, that's not what the writing center is for, lower order concerns. But what if addressing the lower order concerns can help the student to work on higher order concerns, as well? Being attentive, or reading your student, will allow you to decide whether you need to adhere to the letter of the law or if you should use the student's request for grammatical assistance as gateway to facilitate their growth as a writer.

Reading a student is like playing poker. In poker, your opponent doesn't know what cards you have and you don't know what cards they have. In order to win, it is not always necessary to hold the best hand. Often times, being able to read body language, being aware of a player's tendencies, and trusting what’s learned from previous experience can give one a significant advantage. You won't always utilize what you observe, or notice as much each time, but being able to not only play your own cards (work with an essay), but also read the player (understand your tutee) gives you more to work with, and thus increases the chances of success.

If a student is having a bad day, frustrated with their teacher, or just shy, your ability to read each student will help you help them and improve your effectiveness as a tutor. A fellow tutor told me a story about a student she tutored regularly, throughout the semester. As the semester neared the end, the student had to prepare a presentation for a class. They worked together to assess what the student had already put together. Her information was organized and thorough, the tutee merely lacked the confidence to present it articulately. The tutor told me how she simply pointed out observations to the student and reminded the tutee (Melissa) that Melissa was the authority on the information she compiled. Melissa wondered if her information seemed accurate and the tutor pointed out specific parts of Melissa's presentation and why she thought Melissa knew exactly what she was doing. All the student really need
was to trust her own knowledge and present her information confidently, to be successful. The tutor explained to me that she did not sugarcoat comments to the student, but instead encouraged the student by simply stating what she observed and reminded Melissa of how much good work she had done to prepare the presentation. Melissa's doubt did not stem from any part of her actual project, but more from not being sure if her classmates and teacher would understand what she wanted to communicate through her presentation. The following week, Melissa returned for her regular session with her tutor and shared the results of her presentation. Melissa was excited to tell about how the students in her class engaged in her presentation, listened, and asked her intelligent questions, and how her professor commended her, and stated that the presentation was the standard for the other students in the class to strive for. Thus, the tutor's ability to sense and read her student, beyond the surface of academic instruction, facilitated a collaborative connection of tutor/tutee, where the tutor helped the student, not by teaching them, but simply by realizing what that student needed in that particular session.

The more confident you become in reading each student, the more you will be able to help them. Sure, certain strategies will assist you in tutoring a tutee; for example, it is a sound rule to make higher order concerns a priority in each session, but as you probably know, there are exceptions to every rule. Mark my words: the "rules" will be tested repeatedly as you gain experience. You'll question what you've been told and read, and then compare it all with what you've experienced. As a tutor, you have a responsibility to your unique position. Tutoring differs from teaching because teachers, often times, are limited to one style of instruction because of the nature of working with multiple students, simultaneously. Typically, in a tutoring session, you will have the opportunity to cater to just one student and adjust your style based on what YOU think or feel will be most effective in helping them become better writers, better students. Then, with your next tutee, you can employ a different style, if that is what the situation calls for. It doesn't mean you'll be able to satisfy every student and all of their needs, every time, but with your students, especially those you meet with routinely, each tutoring session will allow you to collaborate with them, reflect, and attempt to reach each student in an individual way, a luxury a teacher often times does not have.
Teaching the Writing Tutor to Praise

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

Phillip Brooks (1835-1893)

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

Step One: Recognizing Why We Praise

In “Learning to Praise,” author Donald Daiker notes that “praise may be especially important for students who have known little encouragement and, in part for that reason, suffer from writing apprehension” (155). For many tutors, myself included, praise just seems to come more naturally when working with students who have difficulties with their writing. Perhaps, in some ways, we see any little amount of improvement as a reason for celebration and our comments to students not only seem to be an attempt to point out moments of progress, but also an excuse for offering encouragement to continue writing. We give more praise to these weaker writers because we know their history—poor grades on papers, endless pages of negative teacher feedback, and a deflated ego to match their status as “failures.” Our praise for these students therefore stems not merely from our need to recognize and honor their evolution as writers, but also from a need to reestablish their long-lost confidence as authors. We praise—sometimes more than necessary—because we want these students to feel like they have accomplished something and made inroads as writers. We praise because we want to erase some of the frustration, anger, hurt, and disillusionment that has collected over the years because of their continual inability to master the conventions of form and language required of “good” writers. In addition, we seem to praise students more often when we fear that they may have already given up on writing. As Daiker notes, students who are highly apprehensive about writing because of their weaker skills “anticipate negative consequence” and therefore “avoid writing” (155). In turn, “the avoidance of writing—the lack of practice—leads to further negative consequences: writing of poor quality that receives low grades and unfavorable comments” (Daiker155). Maybe, by praising the students we feel are apprehensive about even approaching a writing task, we hope to rejuvenate or re-motivate them—to instill within them some of the zest for writing that we have found over the years. However, while this increased amount of support may be valuable to weaker writers because it provides them with much needed positive reinforcement, it often seems that we neglect to give “stronger” writers equal treatment. Consequentially, we must ask ourselves why this inconsistency exists and whether our uneven praise has negative effects on these individuals.
Step 2: Learning to Praise Equally

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

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

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

Step 3: Making Praise an Everyday Habit

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

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

As Daiker notes, “since positive reinforcement, or its lack, is so crucial to a student’s level of writing apprehension,” one way to reduce this apprehension and support writers regardless of their skill level, “is by allowing [all] students to experience success with writing” on a consistent basis (156). Tutors can immediately implement this change by becoming more aware of themselves as individuals whose positive feedback affects the confidence of students and consequently 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.

Works Cited


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Your Safari Guide to Tutoring Advanced Writers

So, safari hunter, you think you’re hot stuff. You are a tutor. You are the expert, the giver of knowledge, the advanced writer who knows how to write a darn good essay. You have wrangled Freshman into reading their essays out loud and have observed Sophomores working on transitions in their native habitat. You just got told that your next session is with a graduate student. And now you don’t know what to do.

Once you’re done hyperventilating and wringing your hands, here’s some facts for you. Graduate students don’t have sharp teeth. Most graduate students who come to the Writing Center are either drop-ins, have one-time appointments, or are working on a very specific project that they will only need help with for a few weeks, though sometimes they will be working on their thesis all semester. Working with graduate students is the opposite of confronting a pride of lions. It can be fun and easy.

Graduate students know how to be students. And you know how to be a tutor. They assume that because you are a tutor in the Writing Center, you will be able to help them. They assume correctly. I’ve never had a graduate student ask to work with someone older or more experienced. To them, you are the wise trail guide.

You usually don’t have to worry about graduate students being lazy during the tutoring session. While with other students/monkeys you might have to be careful they’re not trying to trick you into doing their work or editing for them, graduate students are used to doing work themselves. They are in the graduate program because they know how to work hard and be a diligent student. So if you point out a grammatical mistake in their paper, they are more likely to take the initiative to see if they made the same mistake anywhere else.

Sometimes, graduate students want help navigating the Amazon River. Most often, however, graduate students want help with organization, grammar, and clarity. These are things you know how to do; the basics are the same. Does this sentence make sense? Do these ideas flow clearly? Is this paper drowning in commas? Can you help me get this thorn out of my paw?

Before you think that graduate students are all cuddly koala bears, let me remind you that they are human after all. They might be upset about feedback they have gotten on their thesis. They might feel like their years of jungle exploration mean no one should tell them how to write anymore. These types of students are usually never upset at you; they just want to vent. They’re not going to bite your head off. It’s okay to start the session with five minutes of griping if that’s what the writer needs to do. Once they get their frustration out of their system, the two of you can get to work.

Now, you might be worried because graduate students have been exploring the jungle a lot longer than you, and the idea of helping someone with their thesis paper feels like climbing a volcano in the dark. Don’t fret! For thesis papers, graduate students have a professor advisor in their department also looking over their papers. This person looks into the technical aspects of the graduate student’s paper. So if their paper is about engineering, and the only thing you’ve ever engineered is a well-written essay, have no fear. If they do ask you a technical question you don’t know how to answer, feel free to reveal your ignorance and refer them back to their advisor. The graduate student doesn’t need your help with the technical aspects, and they don’t usually expect it. They know, and you should too, that you have a different, equally important role.

You may not be the lion tamer, the zebra wrangler, or the highly experienced safari leader when working with graduate students. Instead, you are the tourist on this safari. You are the dumb reader, the supportive tutor, another invested set of eyes looking at their paper. Remember that the graduate student already has at least two other people in their department looking at their paper, their advisor and a committee member. They come to the Writing Center because they want a fresh set of eyes. And your eyes are trained to look at grammar, for clarity, and at organization. It is of great benefit that you probably have no idea what they’re talking about. Because they know what their jargon means they might get caught up in explaining things in a technically correct way. Your job is to say, “I don’t know what a
panda’s lifespan is or why it relates to the stress placed on this bridge you’re talking about, but there’s no verb in this sentence. Also, maybe you can explain how they relate. Isn’t your paper about tree houses?” These kinds of mistakes seem obvious to an outsider such as you, oh clear-sighted explorer. To someone deep in the jungle of their own thoughts and ideas, clarity might be the last thing on their mind.

Keep in mind that you and the graduate student you are tutoring are both students. You are their peer as much as you are to any untamed undergrad. They might have been doing this school thing a little longer than you, but there very well might be things about grammar or writing that you can teach them. And sometimes, they just need to be told that they’re doing okay. The savannah can be an desolate place at times.

Advanced Writers
While you can usually spot graduate students by their distinct coloring (and because the front desk marks them down as a graduate student), advanced undergrad writers at first seem identical to a regular tutee. In fact, you may wonder what an advanced, accomplished writer might be doing in the Writing Center at all.

There are a few reasons you might encounter an advanced writer in the Writing Center. Some students are getting credit for going to tutoring every week. Or maybe they got a bad grade on a paper and are wondering if they’re a poor writer. Maybe they got a bad grade on a paper and want to complain loudly to someone. Maybe they thought the Writing Center was the watering hole or the place to get quick grammar touch ups. Maybe, even though they get good grades on essays, they realize they are not perfect writers and want to further improve.

Not all these advanced writers are the same. Some are aggressive, demanding you recognize their ability and cater to their desires. Others more humbly take your guidance. There may be some that don’t realize they are advanced writers and need to be told so. In most of these cases, you can tutor the advanced writer like you would any other student, but if you’re feeling very brave today (maybe you just sent a graduate student off with an award-winning essay on jungle survival techniques) you can help make the advanced writer into a superstar. Sure, you could “non-directively” correct their grammar and point them toward the grade they knew they were going to get anyway, but are you really satisfied with mediocrity? Tell me, brave safari hunter, are you? Keep reading if you dare.

If your advanced writer is following all the rules, it might be time to show them how to break them. They’ve travelled the essay trail many times, but now they can wander off the beaten path, so show them how to wield that machete! Instead of focusing on fixing up the sentences they have, show the advanced writer how to develop a stronger, more interesting thesis. Lend them your lantern so they can explore the cave of rearranging their entire essay structure. Show them to the edge of the putting-your-thesis-somewhere-else swamp. Show them how to eat the fruit of the em dash tree. Can they balance on the rope bridge of holding two conflicting ideas at once?

The fear here is that they might get lost in the cave. They might fall off the bridge, into the river of a poor grade and over the waterfall of feeling-like-a-bad-writer. If this happens, you might feel like turning in your cool-looking safari/tutoring hat (you don’t have a tutoring hat?), but you can’t blame yourself for this. The advanced writer can spend their whole life on the easy-essay trail; it is your job, perhaps even your solemn duty, to show them the harder way. They might not be able to instantly master the techniques you show them, but if and when they do, they will be carrying a big stick in the writing jungle. The advanced writer knows how to get a decent grade; they’re not depending on you for that. They are at the Writing Center to improve their writing, and that’s what you’re helping them do.

If your advanced writer is a regularly scheduled student, you might take some time to research some advanced writing techniques that will help them. Remember to ask what the writer wants to work on. Listen closely to the sounds of the jungle. Maybe their syntax is fine, but they feel insecure about their conclusions. Working on what the student writer feels they need help with will make both of you feel good.

But what do you do if the writer you’re tutoring actually is more advanced than you? First, ask them why they’re at the Writing Center and what they hope to accomplish. If they present you with a problem you have never encountered before, don’t hesitate to ask your fellow tutors or turn to other
resources for help. And don’t be afraid to tell the writer that you don’t know something. Remember what you learned about HOCs and LOCs. If all else fails, reassure them. Some advanced writers don’t realize how advanced they are, so show them what they’re doing right. Compliment them, praise them, throw them a party. If someone else is enthusiastic about their writing, they will be too. Next time they’re at the keyboard they’ll think of how prepared they are for the essay instead of how daunting the task might seem. Confidence is an important tool when you’re being chased by the writing hyenas.

Your job as a tutor may not be easy. From hour to hour you’re fighting the quicksand of uncooperative students, swinging through the jungle on a vine in an easy session, and leading weary writers down the road toward a successful essay. If an advanced writer crosses your path, don’t turn them away. Everyone deserves a chance to witness the beauty of the writing world: the gorgeous transition gazelles, the perfect-thesis giraffe, the meaty-sentence elephant. And everyone needs to learn how to avoid the wildebeest stampedes of run-on sentences, to navigate the comma rivers, to built a shelter of sturdy thoughts, and to climb the trees of knowledge in order to eat of the fruit of good grades. As a Writing Center tutor, it’s your job to lead each and every person on the dangerous, exciting, and ultimately wonderful writing safari.
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.
Dyslexia in the Writing Center

Dyslexia is the most commonly diagnosed learning disability. While all students require patience and understanding, it is especially important to remember patience and understanding when working with these students because their frustration levels are often at an increased level due to difficulties with tasks that are much easier for other students. According to the-dyslexia-center.com, a website that offers a range of articles and videos about all topics related to dyslexia, students with dyslexia often exhibit the following characteristics:

* Difficulty in learning to speak
* Difficulty in learning letters and their sounds
* Difficulty in organizing written and spoken language
* Difficulty reading quickly enough to comprehend
* Difficulty persisting with and comprehending longer reading assignments
* Difficulty in putting things in order.
* Difficulty with spelling
* Difficulty learning a foreign language
* Concentration difficulties
* Problems remembering messages or instructions
* Poor handwriting
* Difficulty with little words
* Difficulty with time management
* Easily distracted

(http://www.the-dyslexia-center.com/symptoms-of-adult-dyslexia.htm)

The list of difficulties continues to include struggles specific to areas beyond reading and writing, but the ones listed above are most crucial when speaking of students that you will encounter in the writing center. Below are our first hand experiences with student writers diagnosed with dyslexia. By reading through each of our situations, you will see that while all three students are diagnosed with the same disability, each still requires different attention as each student is different. There is not a single way to help a student with dyslexia, but we offer what has worked for us through our experience in the writing center.

Student 1:

On my first day as a tutor in the Writing Center, I met a student writer that would challenge me in every way. I sat at the table and found that Brittany** is incredibly chatty and easily side-tracked, dyslexic (this student writer chose to share this information about her disability immediately), and an Environment Sciences major. I was very unsure of myself after the first session. I wasn’t sure if what we did in that hour was enough to actually help her with her writing struggles. Surprisingly, Brittany found our first session to be extremely helpful and continued to come into the center weekly. I found it very helpful for Brittany to be so open about her learning disability. With the knowledge of her disability, I was able to better understand where she was coming from in her writing. The most important thing to keep in mind when working with a student with a learning disability is patience and understanding.
Initially, sessions were slow to get started, but with the awareness of Brittany’s difficulties with reading and writing, I quickly learned to adapt to different techniques to help this student writer. When working with most student writers, I ask them to read their papers aloud to me. With Brittany, however, I quickly learned that in order for her to benefit from our sessions, I would need to read aloud to her. With dyslexic students, the errors in their writing do not come from lazy proofreading or hasty typing. The errors do not appear as errors to these students. It takes an outsider to read the words exactly as they appear on the page for these unique students to recognize and remedy those errors. Most of the time, she notices and corrects the errors without my help. With Brittany, just sitting at the table with her and reading aloud is all she needs to succeed in her lab reports.

Student 2:

The second week I started tutoring at the writing center I met a tutee, Lisa, that told me how hard her life has been so far, right off the bat. She told me that she had leukemia and the chemotherapy had hindered her speech and the speed at which she thinks. Lisa explained that her writing has suffered the most because she cannot form sentences the way she used to and her clarity is almost nonexistent. I knew this would be a difficult session, but I was optimistic that it would help her and that we could find a way to help her edit and revise a bit more quickly than usual. Just from looking at her first paper I could tell she was not exaggerating about anything she told me. Clarity and organization were the High Order Concerns in her paper, but grammar was following behind very closely. We started off with papers just from her women’s studies class, but now work on papers from all her classes as they are assigned.

Lisa explained to me that due to everything she has been through she developed dyslexia from the chemotherapy as well. I appreciated her telling me from the start and it honestly helped me help her write her papers. I started off by asking her what I ask of all my tutees, “[w]ould you like to read your paper aloud, or would you be more comfortable if I read it?” I was told that she preferred that I read her paper since her speech was also hindered by her treatment and it would take much longer if she read it to me. Since I was reading it I asked her to hold a pen in her hand and to jot down any notes to herself or to make corrections on the paper as I read. With the paper in my hands and the pen in hers, I began to read. It seems to be much more effective for her when I read the paper aloud because I purposely do not make corrections as I read. Instead, I read the paper exactly as it is typed which she found much more useful. I agree that it is more useful to her if I read the paper since she has difficulties with her thought process and may not register the fact that I am making corrections as I read if that was how I decided to go through her paper. There were a couple times where I had to actually stop reading so that we could just go through full sentences based on the fact that letters and especially vowels were missing. One sentence read, “G.Q. is a magazine that hs alt of ads wit wite men in them and alcoha; it sems to be targeted towads rich population.” As I was reading that sentence she was shaking her head and saying “oh my gosh” and laughing at how she was unable to see those mistakes even when she had read over this draft twice before showing it to me.

This was when I took the liberty to talk to her a little bit about how to revise a paper. I explained to her exactly how I revise papers and hoped that maybe the same method would help her. I told her that “I generally write my paper in one go without making any corrections to it whatsoever. Then I take a break by eating something or reading my book just anything else other than looking at that paper; after taking that small break or even an hour one, I go over my paper making spelling corrections and grammar corrections as I see fit. Then I print the paper out and look at my clarity in sentences and organization. After I do all of that, I make my corrections and leave the paper alone, again, for a day or a few hours this time before going back to it and making more adjustments.” Lisa told me that loved the idea of going back to a paper because she, just like many of my other tutees, tries to get the whole paper done in one sitting including the writing process and revising and editing. She was excited to start using this method with her future papers and she even said she would most likely ask her husband to read them aloud to her so that they could make adjustments together before she brought the paper to me. This method works well with people who have dyslexia because they are able to make corrections to their papers without
thinking about it and without realizing that their paper has something written that is completely different than what they think it says.

Every tutee is different and with each one I have to change my expectations as to what a successful session will look like. Lisa really needed to find the skills to be able to do most of the writing process by herself without any help and she was much happier as we went through her paper and I gave her many ideas as to how she could edit and revise and work on her organization. I really felt like a success and that I had made a difference that day when she turned and said to me, “I really want to thank you for working with me and not talking down to me at all. Usually when I tell people I have a disability they talk to me as if I’m an idiot or like I don’t understand English, so I really just wanted to thank you for helping me.” I was shocked that people treat people with disabilities that way, but I was so ecstatic at the same time for making a difference in her life. She always randomly talks to me about how she feels like a failure and that things are too difficult for her sometimes after all the chemotherapy. I really am empathetic to how she’s feeling and I am just so glad that she now has better tools to help her with her writing process.

Student 3:

Another experience I had with a tutee that has dyslexia is with a girl named Shannon. Like the other students described above, Shannon chose to tell me about her disability at the beginning of the session. She is incredibly determined and an amazing writer; however, her disability hinders her ability to organize her paper and understand exactly what certain teachers are asking of her when she reads the prompt. The best way to handle a situation like this, from my experience, is to slowly reread the prompt multiple times. The first time I read it and then I have her read it back to me and then we both take notes as to what we think the prompt is asking. After doing this, we compare what we wrote and break down the prompt so that I can make sure she completely understands the purpose for the essay and how to develop a thesis for it.

Ideally, student writers will share any specific disabilities that hinder their reading and writing skills. Some students, however, may not offer this information as readily as Brittany, Lisa and Shannon did. When working with any student, it is important to take note of recurring errors in his or her writing. In so doing, you may notice that some of the difficulties that your student is having could be related to dyslexia. It is best not to jump to any conclusions and ask the student immediately. We advise giving the student some time to get comfortable with you as his or her tutor. Once the student is comfortable, he or she may naturally open up and tell you about his or her disability. In the meantime, while you wait to see if the student is going to share this personal information, adjust your tutoring style as if you already know this student is dyslexic. The label is not important; helping the student succeed is what matters more than the label.

The key to working with anyone who has a disability is to be patient. This is a lot to ask for some people because not all of us are capable of being as patient as we would like to be after half an hour of trying to explain to someone what a prompt is attempting to get you to write about, but what helps me is to take a deep breath and continue to try different approaches to explaining what the professor wants. As tutors we cannot be expected to make miracles happen and due to this you cannot expect to achieve great amounts of progress during every session. So if the only thing you are able to accomplish in a session with a dyslexic tutee is to explain what they need to write about, you need to realize that it is a great accomplishment because you have just done them the biggest favor they could ask for. So I am asking you to show some patience with your tutees whether they have a disability or not.

**All names have been changed to protect the privacy of the student writers.**
Learning Styles: What You Should Know To Help Your Tutees

You have been working with a student for a few weeks now, but you have not been able to get anything to stick into that student's mind. You are frustrated and not sure what you are doing wrong. You have tried saying it in every way that you can think of, but it just isn't working. You are wondering if it is your fault or the student's, and you wonder what to try next. This situation is common for many tutors, and there may be many solutions to the issue; however, one that might be good to try first is to look at the student's learning style because every student has different styles that work better for him/her, and your tutoring style might not be a match for your students, so it is your responsibility to change your tutoring style to fit the needs of your students.

You may have heard of learning styles in the past or even have done a learning style questionnaire. If you have and are familiar with the different learning styles, good for you, and now you can begin to work more effectively with your students. If you are unfamiliar with the different styles, continue reading on to learn a bit about some of the main ones and some of their characteristics.

The Different Learning Styles

**Auditory Learners:** Students who are auditory learners typically learn best when they hear things spoken to them instead of reading the information, thus the name auditory. They may also work well collaboratively in a discussion/study group because it allows them to hear the ideas spoken by their groupmates, and they would probably much rather be told how to do a task verbally than reading a set of instructions that are written down. Some strategies that can be helpful for auditory learners are:

- Talk aloud when studying
- Use a tape recorder during lectures
- Use mnemonics to help remember information
- Studying flash cards verbally or with someone else
- Try to teach someone else what you’ve learned

**Visual Learners:** As the name suggests, students who are visual learners are typically going to learn better when they see things written down rather than by hearing. They would rather complete a task using written directions instead of oral instructions. Some strategies that work well for visual learners are:

- Taking good notes on what is said during a lecture
- Annotate their notes and textbooks heavily
- Create their own diagrams, charts, graphs, maps, tables, or matrices

**Kinesthetic Learners:** These type of learners like to learn by actually doing things they are learning. They are typically hands on learners; they like to be active while they are learning, and they may have some difficulty sitting through lectures. Some good strategies to suggest for kinesthetic learners are:

- Try to sit in the front of the class and take good notes to keep busy
- Walk around or be doing something active while studying
- Use a chalkboard or white board to map out topics
- Try typing notes or ideas on a computer
- Try to apply what the student is learning to real situations and apply the ideas if possible
Conceptual Learners: Students who are conceptual learners tend to learn theories well and are able to think critically about abstract ideas. They do not need to have practical or real life examples or applications. They also prefer to work with language typically. Some strategies that work well for conceptual learners are:

- Look for the big picture ideas and how they relate to other ideas
- Try to connect readings with lectures and other readings
- Leave space in class notes to record these connections
- Think about how and why information is organized in the way it is

The styles listed above are just a few of many, and students are not limited to being only one type of learner; they can be a combination of many. Furthermore, the strategies listed above are only a few strategies that generally work for students with those specific learning styles. For example, none of the strategies for visual learners might work for a student who is a visual learner. If that is the case, the student (and possibly you as their tutor) might try to come up with new ways of approaching the information so that the student can be more effective and successful. Here is a longer list of many of the different learning styles; however, the ones listed below are not usually the dominant learning styles of students. The four styles discussed above are the most common and most dominant learning styles that students use and have. The group of learning styles listed below tend to compliment and can be used to augment the dominant styles.

- Social learner
- Independent learner
- Spatial learner
- Global learner
- And many more. A simple google search will give a more complete list.

Tutor Resources
If your student doesn’t know his/her learning style, it might be a good idea to try to figure it out early in the semester, so you and your student can be more successful all semester. There are a few ways to go about this. One is to find a list of learning styles and their characteristics and have the student do a self-assessment based upon what they know about themselves and their preferences. This can be good because it helps the student to think about how they are learning, which is never a bad thing. The second option is to have them complete a learning style survey or questionnaire. These questionnaires can also be good for tutors to take as well because it can show what areas you prefer, which can benefit a tutor in many ways. First, it can allow the tutor to be aware of his/her preferences which will help them to figure out what their tutoring style is. Secondly, if the tutor knows how he/she learns, he/she can help their tutees that learn the same way have more options and strategies. There are many free options for doing this. Below is a list of a few websites that will do a learning style assessment for free using student responses to questions:

- http://www.mtsu.edu/~studskl/hd/learn.html
- http://www.metamath.com/lsweb/dvclearn.htm

These are just a few resources. There are many more that a simple Google search for “learning style assessment” will bring up.

Tutor Response
Now that you and your student know and have a basic understanding of his/her learning style it is important that you:
• Begin to tutor toward that style(s) because it can help the student grasp what you are trying to teach them easier, and it can help what you are trying to teach stick in their mind easier as well.

• Know that your student most likely has multiple ways he/she can learn, you can try approaching information in different ways if others are not successful.

• Suggest strategies that might be helpful to your student considering his/her specific learning preferences.

• Have the student continually reflect on what seems to be working because the students preferences can change depending on the type of information he/she is learning, life situations, teachers teaching styles, and the text book the student is working from.
Theresa N. Walsh  
Spring 2010

Tutoring Hearing-Impaired Students in the Writing Center

As tutors in the Writing Center, we typically discuss papers and ideas with student writers. A standard session for me begins with a few moments dedicated to establishing a rapport with the writer. We talk about the class, what the teacher’s expectations are, how the student is feeling about those expectations and where the student feels that he or she needs to improve. Throughout the rest of the session I will usually ask a student to read aloud while I watch them read and tell them when they are self-correcting. This is an effective method for me because I can see where the writer’s spoken language doesn’t make it onto the page. Sometimes, a student writer attempts to elevate his or her language in ways that are unnatural to their actual ‘voice’. Other times, the writer expresses ideas in our conversation that they don’t know how to articulate in written form. From here we might discuss how the student could improve his or her writing so that the paper is true to the student’s ideas.

All of these typical methods are challenged when the student who is coming to you for help is hearing-impaired. I have tutored two students regularly who are hearing-impaired and both times I was uncertain of how I would approach tutoring without spoken language.

Typically when a tutor is assigned a student who is hearing-impaired, you will be notified before they arrive. These moments prior to meeting the student are really the most nerve-wracking that you will experience throughout the whole session. One wonders, ‘How will we communicate?’; ‘What kinds of issues might a hearing-impaired student experience?’; ‘I wonder if we will have a translator.’ These are the questions I ask myself, anyway, and the answers are revealed in the session.

The concern with communication is typically the first to be resolved. This will not be the first time that the hearing-impaired student has tried to communicate with a person who does not know sign language. He or she will be adept at communicating with you. My best advice here is to submit to the methods with which the student is most comfortable.

Every student with whom you work in the Writing Center brings his or her unique method of communication to the tutoring desk, and the hearing-impaired student is no different in this way from students who can hear. In my experience working with hearing-impaired students, I have seen a translator twice—in the first two sessions with my first hearing-impaired student, whom I will call Ella. Ella dismissed the translator after the first two sessions because she felt that the translator slowed us down. Ella and I watched each other closely. Although she was entirely deaf, Ella could speak and read lips.

Most recently I’ve been working with a hearing-impaired student whom I will call Matt. Matt was not assigned a translator, but arrived with a small pad of paper, two pens and a small laptop computer, which we chatted on. Matt has grown accustomed to navigating a world in which very few people speak his language and has determined how he communicates best, with pen and paper.

Ella’s primary issue was that she hated to read and this created a situation in which she was unable to visualize what was being described in the text she read. In the case of a hearing student I would ask them questions. But the questions that I would ask would rely on verbal communication. Typically, I’ll as a student about class discussion. I might suggest that a student talk about the readings with fellow classmates or the instructor. Ella, however, wasn’t in a position to do these things. Together Ella and I had to develop methods that would help her with reading comprehension.

We began by reading the assigned text and then we drew pictures of what was going on in the book. We only had to do this for a few pages before she began to read and tell me how she imagined the scenes that the author was describing. Once Ella began to visualize the stories that she read, we figured out what types of stories appealed to Ella personally. Then we came up with a reading plan so that she would know how much she should read daily to complete her assignments. The reading plan also included a book that Ella would read that was not assigned, but that she found interesting. This gave Ella a workable schedule and we would devote time to her reading comprehension while she was doing the reading at home. After some time with Ella, I realized that many of her writing issues were related not
only to the fact that she hadn’t been reading, but also to the fact that the language she communicated in was different from the written language and the academic discourse that she was being introduced to in school. In some ways, Ella’s problems with writing closely resemble those that we might find with students who are learning to speak and write English as their second language. However, an ESL student can go to a supermarket or listen to the radio and this will accelerate their language acquisition. A hearing-impaired student does not have that option.

Similarly, Matt has developed a written language that serves the purpose of quickly communicating with individuals who are able to hear. He has developed a sort of short hand and this is the language with which he is most familiar. This unique language becomes problematic when Matt enters into academic discourse. Matt communicates with brief notes that describe very basic needs or concerns. When he writes for academic subjects, High Order Concerns are rarely an issue with Matt, as he understands conceptually exactly why he writes any given assignment and has no trouble with organization or the progression of his ideas. However, sometimes the shorthand that he uses to communicate will slip into his papers and reports. I’ve had to be careful to ask him to explain everything that is not entirely clear to me in his written work.

Matt’s repeat issues are related to verb tense, articles and prepositions. Explaining these issues to the hearing-impaired student is tricky. When working with a student who speaks and hears, the tutor can explain the decision to use “a” over “an” through auditory examples. “A” precedes a word that begins with a consonant, while “an” typically precedes a vowel or a vowel sound. You might say, “I got an A on that paper” and this makes sense and can be broken down in writing, but to say, “I got an F on a paper” is more difficult to explain to a student who cannot hear that, although “F” is a consonant, when spoken it sounds like “eff”, demanding the indefinite article “an”, for audio-centric reasons.

When working with hearing-impaired students, especially on LOCs, you should throw out the idea that we are never to write on student papers. I’m not suggesting that you start editing, but once you have worked on HOCs, you should feel free to be creative when helping hearing-impaired students with Later Order Concerns. For instance, when Matt and I work together, I will often write him a note stating, “I’m going to show you where something is missing. In this round, it will either be an article or a preposition.” Then I will draw an arrow between two words and he will fill in the word that he thinks should be in that space. We will go through the paper a couple of times, once for articles and prepositions, and sometimes for verb-tense issues or other grammatical errors. I always tell him ahead of time what errors he should look for, and this has proven to be an effective method with Matt.

Tutoring hearing-impaired students has drawn my attention to the fact that the academic culture does not always effectively accommodate the needs of all students. Much of this is because the hearing-impaired learn on their own how to communicate with the hearing population. The hearing-impaired student learns to rely on his or her own communication methods long before they ever reach the university. Most students enter the academic environment without any prior exposure to the conventions of academic discourse. However, the hearing-impaired student is at a greater disadvantage when they enter the university. Many of us begin to pick up new language and conventions through dialogue with other students and professors. Such conversations occur naturally when we are able to hear and speak. Books, blogs, journals, magazines and fellow-student papers will expose the student to conventions that will bolster their understanding of patterns in academic writing that they might not otherwise be exposed to. But, probably the best advice that I can suggest is to encourage the student to work with you as regularly and as often as possible because writers and tutors both perform better when they trust and understand one another.

Works Cited

Writing Tutors. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2008. Print. This is an excellent reference article for a tutor who is tutoring a hearing impaired student. Weaver explores many of the differences between tutoring hearing and non-hearing students. The article also offers a bibliography to which the interested tutor may wish to refer.
Tutoring the Know-it-All

Some tutees make you wonder why they came to the center at all, because, according to them, they know everything. When you work with one of these Knows-it-Allreadies, you feel like you’re being accused of trying to deface Michelangelo’s David. Back off, you idiot tutor! Don’t touch my masterpiece with your chiseling pen. Simply step back and admire my genius. This may be an exaggeration, but if you have tried to tutor a Know-it All, you get my drift. The following stories illustrate my point.

Story 1: A drop-in (fictitiously named Dejan), wanted help with a ten page paper that was due the next day which he had not yet begun to write. Sound familiar? But, to top that, he also wanted the tutor he worked with (me) to know everything about Confucius and Theravada Buddhism! And to further top that, his manner was demanding and superior. When I offered to be a sounding board and brainstorm his topic with him, Dejan said, You can’t help me. I need an expert. Then he stood up and walked away. I was not sorry to see him go. I thought for certain that the writing center had seen the last of this puzzling man. To my surprise (and, I admit, mild horror) Dejan dropped in again the next day. I was the only tutor available, so I took a deep breath and dived in. I wasn’t too worried since we only had 15 minutes in which to work, and I thought I could survive that long.

Dejan told me he wanted me to check his grammar and punctuation. Knowing his paper was due that afternoon, I told him I would check his organization. (He was not an ESL student who needed line-by-line work as some do.) That was when the battle of wills began. He said, My organization is fine; I know how to write. I said I would check for organization and clarity at any rate, just in case. He conceded – reluctantly. It was obvious that taking the “dumb reader” or the supportive listener approach would not work with this writer. To my surprise, Dejan had written his ten pages without the assistance of an expert in Eastern religion and written them well. He was a very high level ESL student, and his writing was sharp and direct. Thankfully, his grammar and punctuation were nearly flawless, and I was able to get to the heart of his paper quickly.

I am human enough to say that I was happy to see that Dejan had some organization issues and a few confusing sentences with structural difficulties. Although I didn’t have a specific strategy in mind at the time, I see now that I took what Muriel Harris calls the stance of “Tutor-as-diagnostician” (McAndrew and Reigstad, 113). While Dejan tapped his foot, looked frustrated and told me, over and over I know that. I don’t need your help with that, I continued to take notes. Finally, I gave him my feedback, expecting him to get angry and walk away again. To my surprise, he listened! Not only did Dejan listen, he asked me to clarify my remarks. He acknowledged that my comments were valid, thanked me and told me I was very fast. You could have knocked me over with a mechanical pencil.

Story 2: A fellow tutor, Andrea, told me about her experience with Jim (also fictitiously named) -- an older man working on his MBA. Jim was highly intelligent and spoke five languages. His writing was excellent, but he kept forgetting to include articles. He was frustrated and emotionally resistant. Andrea decided to scale back and take an indirect approach. She reacted to Jim’s paper as if she was not the reader, and never expressed her own opinion or made direct statements. Andrea couched all of her comments from the perspective of a third party reader who might read the paper, taking what Muriel Harris calls the “tutor-as-commentator” approach (McAndrew and Reigstad, 113). She used comments like, If you write it this way, your reader might think . . . Gradually, Jim’s defenses went down, and he was able to see that Andrea’s comments made sense. She successfully helped him to detach himself from his work and become a reader of his own writing.
Story 3: I brought up the subject of working with the Know-it-All writer with two other wonderful tutors, Kathleen and Alex, in the tutor’s lounge. (If you haven’t yet hung out in the tutor’s lounge, waste no time – go there today!) The three of us had remarkably similar experiences about men who were struggling with their master’s theses. As it turned out, we had all worked with the same man! Greg (not his real name– we have a lot of fictitiously named people using the WRC, it seems) was very resistant to change. Kathleen said it best, “He wanted me to explain why he shouldn’t have to listen to his thesis reader's comments! I found this to be a challenging session because 1) I felt a lot of pressure to do some magical thesis feat, 2) we only had 30 minutes, 3) he seemed pretty defensive, and 4) I didn't understand his main argument and I had a difficult time trying to get the student to understand where/why I was having difficulties (not because I don't think I was being clear, but because he thought I did not understand how the first few sections of a thesis are organized...but I do! sigh...it felt like a lose-lose).” Alex and I had had almost identical experiences with this writer. The three of us didn’t come up with a magic solution, but we felt better knowing that it wasn’t necessarily our problem. We all have very different tutoring styles, yet we all had the same problem helping this man. Kathleen and I were also interested to learn that this was not a case of the male writer not listening to the female tutors. This story has no perfect ending.

This may be a case of doing our best to apply the theories we are learning and creating some really useful knowledge that arises out of everyday practice as Marilyn Cooper suggests (Murphy and Sherwood, 62). Perhaps we need to share our stories about working with Know-it-All tutees so that we can begin to form a collective understanding. Instead of reacting defensively, and labeling a tutee as a Know-it-All who will probably be a waste of time, we can try different approaches until a connection or at least a neutral zone for negotiation begins to form.

Some of our most meaningful rewards are those won after a difficult struggle. Working with the Know-it-All requires a great deal of flexibility and determination. As in the case of my encounter with Dejan, and Andrea’s session with Jim, the results may be positive and rewarding. But, as demonstrated in Story 2, we may not get through to all of our tutees, no matter which strategy we attempt. Rather than giving up in frustration, we can try to see these tutees as challenges -- people who require us to put theory into practice and teach us a great deal in the process.

The truth is we have no idea how hard these tutees have worked or what obstacles they have overcome to produce the writing they present to us like works of art for which they hope to receive kudos and praise. So, when we feel our hackles rising because a tutee is defensive and condescending, we might come to see it as a good sign – a chance to earn some valuable tutoring stripes.

Works Cited


How to Encourage Passive Tutees

One of the most common challenges in trying to be a non-directive tutor is working with tutees who perhaps because of shyness or insecurity are overly quiet, passive, and unresponsive. When you ask them to brainstorm ideas, they sit there staring blankly at their paper. When you pose questions to them, they ask you for the answer. And their most common response to most any prompting begins with “I don’t…” or “I can’t…”

It’s easy to jump to conclusions when working with such tutees, especially after comparing them to those who are more enthusiastic and overtly motivated; some tutors might, for example, be inclined to blame themselves for their lack of experience or charisma, while others might prefer to blame their tutees for their laziness or diffidence. While such feelings may be understandable (and in some cases even justified), playing the blame game is almost certainly not going to be very productive for either you or your tutee. What ought to be done, rather, is to figure out what positive steps can be taken to break out of this familiar trap and get the most out the limited time you have to work with your tutees.

But before dispensing my own advice on the matter, I’d like to come clean and admit that although I have taken up the discussion of this topic for my Tutoring Book article, I am certainly not any kind of expert on transforming passive, stubborn, or unenthusiastic students into model tutees. What has largely enabled me to write this Tutoring Book entry is not my own reservoir of knowledge and expertise on the subject accrued from my experiences at the Writing Center but the invaluable input I’ve received from my colleagues and from Professor Melzer in asking what they might do were they in my situation. Similarly, if you get a tutee who has you frustrated, one of the best things you can do is probably not to run to the nearest computer so you can refer to this Tutoring Book entry but to simply ask your peers or mentors (don’t forget about the GACs) for advice on your specific situation (in fact, the same holds true when dealing with any issue you might encounter during your time at the Writing Center). After all, even if I was the authority on the matter, there’s no way I could address what to do in every possible situation in a mere two and a half page essay.

And just as important as collaborating with one’s peers is collaborating with one’s tutees. Usually, when speaking of working collaboratively to help one’s tutees overcome their challenges, we’re talking about helping them overcome HOCs or LOCs. But in this case, the issue at hand hasn’t anything to do with a lack of any kind of skill or body of knowledge but with certain attitudes or perceptions that interfere with their holding up their end of the collaborative relationship between tutor and tutee.

So yes, my suggestion is to work collaboratively with one’s tutees in order to overcome their attitudinal problems (I hesitate to use the term “attitude problem,” as this connotes defiance or resentment on one’s part, and while defiance and resentment can of course be the source of a tutee’s passivity, it’s not the only one possible). To do this, we do what we so frequently do anyway in being non-directive, minimalist collaborators: we invite them to offer their own opinions instead of telling them what to do. If, for example, we have tutees who are very unresponsive and don’t offer their own thoughts and ideas in brainstorming sessions, we might begin by asking why this is the case. The trick, of course, is to do this in an inoffensive, non-confrontational way that doesn’t make you come across as angry, resentful, etc. One possible way this, in turn, might be done is to ask them about the issue in a way that exudes concern rather than negativity. If you suspect that your tutees underperform during your sessions because of nervousness, shyness, or stress, you might try sympathizing with them by first asking them if this in fact what is preventing them from performing to the best of their ability. Then, if they answer affirmatively,
try reassuring them that writing isn’t something that comes easily or naturally to even experienced writers like ourselves, that we, too, often find things like structuring an essay, carefully wording thesis statements, etc. to be frustrating, painstaking processes. That, as Thomas Mann put it, “A writer is a man to whom writing comes harder than to anyone else.”

In my experience, such performance anxiety or fear of failure is one of the most common sources of passivity among tutees. While levelling with them in this way is certainly not a magic bullet that will instantly make them churn out A+ work, it may go along way in helping to build their self-confidence. And even if tutors accomplish nothing more than this, they’ve made no small contribution to their tutees’ personal and academic development.

As for tutees that really do seem to have something of a full-on attitude problem, I would recommend collaborating with them on reaching some mutual understanding of what the tutor-tutee relationship ought to be like. In doing so, you might have to explain that your purpose is not to get your tutees better grades but to help them become better writers and that because of reasons of academic integrity you cannot in good conscience simply hand over the “right” answers.

This sort of misunderstanding of what the tutor-tutee relationship is occurs most frequently with drop-ins looking for quick fixes to their problems. Of course, not all drop-ins will be quite so disagreeable, but you’re sure to encounter at least a few of them. The problem with these tutees is that they may simply not understand what we’re trying to accomplish in having them think for themselves and reach their own conclusions. But if you can manage to convey to your tutees that there is real value in doing things the Writing Center way, they will understand their being active and enthusiastic collaborators is part and parcel of their becoming stronger writers. Given that all the empirical evidence supports this view, this shouldn’t be too hard to do.

So far I’ve discussed only two types of passive tutees. As this is undoubtedly not an exhaustive list of all those one might encounter at the writing center, I also wanted to offer a few “high percentage” strategies that, while not sure-fire moves, work more often than not. The first was suggested to me by one of our many experienced tutors, Sarah Faye:

Don't be scared of silence. Once you have asked your question, wait for the answer. Just sit there with an engaging smile, until the student will feel awkward for not answering. If you think the student did not understand the question, rephrase it, but don't answer it yourself. If there is still complete silence, ask a question about the question.

Easy enough, right? If you’re worried that this approach might be a little time consuming (I can imagine some tutees turning such occasions into a game of chicken in which they try to make you feel even more awkward than themselves), I have a few suggestions of my own that might help keep things moving along. First, after initiating a brainstorming activity (or a similar activity), remove yourself from your tutee’s immediate environment. This strategy prevents the tutee from thinking that they can wheedle the answers out of you or wait for you to get frustrated and cut the activity short. It also has the added virtue of allowing you to take a break for a few minutes to get some coffee, stretch your legs, etc. If you’re still worried that after five or ten minutes of break time, your tutee will have nothing to show but a blank sheet of paper, you might also assign them some minimum amount of work you expect them to accomplish during their brainstorming session; when working on persuasive essays, for example, you might try asking them to come up with at least 3 different “pros” and “cons” for the position in question.

If you’re worried that continually interrupting your sessions with these activities won’t leave you with enough time to read through their entire essay, simply make note of important issues as they come
up without stopping until you reach the very end. At this point, you can work together with your tutees in identifying which issues ought to take priority over others and in deciding which one they would like to address first. This gives them some choice in the matter and removes the frustration of constantly being interrupted while reading.

Bear in mind that these strategies are best applied before having the Serious Talk with your tutees about the tutor-tutee relationship. This latter move should be done only as a last resort, when after having already tried out your peers’ and mentor’s suggestions you still find that nothing works. This might not be a very easy thing to do, but having done it, you can at least feel vindicated in knowing that even if your tutee continues to be unresponsive, you’ve done everything within reason to be the best tutor you can be.
Tips for Tutoring Reading

The types of reading that occur in the writing center are very diverse, but essentially almost all tutoring sessions involve some sort of reading. This reading could be an essay prompt, a draft of a paper, a literary text, or a research article, but is certainly not limited to these things. Strategies for reading in the writing center differ depending on what kind of reading students present us. For example, the way in which one approaches fiction or creative writing should not be the same way in which one examines a research article, secondary source, or scientific study. Our knowledge of a specific kind of text (for instance, many tutors may be well-versed in humanities and less knowledgeable in the sciences, or vice versa) can affect the things we should look out for and be aware of in our tutoring sessions.

General Reading Strategies

There are a few techniques one can use during each step of the reading process that are helpful for most reading situations.

**Before You Read**

Before jumping into a text, skim over the entire work. Look at the organizational structure (what does the structure of the article/novel/essay suggest? Can you identify a few main points from the structure?), consider the context or discourse community in which the writing resides, think about the title of the text, and note whether the work was written by a singular author or collaboratively. Sometimes even reading the last sentence or two of the text before reading the entire thing can be helpful. That way you are aware of where the text is headed and what the most important ideas are. This may help anxious readers relax and later, readily identify evidence the author uses to support the main ideas mentioned near the end.

**While You Read**

While reading, encourage the student to think about what has already been identified before starting. One of the first things to look for is the author's purpose in writing. Why is the author writing? What is the main point of the text? Are there sub-points? Encourage students to underline or make notes in the margin of the text while reading, and stress the importance of “marking up” the writing in order to break the text down into manageable pieces. Sometimes students feel more comfortable using pencil, and sometimes they will want to use highlighters. Either way, try to help them identify what is worth marking or what can be left untouched. Often, authors will give verbal cues that point to what is important, such as “ultimately,” “in other words,” “I wish to focus on,” or action words like “we should,” or “if this does not occur, this will happen.”

**After You Read**

After reading the text completely, identify the context of the writing. What audience is the author writing for? Was this piece of writing published in a scholarly journal or an entertainment magazine? Read over the notes the student made, and read the highlighted or underlined portions again. Try to make connections between each main point identified, and see if the student is able to discern between a main idea and evidence for that idea. A good exercise to employ after reading is summarizing. Help the student go through each section of the text, and write a sentence or two summary of that section or main point. By summarizing, the student is
able to internalize the information and make it more manageable.

Reading Familiar Texts

Approaching a text in which we have knowledge might seem like the ideal situation to most tutors, but even if we know a lot about the subject matter we still have to monitor ourselves to make sure we are truly helping the student learn and not just feeding them answers to our own questions. The biggest danger in this situation is taking over a session. Even if we aren’t directly telling a student how to interpret a text, a trap we can fall into is asking a question with an answer already in mind. In their article, “Reading in the Writing Center,” Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner note that, “Rather than engaging the writer in a discussion of the strategies she’s using to make that interpretation, the tutor instead pulls the student ever closer to guessing what’s in the tutor’s head” (114). In order to avoid this situation, it is best for the tutor to set aside for the session his or her opinions, biases, and interpretations concerning the text. What is left is the tutor’s general knowledge in the subject area. The tutor can use this knowledge to first ask open-ended questions (remember that open-ended questions can lead a student to important areas of the text, but should ultimately ask for their thoughts or opinions), and, if necessary, develop more direct questions from cues the student has supplied. Above all, make sure the student is aware of important things to look for in the text with which he or she is working. For example, if students are reading a literary text, they might consider themes, plot, narrative strategies, and setting. If they are reading a research article, they would probably want to look for the author’s argument, evidence, assumptions, and conclusions.

Reading Unfamiliar Texts

Working with a student who is reading texts outside of our knowledge base can be frightening. Sometimes we doubt our abilities to provide them with helpful feedback and questions simply because we are unsure of our own understanding of a text. However, if we can identify the structure and genre of the unfamiliar text, it becomes much more manageable. Often, students will come to the writing center with a list of questions which are based on their reading. If we are having trouble finding a place to start, these professor-provided prompts can serve as a good jumping off point, especially if we find that the student has not read the questions thoroughly, or perhaps didn’t understand what the professor was asking. Ultimately, as Gillespie and Lerner write, “As tutor, your goal is for the writer to teach you the content of the reading material” (116). What an unfamiliar tutor can do is make sure that the session doesn’t get lost to confusion. Keeping the session on track by asking questions concerning important features of the text and encouraging students to develop their thoughts can help when a tutor feels less-than-knowledgeable.

Reading Student Writing

One of the most commonly read things in the writing center are rough drafts of students’ papers for their courses. As much as we would like to have students come in before words even hit paper, many come into the writing center with fully-formed rough drafts, or even what they consider final versions of a paper. In this case, the first step towards helping students with their writing is through careful reading. Sometimes students are able to read their own papers closely enough to spot error or make logical organizational corrections, but often they come to the writing center hoping that we can help them with these sorts of issues.

Higher Order Concerns

When reading student writing, essays for example, for higher order concerns it is important to look at the overall organization of the paper as a whole. This type of reading will be most concerned with identifying main structural components. Does the paper directly answer the prompt? Is each idea presented in a logical order? Are there topic sentences at the beginning of
each paragraph, and transitional sentences at the conclusions of each paragraph? Can you readily identify the thesis or main points? These are some questions you might ask yourself as you read. An important aspect of reading for organization is making the student aware of these questions, as well. If they can ask themselves questions about their own writing structure as they read, they will be more prepared to approach organizational writing issues in the future.

Later Order Concerns

Many students are not able to see consistent grammatical mistakes or faulty sentence organization because as they read their papers to themselves, they fix the errors subconsciously without noticing that the page does not match what they read aloud. A good way to make error noticeable to students without having to correct them ourselves is to read their paper aloud, clearly pronouncing the errors and pausing slightly to give the students a chance to review. Most of the time, once students are able to identify that there is error and where the error exists, they can make logical decisions concerning how to correct it. Often, students will make the same mistakes continuously throughout a paper. If we read tutees’ draft carefully and slowly, we increase the chance that they will be able to correct reoccurring mistakes once they have noticed a pattern.

However, there are certainly cases in which the students will not notice the mistake as such, even if we pause or pronounce each word clearly. In this case, it becomes our responsibility to help them become aware of the error so that they have a better chance of not making the same error in the future. Of course, simply pointing the mistake out and correcting it will not do. We should take a moment or two to explain the reasoning behind the correction so that the student feels empowered and in control of their language.

Finally, informing students of the benefits of close reading their own materials is important in helping them become successful writers in the future. By performing as models in close reading we can encourage students to practice close reading themselves, once they are aware of this strategy.

Works Cited

Reading in the Writing Center! What?

Many assumptions are made about what happens in the writing center. It is often thought that we are a one-stop shop for grammar and punctuation. Yet, as tutors we know that our job is more complex than that. We are given the challenge of helping students become better writers. This involves much more than simple lower-order concerns. Each of us may struggle to find a way to help our students. We suggest that one of the best ways to help a struggling writer is to read in the writing center.

In his English 125B class, Angus Dunstan uses this quote: "There is nothing else we ask all our students to do in school that even approaches writing in the intellectual and psychological demands that it make on students." This is truth tested every day in the writing center where student tutors and tutees collaborate in an effort to improve the tutee’s writing. We developed the idea for this article from a discussion we had in the tutor lounge about how academic writing overwhelms students with marginal reading skills. We conclude that certain tutees need far more from the writing center than focus on their lower order concerns, although most of them tend to think that grammar and syntax is their major problem. While we do not wish, in anyway, to diminish the important role prescriptive grammar play in academic discourse, our topic focuses on what occurs before the tutee ever begins to write. It is our sincere hope that our discussion will prove useful to you in your own efforts to make a difference.

Some Theoretical Background

In a 2002 report, The Academic Senate for California Community Colleges (ASCCC) states that good academic writing is a response to analytical reading. Their finding is supported by a survey of California College and University faculty which shows a positive correlation between analytical reading and student success: 90% at UC; 71% CSU; and CCC 83%. This survey repeatedly identifies reading as the most significant factor in the success of college students. Three fundamental reading competencies prove essential: Reading for literal comprehension and retention, reading for depth of understanding, and reading for analysis and interaction with the text. Gary Griswold’s article about tutoring reading, In Postsecondary Reading: What Writer Center Tutors Need to Know, provides support for the ASCCC findings and gives evidence that tutors are supportive of reading in the Writing Center. Every tutor Griswold interviewed expressed concern about the reading skills of students they see. Most felt that their students did not have problems actually reading the words on the page but rather had difficulty engaging critically with the text and distinguishing between key points and supporting evidence.

Though students regularly have issues with literary analysis, Griswald's article also suggests that they have unique problems dealing with infotexts, such as textbooks and academic essays. All tutors interviewed believed that helping students become better readers is of importance in teaching writing. Griswold voices encouragement for the role of reading in writing centers by stating that tutors should be aware that a lack of formal course work in the teaching of reading does not mean they cannot be of great assistance to students, just like tutors who do not consider themselves grammarians but who, nonetheless, have acquired the ability to write and tutor grammatically correct English prose. He concludes that if writing center tutors receive even minimal training on and information about reading theory, they can develop a concept of how reading is best taught just as they have done with concepts or strategies for teaching writing. By formulating and incorporating specific reading strategies in their tutee sessions, tutors can improve a tutee’s reading ability, which will, in turn, improve the individual’s writing ability.
At our writing center tutors primarily focus on helping students become better writers by assisting them with higher order concerns as well as lower order ones, when appropriate. However, tutoring a student to write in academic discourse is astonishingly difficult when you realize that the student does not understand the prompt and cannot discuss the paper he or she has just written. If you find yourself in this situation, ask the tutee to read aloud. As soon as they realize you are actually listening, almost all of them relax and become engaged in their own papers. In a sense, showing an interest in their work breathes a little life into a dead paper that has been re-thought, if not rewritten, to the point of exhaustion. Also, engaging in meaningful dialogue with tutees about their work, causes them to see their papers as something of intrinsic value, one, in which they have something important to say. As a result, they begin to let go of the mistaken notion that the writing center’s function is solely to provide free editors and proofreaders for their work, and writing, that most daunting psychologically demanding task, becomes slightly less difficult.

Having tutees read portions of their paper aloud also teaches them a technique for catching errors, but if they do not have basic comprehension of their own material, reading aloud is an ineffective strategy. When Sharon first started tutoring, she thought she was accomplishing something positive by using the read-aloud strategy with a tutee. However, she found it had its flaws, especially when the student was just mouthing the words. When that happened with one of her tutees, she changed gears and had him begin to read his source material, a short story. In his first draft it was apparent from his instructor’s comments throughout the paper, that the tutee did not understand the storyline. So, Sharon and the tutee read the story; however, before they did so, she helped him look at the story prompts at the end and showed him how to consider these as questions while he read. She also asked a few questions about what was happening in the story as they read just to see if his comprehension had improved. Almost all students are used to talking about people, so the type of question that gets the most positive response for students struggling with fiction is to ask simply "She did what?" It causes the tutee to engage with the character as an actual person. At the end of this one-hour session, this tutee realized that he had mixed up characters. What we, as tutors, do not understand is how he got it so wrong when he had actually read it before, read secondary source articles, listened to lecture in class and wrote a five-page paper. An unedited example of this tutee’s first draft on A Rose for Emily is included in this article solely to illustrate what may trigger you to back up and ask the student to read from the source:

Living in the early nineteen hundreths, Miss Emily was shaped greatly by the era she lived in. Her father Colonel Sartoris and mayor of Jefferson influenced her humble virgin figure by house training her to become a desperate figure seeking love. Being the daughter of Colonel Sartoris exposed Miss Emily to perform in a distinct delicate lady figure at home and in the eye of the public. After her father ceased, Miss Emily became a victim of the modernizing town's expectation to live up to a tradition south woman figure. In the story, "A Rose for Emily," William Faulkner demonstrates the ironic twists of how gender can influence the role of an oppressed woman, while blindingly alluding to the town’s judgments and expectations.

Sharon states that after reading the story she and the tutee discovered that Colonel Sartoris was not the mayor of Jefferson. Since the tutee’s paper had not only repeated this mis-perception throughout but was also the basis of his analysis, it was easy to see how the instructor’s comments contained a significant degree of frustration. Fortunately, the tutee's second draft was much improved, at least, insofar as the facts were concerned. However, his analysis and interaction with the text still needed work. Had Sharon not read with her tutee his analysis would have remained faulty. Hopefully, this is a lesson he can take with him during his academic writing career.
If we can help students engage in "metacognition or awareness of one's own learning processes" then we not only help them become more effective writers and readers but students as well (Gillespie and Learner, 107). Self-awareness is fundamental to improving the overall writer. The more we can help students question what they read the more likely they will become critical thinkers. We, as tutors, must be prepared for students who have little in the way of critical thinking practice. One way to bridge the critical thinking gap between our students and their texts is through the SQ3R method of reading. We can model this method for students and ask them to do any of the following:

- **Survey:** This has the student engage in previewing the text they are about to read. They are to notice headings, indentations, underlining, end summaries, chapter questions, charts, etc.
- **Question:** Have the student create questions they think the text will answer. These are based on their initial preview. They can reference questions posed throughout the text or at the chapter’s end. They can also pose their own questions based on what they have previewed.
- **Read:** The writer then reads the text searching for answers to their questions.
- **Recite:** Here, the writer will read or write down the answers to the preview questions and review the answers, preferably aloud.
- **Review:** The writer will reread certain portions of the text to gain clarity on the answers to the questions.

By now you are probably thinking we are crazy, or at least wildly optimistic, for suggesting this process to tutors who typically have only a half or full hour with their students. Admittedly, the confines of a tutoring session prohibit engaging a student in the entire SQ3R process. However, we believe there are small yet effective ways in which you can give examples of how it will be beneficial to their writing. The following is a brief example from a tutoring session Nicole had with one of her regulars to illustrate our point:

*In one of my sessions I was asked by one of my regular tutees to help write a case summary of a law brief. She had a very large and imposing law book that contained numerous examples of case briefs. Her task was to concisely summarize each section of the case into a total of one page. I asked her if she had ever written a summary. She stated that she had not and then asked if I could show her how. I said, "Sure," and advised that the best way to construct a summary was to go paragraph by paragraph and summarize according to what the instructor wanted her to look for." She then jokingly asked, "Are we allowed to read in the writing center?" I said, "Yeah, I guess so."

Before we began to read I advised my tutee that I would not be very helpful in terms of the law jargon we were to encounter and that she was the expert in this regard. I felt that this allowed our session to be more collaborative because I was the "expert" on summarizing and she was the expert with the language. Once this was established she chose where we were to begin - the facts. "What does that mean?" I said, thinking of Dragnet and "Just the facts ma'am." She said, "Oh you know, the facts of the case." I just smiled and asked her to begin reading out loud. (Yes, we read a law textbook in the WC aloud).

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2 Adapted from Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring
After each paragraph I asked her to explain to me what the text was saying about the case. When she finished I advised her to write it in the book next to that specific paragraph. At the end of each section, I had her create a summary based on the notes she took. Though we were only able to make it through two of the five sections she needed to get done, she felt completely confident that she could now do the process on her own.

In this example, Nicole was able to use the session to help the student engage with her text. By modeling the SQ3R in a collaborative manner, Nicole negated the typical utor/tutee hierarchy by reminding the student she was an expert in the area of legal terminology. By taking their respective roles, Nicole and her tutee were able to remain on the same page. This session served as an educational function for both individuals. The tutee was able to learn an effective way to read a text and summarize it and Nicole was able to gain some trans-discourse knowledge that she will be able to use in the future.

Final Thoughts

Gillespie and Lerner note, that students who come to the Writing Center are responding to some kind of reading either to "simply make sense of what they are reading" or to "analyze [and] evaluate" (105). Given this, reading becomes fundamental to the writing process. If a student cannot critically read or summarize a document then they are less able to articulate on their own pages. Reading and writing are "powerful instruments for learning, capable of enabling thinking, and the critical analysis of ideas" (Tierney, Soter, O'Flahavan, and McGinley, 136). If one is better able to read, it follows that they are better able to critically analyze, which will lead to a more enriched analysis of their texts rather than one that simply scratches the surface of an idea.

Writing Center tutors can help their tutees negotiate the text by modeling close reading when appropriate. When we ask our tutees to define what they mean it often pushes them to the limits of their cognitive ability. In order to survive such the cognitive overload that academic writing demands, the SQ3R can be a useful way for your writers to work with a text they are writing about, regardless of discipline. Caveat: Try to introduce the "SQ3R" without using the actual acronym, as it has been our experience that "SQ3R" causes immediate phobic algebra flashbacks in certain students and tutors. What we hope future tutors remember from this article is that we are a writing center where writers help writers, and that while we can employ reading strategies when needed, we should be careful not use reading as a back door to appropriate the tutee’s text. It is still the tutee’s paper, and the informed tutor can avert disaster in helping tutees develop their own skill set of critical reading tools as well as academic writing skills. Just remember that "your job isn't to explain the meaning" but rather "help the writer discover that meaning" (Gillespie and Lerner, 108).

Works Cited


Reading Out Loud: An Effective Strategy to Engage ESL Writers

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

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

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

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

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

Asking writers to read out loud proved to be a big step toward achieving this. It began as an experiment, asking a couple of writers to read their essays out loud to me. My goal was to test several ideas:
• Would writers feel more comfortable discussing their ideas with me?
• Would ESL writers catch more of their own errors?
• Would it keep me from talking too much?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In this vein, McAndrew and Reigstad assert that “Tutors working with ESL writers must be ready to become more like traditional teachers and less like helpful collaborators” (97). But how to start? Again, in Tutoring Writing, McAndrew and Reigstad refer to Muriel Harris and Tony Silva. They recommend “plunging in – ESL writing often seems plagued by miscues at all levels. Tutors need to be reminded to maintain a hierarchy of concerns, [Higher Order Concerns] HOCs before LOCs; focus on one or just a few problems at a time, and explain to writers that miscues are a natural part of learning and using language, even for native speakers” (98). While on guard to not appropriate their material, I gave myself permission to guide ESL writers’ grammar a bit more firmly.

Still another benefit of reading out loud is that writers gain practice in correct pronunciation and inflection so critical to grasping the nuances of English structure. During one session I discovered that some ESL students’ primary opportunities to read and write English are connected to school. Growing up, parents in these households conversed in their native language. No English language newspapers or magazines were routinely available, and so the rhetorical conventions of English composition are literally foreign material. For those not familiar with composition and academic writing in their primary language, the difficulties can feel insurmountable. In Understanding ESL Writers, Leki notes that “it does seem intuitively clear that those who never learned effective writing strategies in L1 cannot employ them in L2 despite a great deal of fluency in L2” (78). With this in mind, it’s easy to see the value of the Writing Center. Students can practice unfamiliar concepts and work to get their ideas down on paper in a safe and supportive environment.

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

Reading out loud is a practice that may not succeed in all tutoring situations, but I found that it has distinct advantages when working with some ESL students. Rapport seems to come more easily, students can’t disconnect as their work is being reviewed, and most importantly, it puts the writers and their words front and center in the tutoring session. If you’re struggling with some of the issues that I did, try it out and see if this approach can work for you.
Are There Proof-reading Traps Regarding ESL Students?

As writing center tutors the discussion over Lower-Order Concerns (LOCs) vs. Higher-Order Concerns (HOCs) becomes a not very exciting one. Why? Because we are repeatedly told that though important, our priority should not be to edit papers and just proof-read for missing commas and other sentence-level problems. Instead we are supposed to look at the “big picture” and talk about ideas, analysis, brainstorming…etc. first and then proof-read.

Ok I get it. Even the sign at the front desk tells students that we will not just “edit” a paper.

But what happens when an English as Second Language (ESL) student walks in, and you realize he/she has the best ideas but cannot get them across because of sentence-level issues? What if they keep forgetting articles, or they have fragments galore, or they confuse words and make up their own? Do we ignore them because it is not “our job” and try to move on to “more pressing issues” that don’t exist?

Of course not, and I’m not the only one that thinks so.

Sharon Myers agrees with me in her article “Reassessing The ‘Proofreading Trap’: ESL Tutoring and Writing Instruction.” Myers also has issues with “writing center scholars and others who view sentence-level revision for ESL students unethical” (219). I would find it even more unethical to expect ESL writers to learn in the same ways or at the same rates as native writers. Thinking back to Stephen North’s “Idea of the Writing Center,” he tells us that it our “job to produce better writer’s not better writing” (38). Therefore we have to ask ourselves, what would make our tutee a better writer?

Myers calls for tutors’ recognition “that so-called ‘sentence-level’ errors actually involve deeper levels of creating and processing meaning. By helping ESL students correct these errors, then, tutors can help students gain deeper insights into English syntax – an important step in becoming better readers and writers of the language” (219). This means that with our help in paying attention to the sentence level errors, we will help students become better acquainted with language and its lexical and syntactic conventions.

The problem here lies when tutors and writing center scholars refuse to see the “the depth of the ‘sentence-level’ problems involved in second-language processing” (Myers 221). It seems contradictory to say that “sentence-level problems” are deep, but when it comes to ESL students that can be the case because those problems may stem from their language barriers and cultural writing differences. For native speakers, grammar is second nature; we do not have to think about the differences between the past participle and the past imperfect, but they do. The hardest part is that sometimes they are aware of their mistakes and they do not know how to fix them. That’s where we come in. Native writers do not need the sentence-level editing to be a priority because if they read through their writing carefully, they will catch their mistakes and fix them. Unfortunately, non-native writers do not have these skills and sometimes think that the way they wrote something, although grammatically incorrect, is the correct way of doing it.

Also, these small mistakes are a reflection of the problem they have communicating their ideas. Their ideas might be there, but they do have the skills necessary to express them. So when to us it might seem like their word choice is just “awkward,” it could actually be a bigger problem than anticipated. It is important to keep this in mind and try to help them better express their ideas, because in this case their LOC’s are their only concerns and should be treated accordingly.
We also do not want to just fix the error for them, because then they will never acquire the skills necessary to do it on their own. By helping them develop these skills, they will become better writers: this is our main goal.

The best way to start is by reading the paper out loud to them. This is because hearing you read it will either verify the things sound the way they wanted them to or show them how the errors interfere with the clarity of the paper. When stumbling upon such errors it is helpful to say something like “Do you see how I’m having trouble reading this part?” or “See how that is confusing when I read it out loud?” The next step is to discuss their answers to those leading questions.

The reason why I would not recommend having them read the paper out loud is because as ESL students, they may not be confident in their English speaking abilities enough to read out loud. This added pressure is not conducive to a comfortable tutoring environment. Also, they are more likely to read over the error without catching it because of their limited knowledge to writing and grammar conventions.

Make sure that both you and the tutee are holding a pen. The reason for this is that as you see something that needs to be corrected for clarification, you can underline it or circle it. Don’t be afraid to mark up their papers…with useful notes and information. They are then going to need the pen to fix the mistakes themselves. They can rewrite the sentence, fix the tense, or add their own notes in the margins.

Other tutoring theories and methods usually emphasize minimal marking. This is what teachers do when they only write “awkward” or “frag” in the margins, or even when they simply underline a sentence and put a question mark next to it. This minimal marking may work for native writers that can read over it and fix it. Yet, it is not fair for non-native writers that can read over it and maybe see the mistake but not be able to correct it, which is why they come to us for help.

It is also helpful to have a dictionary or thesaurus nearby. This might help with vocabulary and word choice issues. If we teach them how to look up words and what the difference between a dictionary and thesaurus is, then they will be able to look them up on their own in the future.

When the problem is grammatical, then the best thing to do is to be as specific as possible. If it is a noun, verb, punctuation or tense issue it is vital that we tell them that. That way they will have a clue as to what the problem is and what they need to do in order to fix it.

As soon as we move away from the idea that proofreading as a priority is taboo, then we will be able to better serve all our students, not just a select group.

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Labels and Misleading Assumptions: “ESL Students”

Labels are easy. We throw them around without thinking, thus putting people into strict categories for easy filing. However, being a tutor means being flexible when encountering unexpected tutoring situations, and respecting the students as individuals. Therefore, we must be careful when we use easy, one-size-fits-all, labels such as: “ESL students.”

Sharon A. Myers’ article on tutoring ESL students points out some techniques on how to help students who are struggling with the English language, and these techniques can undoubtedly be very useful for tutoring multilingual students. Myers says that ESL students need to focus on “the ‘linguistic component’ (vocabulary and syntax) much or more than [on] the ‘writing’ (rhetorical) component,” and that we should pay attention to LOCs when tutoring ESL students (Myers 220). As an example, she states that “subject-verb agreement is a difficult feature of English” (Myers 230). I agree: the English language’s grammar rules are mind bogglingly difficult – but this is so for ESL and native speakers alike. So why only help ESL students with LOCs? Just because we have labeled them as “ESL students?”

Behind the label “ESL,” there are two lurking assumptions: 1) all ESL students don’t know English very well; 2) all native speakers know English very well. These assumptions do not reflect the reality, since I am a so-called ESL student and I tutor a native speaker who does not know the rule of subject-verb agreement. Should we call my native speaker an “ESL student?” After all, why should we separate ESL students from native speakers who have the same difficulties with the English language? The focus here should not be the place of birth, but the level of proficiency with written English. When I tutor my native-speaker student, I apply Myers’ method of focusing on LOCs, showing him “the many complex ways a language determines, subordinates, coordinates, lexicalizes and so on” (Myers 224). I do this because I recognize that this native-speaker student has similar language issues as what Myers calls ESL students.

The term “ESL” is misleading. Although we break this term down in class into different categories (international students, immigrant students, Generation 1.5, and eye vs. ear learners), Myers’ article throws around the label indiscriminately, as if ESL students all came from the same background and had the same level of proficiency with the language. Rather than just labeling students as “ESL,” tutors should always take into consideration more important things than the place of birth, such as the level of confidence with the language, the understanding of the American rhetorical and academic conventions, and the individual preferred learning style.

I want to come back to one of the assumptions behind separating ESL from native speakers, which is: assuming that native speakers should know written language better than ESL students. This assumption can affect the way we see native speakers who have the kind of problems that Myers links to ESL students. We might wonder why, since they were born here and speak English at home, they do not understand a specific grammar rule. We might get frustrated that they are not able to pick up their mistakes when they read their paper a second time. But native speakers, like ESL students, come from very different backgrounds; some of these backgrounds did not offer them real opportunities to have someone teaching them the rules of grammar and spelling, or mentoring them in the differences between spoken and written conventions. However, tutors often believe they should not point out LOCs to native speakers, since they think these students should be able to see their mistakes when they reread their drafts. If the students fail to meet these unrealistic expectations, tutors might see them as lazy or distracted. Even worse, I have witnessed native speakers being completely demoralized by the comments that their professors left on their writing. The tone in some of these comments stops just short of calling them stupid because they keep making the same grammar or spelling mistakes. These comments reveal the professors’ impatience towards students they feel should know “better than that,” and these professors’ assumptions about their students create an environment of frustration that goes against effective learning.
As tutors, we should not make assumptions on the preferred learning style and language ability of the students based on the labels we put on them, whether those labels are “native-speaker” or “ESL.” Assumptions will negatively affect our tutoring methods and our respect for the students. Therefore, Myers’ advice that tutors should patiently point out their errors again and again to ESL students, since “students are not uniformly ready at all times to internalize everything pointed out to them,” could be applied to all the students who could benefit from this method, no matter their accent (Myers 225).

One thing Myers does not bring up in her article is the existence of multilingual tutors, which shows Myers’ assumption that tutors are all native speakers. But that’s simply not true, since there are quite a few multilingual tutors in our Writing Center. As a multilingual tutor, my motivation is to help students make sense of the very difficult material that I had to learn. I’ve picked up some tricks and methods along the road to learn this language, and I gladly pass them along to all the students who struggle with written English. Needless to say, I cringe when articles on so-called ESL students implicitly label them as “only tutees,” because I feel left out.

As a multilingual student, I have encountered a lot of labeling. People hear my accent and think I’m fresh off the boat and cannot put two English words together. When I say I’m studying English, they often assume that I am studying the language, so I have to correct them and tell them that I’m working on a Master’s degree in American Literature (it’s always a kick to see the facial expression change!). Native speakers are not the only ones labeling me, since my multilingual students label me as well. When we start the session, they hear my accent and their worried looks let me know that they are not sure I’m proficient enough to help them with their language difficulties. They see me as an impostor, trying to pass for someone I am not. It always makes me smile when I see that happening, because I want to tell them: “People label you all the time and I know you hate it, so why are you labeling me?” But, as the session goes on, they realize that I know the language without having forgotten how hard it is to learn it. They then feel comfortable to vent their frustration at the difficulty of the English language to someone whom they know can not only empathize, but sympathize.

This labeling back and forth of people based on their accents is a great loss of time and energy. It also grossly oversimplifies the complexity of human beings. As you have probably noticed by now from the class discussions, tutors mix and match techniques as needed in different situations. You will hear tutors say: “Usually I am a minimalist, but when I notice that the student is getting frustrated, I take a more directive approach…” If we are not comfortable putting a label on ourselves and want to keep some freedom of movement between our different techniques, why are we so rigid with the labels we put on the students? When you use the term “ESL,” find out what it really means to you, see who and what you are focusing on and, more importantly, who and what you may have left out.

A Spare Tire, Not a Windshield

One of the more challenging aspects of tutoring in the University Reading and Writing Center (URWC) involves working with ESL students. In addition to the fairly ordinary concerns about LOCs and HOCs which arise in any given session, an ESL student may bring to the tutoring table a specific set of expectations derived from their cultural background. It is important to remember that you also bring expectations to the very same table, and that both sets of expectations must be sorted out in order to have a successful tutoring session. True collaboration is not possible if a tutor and tutee spend the entire time wrestling over the direction of the session.

The ESL student sitting across from you did not materialize in the hall and walk through the URWC doorway. Each student is the product of years of scholastic and life experience. Though we as tutors may have a preconceived notion of the ideal tutee, it is dangerous practice to start mentally sanding a tutee’s edges in an attempt to fit them into that notion. It is up to you to be aware and beware of your own thought process when engaging an ESL tutee, for it is likely that their “culturally conditioned notions about what to expect in a nonclassroom instructional setting” (Harris 207) will come up, possibly making it necessary for you to adjust your tutoring approach.

In her article, “Cultural Conflicts in the Writing Center,” Muriel Harris discusses how she “learn[ed] more about what ESL students expect when they come to tutorials” by “ask[ing] eighty-five international students at [her] university to respond in writing to a lengthy list of questions” (208). These responses led Harris to conclude that tutors “should . . . be wary about creating learning environments in which we assume students from other cultures share our perspectives and goals” (209). The spirit of collaboration which we seek to extol in the URWC may be an anathema to an ESL student from a cultural background in which teachers and tutors simply correct errors. In such cases, a strict adherence to minimalist tutoring could result in thirty minutes to an hour of awkward silence.

Harris indicates some culture-specific responses from her questionnaire, pointing out that “Asian students all responded that the tutor’s job is correcting errors, showing mistakes, and ‘giving clear understanding,’ not providing motivation or encouragement” (210). Most tutors would view such a clinical and directive approach to tutoring as rather backward; however, it is not an option to tell an ESL student that you do not appreciate or agree with their point of view concerning tutoring theory. Should you forge ahead without regard to cultural difference, you may be the recipient of false feedback. Harris gives us the warning of “Xiaomin Cai, an Asian tutor in an American writing center, [who] cautions us that Asian students prefer to be indirect and may agree or nod rather than challenge or confront those they disagree with. They may also pretend to understand when they don’t, to save face” (212).

The challenges of cultural difference do not end with tutor-tutee interactions. Determining the “rhetorical qualities of good writing is even more difficult because we are less aware that some are culturally determined, not universal” (215). Finding a repetitive error in grammar is fairly easy, but identifying an alternative rhetorical approach is far more challenging, for many of us are accustomed to American rhetorical values: “conciseness, directness, . . . clarity” (215). We need to keep in mind that there are other rhetorical systems at play in this wide world, such as “the Asian preference for indirection” (215). Each rhetorical vantage point views itself as best. If a tutor denigrates indirection as wrong, she or he could make an Asian student feel like an outsider. These rhetorical differences must be treated with extreme care. Though we may want a student to gradually adapt to American rhetorical values, we should never disparage the home discourse and concomitant rhetorical approach of an ESL student.
The documentary Writing Across Borders gives a brief account of one of the first academic studies of contrastive rhetoric. Robert B. Kaplan’s “Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education,” published in 1966, suggests that different cultures produce different rhetorical systems. This work is considered overly simplistic and culturally insensitive today. He used simple diagrams to display the rhetorical systems of several cultures, using a straight line to depict American rhetoric, and a swirling design to indicate the “Asian preference for indirection” (215) mentioned in Harris’ article. Also included in the documentary was the modern testimonial of a Columbian student whose friends became irate when he adopted the American rhetorical style and got straight to the point in a conversation over the phone. His friends told him that he was being rude by not asking questions about other things before getting to the point, and he agreed. After watching Writing Across Borders, I wondered how the Columbian student’s testimonial had been any different than Kaplan’s simple diagrams. The answer, after careful consideration, became clear - the testimonial was from the source.

As tutors, we must avoid stereotyping when attempting to be culturally sensitive in our sessions with ESL students. We cannot take a simple rhetorical diagram and apply it to all students from a specific culture, nor can we assume that all students from a specific culture enter the tutoring environment with the same expectations. It would be easy to take the information from Harris’ article and use it to anticipate the tutoring session expectations of an Asian ESL student, but that is not the correct method for applying cultural sensitivity.

Each individual student is unique, and each ESL student is unique within their respective cultural community. Just as no two Americans are perfectly alike, no two Asians or members of any other culture are perfectly alike. Harris’ use of the term ‘Asian’ illustrates the impossibility of accurately categorizing and anticipating the behavior of an ESL student, as ‘Asian’ presumably refers to all Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, Japanese, Cambodian, and other cultural communities within that vast framework. It is unrealistic to think that all ‘Asian’ ESL students share an identical cultural profile.

Though each ESL student is unique, cultural similarities still may apply; however, it is not productive to start with those similarities when engaging an ESL tutee. Starting with cultural assumptions is stereotyping, and completely ignores the fact that a unique individual is sitting across from you. The appropriate application of cultural sensitivity comes when you know how to adjust to the culturally-based expectations of a tutee, and distinguish the difference between an alternative rhetorical approach and an error in organization.

I concede that identifying an alternative rhetorical approach is not at all easy, and I would not tell you that I know a sure method for you to follow. I would humbly suggest that you try to remain open-minded when reading an ESL tutee’s work, and remember that there are other rhetorical approaches which differ from the straight-line logic of American academic rhetoric. It may be helpful to read an entire essay before attempting organizational fixes, as this will give you an opportunity to first discover the tutee’s rhetorical approach.

As for the strangeness of my title, I must apologize to you. It was the easiest way for me to understand the application of cultural sensitivity when tutoring ESL students. Consider the information offered in the Harris article about the tendency in Asian students to “agree or nod rather than challenge or confront,” and “pretend to understand when they don’t” (212). If you use this information as a windshield, you see the tutee through it, thus imprinting your stereotype of what an Asian student is supposed to be upon that tutee. You thereby begin the session with assumptions which may not be true. If an Asian ESL tutee tells you that she or he understands, is it really a good idea to always assume that the tutee is confused and simply does not want to admit it? Of course not. On the other hand, if we remember the potential cultural issues which may surface in an ESL tutoring session (without letting it creep into our consciousness in the form of stereotyping), we may use cultural sensitivity to fix any flat tires we
experience on the tutoring road. I concede that it is a bit tortured as analogies go, so I’ll leave you with this - deal with each ESL tutee as an individual independent from any cultural profile, and adjust to the individual needs of that tutee, using cultural sensitivity as one of the many useful tools in your expanding tutoring toolbox.

Works Cited


Do You Understand Me?

Before working in the writing center I had many misconceptions of what the writing center does and who I was as a future tutor. I decided not to take this course until the end of my graduate studies because I did not feel prepared to help others with their papers and writing process. I did not see myself as an “expert” in the field of composition, and I was afraid that I would do more harm than help to any tutee that would come in. Thus, during our “boot camp” I took many notes, learned the “language” of tutors, and even took on the persona of an expert compositionist. I remember the first time that I sat down with a tutee – It was a disaster. I spent much of the time in our session validating who I was as an English major as I spouted off current composition theory, grammatical technicalities, and MLA structure. Now that I think of it, I don’t remember the student, their writing process, or even their paper. All I know is that I never saw that student again. I can only hope that something that I said during our hour session was helpful, but I often think that I couldn’t communicate because I wasn’t speaking their “language.”

I share this story with you because as you may already know (or will learn later in the semester) each individual belongs to different discourse communities. Tutors are expected to be in the discourse community that has a working understanding of the English language and the writing conventions that we use. The prerequisites of 195A/410A, that you have already completed, prove that you are a part of this discourse community, and that you are prepared and apt to be a tutor. This discourse community has developed its own language based off the readings of Friere, Delpit, Elbow, etc. and is easily understood within our discourse community; however, outsiders may not understand what we are talking about. I learned the hard way that not every student knows this “language” or even cares to understand. Rather, they merely want help with their paper, and in turn becoming a better writer.

It took me weeks to learn my identity as a tutor and how I could best help the tutees benefit from our sessions. I learned that before I could expect them to speak and understand that “language” that us tutors and compositionist use, I had to take the time to understand the tutee’s language. I now begin my tutoring sessions by simply asking questions about the student and what they are interested in. Students seem to be very surprised when I begin our tutoring sessions by placing the paper to the side, and begin asking questions as to who they are as a person before I approach who they are as a writer. After spending some time getting to know the tutee and the “language” that they speak I am able to adjust my “language” to help them with their writing process.

I remember a recent interaction with a student athlete who came in for help with annotations and reading strategies. I shared with him some pre-reading strategies and gave him some helpful hints of what to annotate and why we annotate. He still didn’t understand the benefit to all of this and it took me a while to make a connection for him. Because I took the time to learn that he was a student athlete I was able to show him that some pre-reading strategies were similar to stretching before a game. I told him that if he wanted to do well in the game, he had to warm his body up. Similarly, if he wanted to do well with his reading strategies he had to warm his brain up to take in all the information. I still meet with that student and from time to time he mentions that his reading comprehension has grown now that he understands why it was important to “warm up.”

Similarly, I had an ESL student come into the writing center wanting help with his paper. He merely wanted me to look over his paper, because his teachers had told him that he had many repeat errors. After hearing the frustration in the student’s voice I began asking him about his heritage and how he felt about his writing process. He told me that Russian was his first language and that getting bad grades in writing was a new thing for him because he was a top student in Russia. After glancing over his paper, I immediately saw that he was struggling with articles. I asked him about Russian writing and he told me that they simply omit articles before a noun. After learning this important piece of information, we were able to work on his writing process as a whole while addressing his specific need to understand articles.
While I have had many successful tutoring sessions using this method, there has been a few times where the tutoring session focused too much on the individual and not enough on their writing process. I began this drop-in session the same way that I would any normal session: asking what their major is, why they are in here, what interests them. We then began talking about football and continued to exchange high school stories. I remember the look of terror on this student’s face when he looked at the clock and saw that his time was up. I felt horrible and thought this student would never come back to the writing center because our session was unproductive. However, this student signed up to work with me for the rest of the semester because he felt as though I truly cared about him and his “language,” not just his paper. I cannot guarantee that all of your tutees will want to share their personal lives with you. However, I can attest that by doing so you will build a relationship with that tutee, and begin to understand their language.

My encouragement to you is: understand that while the tutee’s writing process and paper is the primary aspect of the tutoring session, spend some time learning “secondary” information about the tutee to help them understand the language of composition. If you begin your sessions by focusing on who the student is as an individual, and thus learning their language, then they will have confidence in your desire to teach them the “language” of composition. Finally, keep it simple. You don’t have to learn their life story in order to have a successful tutoring sessions. But, it would be helpful if you were to begin the session by asking questions such as: what is your major? What do you like to read? Do you normally enjoy writing? What are your hobbies? If you are able to begin a session by investing in the student, then the student will invest in the language of the composition community.
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 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 an 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.”

Worldview: the Continent, Asia and a Testimony from India
Niccole Scrogins

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

Tutoring Continental Student Writers
Tatyana Moran

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

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

On the Continent, where was been born and educated, universities do not endorse the teaching of academic writing. The underlying rationale for this position is that content is married to form and good writing is married to good thinking and all these are so tied together that instruction which separates these marriages may be a fruitless endeavor. The idea of good writing as a gift, as an innate intellectual or artistic talent which is, in its nature, unteachable, dominates continental attitudes toward academic writing. In schools, exercises in creative writing replace the English drill in step-by-step instruction in the production of argumentative texts. For instance, the teacher may read aloud the best student’s paper but would never comment on what makes it good; thus, the ability to produce good writing is viewed as an art to be mastered through observation and practice.
Recently, Rienecker and Jørgensen (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 & Jørgensen (2003)

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

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

- Believing that writing is not an inborn ability
- Quoting too much and writing conceptually and linguistically too close to the sources
- Finding and maintaining a focus
- Getting beyond mere restatement and reformulation of the others
- Adopting an assertive academic tone

Based on my own experience as both a continental and an American student writer, I suggest a few approaches, tailored to address the above problematic areas that writing center tutors may apply.

Attitudes toward Writing

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

a) If they believe they are bad writers, explain that American academic writing is not an art but a craftsmanship that everybody can learn.
b) In case they believe to be excellent writers, point out that learning to write in a different mode will enrich their gift and quality of thinking.

**Introduction and Thesis Statement**

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

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

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

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

**Organization and Cohesiveness**

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

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

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

**Voice**

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

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

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

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

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

In American writing, students are taught to develop a thesis statement, identify supporting ideas, add a few examples being both coherent and cohesive, and conclude the paper with a brief summary of the paper. Conversely, Asian writing does not have a thesis statement at the beginning of the essay, but rather a topic statement at the end. American writing is writer-responsible while Asian writing is reader-responsible. American writers try to convey their thoughts directly and clearly with explicit details; whereas, Asian writers do not express connections too explicitly as a way of showing respect to the reader. Despite the loose organization of the essay, the reader has the responsibility to make connections between various parts in the writing and understand what the writer conveys in his or her writing. On the contrary, American readers have little patience with implicit detail. Therefore, tutors should help the students become aware of the cultural differences and of the value of audience awareness in writing.

Asian students who are accustomed to sentence-level instruction and pattern practice in the writing classroom may have difficulties in expressing, supporting, and explaining a single idea at length and in detail. Providing model sentences can help students become familiar with how they are expected to write. American culture values individualistic expression and debate. On the contrary, directness is considered to be impolite in Asian culture. For example, it would be rude and disrespectful if you say, “I disagree with the view of the author…” Due to the cultural values, Asian students tend to seek more of a consensus and may feel awkward performing writing exercises without a model or collective help. Therefore, providing model writing samples can increase their writing fluency.

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

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

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

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

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

The Testimony of an Indian Working with Diversity
Manpreet Devi

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

Making the Student Feel Comfortable
When multilingual students don’t feel comfortable sharing their idea because their culture doesn’t allow them to be so open about a subject, it is always a good idea to show extra interest in their background. I always found it very helpful when a tutor or a teacher would compliment my unique or indifferent ideas. It’s important that they are encouraged and appreciated for working hard. When they see that their ideas are valued by someone they look up to, it is satisfying and very encouraging. This helps the student express ideas more freely since their ideas are not “odd” but useful and interesting to others. Once students create a channel through which they can express whatever they please, it then takes them to the next stage of sharing information with more people. Likewise, I was able to help the student with a MySpace paper as well as his future papers because I invited his ideas and wasn’t afraid to show my amazement towards some values that people from his descent hold.
Reading Out Loud
As tutors, we don’t want to miss any opportunity of improving the writing of the student. Many students catch their own mistakes when reading aloud. During every session, if a paper is read out loud, in addition to a student catching his own mistakes, he will be working on speaking clearly. Talking out loud and asking questions will help the student put together his own sentences and learn by listening to the way the tutor speaks to him. I had a student whose sentence structures rarely made sense. The positive thing was that he never spoke the way he wrote. He spoke in full sentences missing just a couple of words. Whenever I came across sentences like these, I turned them around into questions and had him answer it out loud. For instance, he wrote, “To stay safe on MySpace, you should put age 99, location, add strangers, put pictures private.” I would ask, “I am going to make a MySpace. What can I do to stay safe?” He would answer slowly and in short sentences, but they were not run on sentences when he spoke. I would quickly start writing down what he said word for word. When I showed him what he spoke versus what he wrote, he agreed that writing something down was a problem he faced. I suggested that he ask himself what he wants to write in a sentence, and then answer that question out loud while writing the answer down. He is currently working on editing in this manner and shows much improvement.

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

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

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

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

References


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.’ In Indian languages, adverbs can be repeated for emphasis as in ‘please speak slowly slowly’ for ‘please speak very slowly.’
- Prepositions: Writers will likely struggle with the appropriate use of on, in, with, for, by, from, to, and others because of the rather idiomatic English usages and because Hindi prefers postpositions.

Learning and Writing Styles

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

Works Cited


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

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

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


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 nonstandard dialects. Dialects themselves are neither good nor bad, and prestige, rather, is “externally imposed” upon them (5). Often times the more power and influence a speaker is thought to have, the more prestige is afforded to his or her dialect (5). Proponents of SR point out that speaking a nonstandard dialect impairs neither the ability to read (6-8), write (8), think (9), nor communicate meaning.

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

Not helping students achieve at least some level of proficiency in standard English may very well disadvantage them because other students will have these skills. Students need tools and strategies to better negotiate the system, a system which, I might add, is not likely to change overnight. Lisa Delpit argues the importance of explicitly teaching students the rules of what she calls “the culture of power” (85). While affirming the validity of nonstandard dialects, Delpit also explains to students “that there is a power game that is also being played, and if they want to be in on that game there are certain games that they too must play” (95).
At this point, you may very well be wondering what any of this has to do with you, a future tutor of writing. After all, while in 1974 such statements as those professed in the Students’ Right to Their Own Language were fairly radical, three decades have passed since then. Higher education is no longer what it once was, and the face of the university, so to speak, is changing. There are now students of many different races, ethnicities, cultures, ages, and socio-economic classes attending college; this is especially true of a university like CSUS^2, 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 oppressor). 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).
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


Tutoring for the Grade: Finding the Middle Ground

Many of my student writers this semester came in with one expressed goal: to improve their grades on papers. They discussed with me how they had been receiving mostly B range grades—a perfectly acceptable score denoting “above average” work. Nevertheless, they weren’t satisfied. They wanted to receive grades within the A range, and told me that they were willing to put in whatever work was necessary to do so. Several of them even came in twice a week to brainstorm, outline, draft and revise their papers, all before turning in the first draft! I admired their commitment to improvement, their willingness to put in extra time on each writing assignment. And, to our mutual credit, many of them reported that their grades were improving as a result of our sessions. I don’t hesitate to say I was quite pleased with the results; I believed my tutoring style, overall, was working effectively.

However, toward the latter half of the semester, I began to note that my student writers were repeatedly making similar mistakes to those we dealt with in the beginning of the semester. For example, one of my student writers could speak over five different languages; consequently, he understandably had trouble differentiating between the grammar rules for each language. In particular, he struggled with plural versus singular nouns and article usage. We spent most of our time together examining where he needed to add an article to denote a singular noun or where he needed to add an S for a plural noun.

Although he seemed to be gaining a firmer grasp on this topic with each additional session, his papers continually had a minimum of four errors per page which I needed to point out to him. However, I was somewhat blinded to this point by the student’s overall satisfaction: he told me he was receiving A’s on many of his papers, and was perfectly content with our progress.

Similarly, another student writer struggled with specificity in her papers. With each paper prompt, she had so many different ideas and initial thoughts that she struggled with narrowing her focus into a unified thesis. She often received teacher feedback that suggested she had “gone off track,” or that her paragraphs didn’t seem to relate to one another. Thus, we spent a significant amount of time looking at the structuring of her papers, including her use of transitions, evidence, support, and overall commentary. Like the student before, this student writer reported that her grades were drastically improving within her course; she went from receiving a B- on the first draft, to an A- on the final draft! Her success and improvement, in turn, made me feel successful as a tutor.

Certainly, these two students have shown improvement in their writing. During our sessions, they are now able to note the areas where revision is necessary, without much prompting from me. I do not wish to disparage this fact; however, the amount of prompting I have to provide is somewhat discouraging. Looking back on all we have covered this semester, I cannot help but wonder: was I too focused on assisting them in improving their grades?

This question comes with many pitfalls and traps. Granted, the improvement in received paper grades was the professed goal of my student writers. Who am I to challenge this goal? In striving for the improvement of their grades, was I perhaps supplying them with too many editorial points? Should I have left them to search out every repeating concern? Or would this have ultimately been a disservice to my student writers?

In Stephen North’s article “The Idea of a Writing Center,” he suggests that tutors “are not the teacher. We did not assign the writing, and we will not grade it” (North 42). North argues that tutoring at a writing center is an empowering position, as tutors don’t have to worry about assigning a grade to student papers, or even applying some kind of value judgment to them. Instead, the tutor functions as a middle ground position, a space where student writers can explore and experiment. North seems to promote the idea of a space free from expectation; there is only the student’s work and their interests. From North’s prospective, it would be in the best interests of the student writers to ignore the product of a
grade, to allow them to discover and notice their own repetitive mistakes, without providing editorial focus.

Yet, in direct contrast with this point, Elizabeth H. Boquet suggests that, “by attempting to have them figure it out for themselves, I end up feeling as though I’ve perpetuated the very notion that I am attempting to dispel—that there is a body of knowledge ‘out there’ that some people have access to and other people do not” (Boquet 118). Boquet seems to think that it’s okay to supply the edit for student writers; indeed, that a tutor withholding such critiques is a figurative “hoarder of knowledge,” leaving the student writer in the dark.

We see two opposite perspectives here: one in favor of an explorative, non-product focused tutoring session and the other for a more directive, editorial tutoring session, focused upon improving the final product. Yet we’re no closer to a final answer—is focusing on improving the grades of student writers wrong?

Ultimately, I believe the only viable approach is a compromise between the two. If our student writers come in seeking to improve their grades, it would be wrong to steer them away from this point. The focus of each tutoring session should always come from the student writer. In the case of my students, they reported that their grades were improving, and that they were pleased with this improvement. Though I hinted at the fact that they were still frequently repeating similar mistakes, my student writers were not daunted. Understanding writing to be a process; it would be unfair of me to expect my student writers to immediately improve in such areas. It’s okay if they are still making mistakes; their interest in improving is more important.

Further, whether we agree with it or not, higher grades are interpreted as a sign of success within our academic setting. By helping to improve their grades, we are simultaneously helping them to excel within their academic setting. Indeed, it seems a little unrealistic to completely disregard grading systems in the way that North promotes. Ultimately, grades are a very influential factor on students, and we should be willing to address grading concerns within the writing center.
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 www.al.csus.edu/writing/gewritingrequirements/gwar.php

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.
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 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-25 years</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-34 years</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15-65 years</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>66 and over</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EDUCATION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than H.S.</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.S. grad.</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voc/Community college</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some 4-year college</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College grad.</td>
<td>48</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.

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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.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criterion</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifies and articulates a focus arising from the prompt:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sets a meaningful task that addresses the readings provided.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Articulates writer’s own position in analyzing a significant issue:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meets the expectations of academic audience(s) with regard to establishing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a controlling idea that is analytical.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion that analyze</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>major ideas surrounding the issue: produces a developed and cohesive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>academic composition employing conventions that are appropriate for the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>genre selected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develops writer’s position appropriately for an academic audience by</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>incorporating support using specific details and examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cites the readings provided, adequately integrating them into text.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides evidence of awareness of writing as a process:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>demonstrates awareness of or reflects critically on writer’s own literacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>history and practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrates awareness of conventions of academic discourse:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>makes appropriate rhetorical choices regarding purpose, format,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evidence, tone, conventions, and organization, and genre.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displays evidence of editing with adequate control of grammar and</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mechanics appropriate to an early draft. Errors do not slow the reader,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>impede understanding, nor seriously undermine the authority of the writer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammatical errors, inappropriate word choice, or incorrect usage may</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occur throughout the essay but rarely interfere with effective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>communication.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Analyzing Rhetorical Situations in English 109M/109W

There is a wide variety of students who use the service at the Writing Center. I have never realized the influx of students who come from different countries and are seeking help to improve their writings not until I became one of the tutors. Most writers I have dealt with are either from the English 109M or 109W. The distinction between the English 109M and English 109W is minor; just bear in mind that 109M is for students who are multilingual and 109W is for students whose native language is English.

To help understand what these courses mean, according to the University catalog, English 109M/109W provide intensive practice in prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing academic writing for multilingual and native-English speaker writers. Students research, analyze, reflect on and write about the kind of writing produced in academic discipline.” This quote illustrates the type of writing the students are expected to produce, and they have to produce a considerable amount of writing that involves informal reading responses, rhetorical analyses, and an extended academic research project students need to submit at the end of the semester. As a tutor, it is important for you to know the descriptions of both courses (English 109M/109W) so that you can assist your writers when they come to you for help on their essays. Thank goodness I had taken English 109M; if I had not taken this course, I probably would have encountered problems in understanding my tutees. At least when they came to me, I knew exactly what they would be talking about. Let me tell you more about this.

When students from English 109M/109W come to you for help, they will show you their assigned homework pertaining to their discourse communities. So, what is a discourse community? In general terms, it is a group of people who share the same interest and common goal. Few examples of discourse communities are disciplines students are majoring in, say, biology, music, etc. Thus, those students who take English 109M/109W will have to produce essays that analyze the rhetorical situations of their fields. An example of the rhetorical situation is illustrated below:

THE RHETORICAL SITUATION
(Rhetoric = the art of using language effectively and persuasively)
Student writers will come to you for help because they need to produce some analyses of their academic discourse communities, and the analyses are usually based on articles or scholarly journals that are retrieved online. Analyses are typed in a form of academic writing and revised several times during the semester. Finally, peers and instructors would review the final writing again, revised by the writer, and then kept in the writer’s portfolio for submission.

The academic writing has conventions that must be followed, but bear in mind that writing conventions differ in different fields. Therefore, as a rule, writing conventions have the following primary features as illustrated previously, such as: purpose, audience, persona, text, and genre. It is important to remember that these criteria are the main reasons why writers from the English 109M/109W will want some assistance because most of them do not understand the gist of the features. In so doing, let us take a look at the primary features of any rhetorical situation so that when writers show their assigned projects, you as tutors will be able to communicate effectively how the features are applied to their academic discourse communities.

- **Purpose**
  Almost all English 109M/109W writers who come to me always struggle with the purpose. They seem to interchange it with objective which takes on a different meaning. As defined by the Sacramento State *Student Writing Handbook*, a purpose could “include the goals the writer has for his/her writing, that purpose that is set out for the writer in a teacher’s assignment, and the influence of factors like the audience writing is addressing.”

  **Example:** Mark Bauerlein’s writing of this article is to raise awareness of change and development in the use of the technology in schools. For example, he writes “because writing is a deep habit, when students sit down and compose on a keyboard, they slide into the mode of writing…” (25). This quote further proves…

- **Audience**
  In the writing center, I have not encountered any writer who is not aware of their audience. The writers know full well that teachers are their primary audience. However, teachers can play a variety of roles when they read and respond to writer’s writing. At other times, teachers play the role of representatives of their academic field and they will respond to the writer as a biologist, a nurse, an engineer, etc. For example, I have seen teachers assign a project whereby a writer is to create a memo targeting the audience of their own discourse community. In so doing, the audience will affect the purpose for writing, the persona the writer takes on, and the way the writer develops and organizes the text.

  **Example:** The audience or target readers of Mark Bauerlein’s article are scholars, researchers, academicians, futurists, students, and individuals or organizations belonging to his English and non-English academic discourse communities who understand and respond to the changes and development of the technological revolutions. For example…

- **Persona**
  Of all the writing features that have been mentioned, I think the persona is the easiest to explain because it is how the writer presents himself/herself. It can also include the voice, stance, tone, and style a writer takes on in their writing. Furthermore, it includes a writer’s
word choice and the attitude that resonate within the writing. Since the writer’s writing is done at an academic level imposed by the academicians at Sacramento State University, the writer is expected to write on a formal persona rather than informal. In other words, depending on the writer, he/she can be friendly, informative, experienced, or articulate in their writing. Hence, bear in mind that a writer from English 109M/English 109W will end up taking more courses unrelated to their academic discourse community that there is really no single persona a writer assumes in all of their college writing; each rhetorical situation will demand a different approach to voice, style, and audience.

**Example:** Mark Bauerlein presents to me as a person who is concerned about the changes and development of the digital age. He is very analytical, intuitive, and has an ability to foresee changes that will be taking place that can make some impact in our society. He is very concise and specifically uses words that are simple and brief.

- **Text**
  Text means different things to different people. Text can mean a research paper or a lab report, Web site, a PowerPoint presentation, flyers, handbook, or a brochure; thus, most teachers consider them as part of the academic discourse because they are used to communicate with writers or students. What comes along with text is the use of graphs, diagrams, photos, images, and etc.

  **Example:** Mark Bauerlein’s article is two pages long, written in a simple MLA format using Times New Roman font type and font size of probably nine. On the title page, however, he uses a different font type like Arial Narrow that is bolded and a font size of 36, in order to make the subject matter more visible to the reader and catches the reader’s eye.

Each academic discipline has its own texts. For example, the accounting students who come to the Writing Center have their own texts to analyze. They come with graphs, and ledgers with columns and rows. The accounting discourse community has specific texts that are used in response to the purpose and audience of their own discourse community. In turn, format that comes out of the text in response to the recurring rhetorical situation, is called “genre.”

So, what is “genre?” Most of the English 109M/109W have struggled with this concept. I, myself, have struggled with it too. Thus, there really is no clear definition of this particular concept, but to make it easier, simple examples are movie genres such as spaghetti western, suspense-thriller, or romantic comedy. In these examples, genre is used to classify a certain type of movie. As for academic writing, genres are used as well. For instance, a case report or book reviews are considered genres. In other words, typical kind of genres requires typical responses that pertain to the purpose and audience in accordance to the academic discourse community.

- **Context**
  Of all the features that have been discussed, the context take on the broader social, cultural, and historical aspects that influence writing. For example, a writer comes to you and tells you that he/she has to analyze a scholarly journal written by a certain author. Part of the assignment is to analyze the context of the author’s journal. You as a tutor need to educate the writer that part of the context involves a summary of the author’s background, and how the background impacts the author’s discourse community. In addition, part of the context relates to the aspects of audience’s economic class, their level of expertise with the subject matter, their background, and personal beliefs.
**Example:** Mark Bauerlein’s background such as his credentials which includes education, profession, and experience prove his ability to evaluate, investigate, foresee, and forecast different social and cultural changes that will occur in the future. In addition, his profession as an English educator at Emory University further distinguishes him as a well-articulated and rounded individual, with a keen sense of understanding of the impact, influence, and the phenomenal implications the digital forces may have in our school system, and almost likely the society’s social and cultural environments.

Lastly, almost all academic writing requires some form of **summary**. The summary is not part of rhetorical situations; however, almost all instructors from English 109M/109W require it. For instance, many instructors will require students to read a material about a certain subject. Thus, students will then summarize the information they learned through reading the material. Including with the summary are: the author’s name, credentials such as education and experience, and a brief description of the author’s subject matter. In addition, four to five sentences are enough for a summary provided the student writers have made their points.

In conclusion, at the end of the semester writers should be able to show that they can engage in writing as a process that includes revision, editing, and drafting based on feedback from peers and instructors throughout the semester. As a tutor, just do the best you can to help them. You will find that meeting different writers from different discourse communities is a rewarding experience because as a tutor, you will then get exposed to many facets of disciplines with different rhetorical choices to be dealt with. Enjoy!
Social Constructivism in Action

For some tutors new to the University Reading and Writing Center, the readings on the theoretical underpinnings for the Center can be a bit daunting. While some of the articles may sound interesting, even something we may agree with, it can be difficult to find a translation from theory to practice. In other words, some may find themselves agreeing with the tenets of one theory or another, but leave the classroom thinking: *that’s nice, but what do I do with this?* My goal is to help new tutors see possibilities of how theory can translate into practice.

Social constructivism is built upon the idea that knowledge is created through the process of interaction between several individuals. No wonder this theory is applied to writing centers! Where else on campus can you find so many individuals collaborating toward a mutual understanding of a text? Tutors and student writers are constantly in dialogue toward a negotiated meaning of writing prompts, student writing, instructor feedback, and the readings students respond to in their classes. Andrea Lunsford tells us that collaboration is paramount in our understanding of this theory, and that the movement toward collaboration involves a shift “from viewing knowledge and reality as things exterior to or outside of us, as immediately accessible, individually knowable, measurable, and shareable—to viewing knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualized” (48). What does this mean? This definition might be expressed differently as an equation:

\[
\text{collaboration + context} \rightarrow \text{knowledge}
\]

According to social constructivists, knowledge is not a static, singular object, but a nebulous thing always in flux, always being created, added to, deleted from, and transformed through our interaction with others. Feeling more confused? Hopefully not, but in the next section I’ll show a small vignette from a tutoring session that will hopefully help to explain *how* this might occur in the Center.

Social Constructivism in Practice: A Vignette

One example of social constructivism in the writing center can be seen in a recent session with Joel, one of my regularly scheduled student writers. Joel needed help understanding Lord Byron’s poem *Prometheus*, one of the readings that had been assigned in his history class. Joel had (half jokingly) asked if I could just tell him the meaning of the poem, assuming that all English majors are well versed in Lord Byron. Rather than dispense an analysis of the poem (which would reinforce the early model of the writing center as a Storehouse of Knowledge, and this model’s inherent hierarchy of power), we began to negotiate the meaning of the poem through several practices that reinforce social constructivist theory. After reading the poem several times over (both silently and aloud), we both began to dig out bits of meaning of the poem. When Joel was stuck on a word, we turned to the dictionary, looked up the definition and wrote it in the margins of Joel’s text. From there, they began to work out their own meaning through collaboration. For example, when we reached the line “What was thy pity’s recompense?” we both began to discuss the difficulty with the language, replace the difficult words (pity and recompense) with the phrases and definitions that had been negotiated through the use of the dictionary, through our conversation, our own analogies and examples, and finally started to reconstruct the sentence. The sentence transformed into a less eloquent, but more understandable question: “What did Prometheus get in return for feeling bad for humans?”
This interaction accomplished the goals of social constructivism on several levels. As Andrea Lunsford states, writing centers built on social constructivism will “place control, power, and authority not in the tutor or the staff, not in the individual student, but in the negotiating group” (52). In the example of Joel’s reading, no one party had more power than the other. The input from Lord Byron (through his text), from Joel, and from the tutor all were part of the construction of Joel’s understanding of the poem. Even the instructor for Joel’s class played a role in creating meaning as Joel reviewed his lecture notes on the poem from the previous day. All of these pieces work together in order to create a new text that was more understandable, and ultimately created Joel’s knowledge of the poem.

Techniques for Implementing Social Constructivism

For tutors who want to implement social constructivism into tutor sessions, there are many techniques that you are probably already addressing that work toward the goals of social constructivism. If students seem to be struggling with how to start an essay, there is a chance they do not quite understand the text to which they are responding, and may therefore benefit from collaborative active reading as I have outlined in the vignette. Collaborative brainstorming during the pre-writing stage is an important task that can be done during tutoring sessions with the student writer. This strategy will help students gain better insight through negotiation with the tutor about what students already think about the topic, what they want to say, and what they need to discover before writing. In the revision stage, tutors can use Elbow’s “Movies of the Mind” to give students their reactions to the writing without imposing a set idea of what is wrong or right, what is working or not working in the student’s writing. This will allow the student writer to assess if the tutor’s reaction and response are what was intended by the writing. These activities empower students with the authorial authority over the paper, and also allow for discussion and negotiation with another party (the tutor) to help guide students through the drafting and revision process. This will, in turn, allow students to construct a better understanding of writing prompts and their own writing through collaboration. There are many techniques that you can choose to implement a social constructivist tutoring framework, but hopefully these strategies give you a place to start. Happy collaborating!

Works Cited

Social Constructivist Strategies for Completed Drafts

The diversity of culture, age, and fields of study among CSUS students makes our writing center an ideal place to observe and participate in the vast exchange of knowledge and perspectives which characterizes modern universities. The theory of social construction reminds us that the goal of these interactions is to achieve greater mutual understanding, thereby creating new knowledge through our collaboration. Many aspects of social construction come naturally to tutoring sessions, such as dialogue and teamwork. Still, it can be useful to define specific practices of social construction because they can help tutors negotiate between the validity of the student’s ideas and the expectations of the university.

The tutor’s job is to help students revise their papers for greater clarity, which means finding a better way to translate the student’s thoughts into the specific context of their assignment. According to Dana King, the goal of social constructivism is to, “help [students] see that although there is no right-or-wrong approach, there are some practical methods for assessing which approaches might be ‘more right’ than others.” Because there is no clear-cut right or wrong answers students must evaluate information from multiple sources in order to determine what methods work best for them. By presenting the idea that knowledge is created socially students gain the confidence to create and assess new alternatives. However, when a student comes into the writing center with a completed draft, the path to this approach is not always clear. Some of these practical techniques be of help.

- King claims that when tutors “model the process of evaluating choices” they empower students to “own” their learning process by developing the ability to analyze and incorporate a broad range of information, which is necessary for success in modern society. To accomplish this she suggests asking open-ended questions which encourage an evaluation of the student’s own thought process such as, “How might this change in your writing affect the overall tone and message of your piece?” or “Why did you choose to write your ideas in this particular order?” These questions prompt students to assess their own writing and decide which rhetorical techniques are most appropriate for themselves and the situation.

- Returning frequently to the assignment prompt and expectations of the professor helps reinforce a critical knowledge of the specific context the student faces. Questions such as, “In what way does this section of your paper respond to the prompt?” or, “How can you relate this idea back to what you have learned in class?” will allow students to reason through their own thought process and clarify the relevance of their ideas for themselves. Encouraging students to refer back to class notes and texts also highlights the significance of outside information to the creation of knowledge within the class. These approaches emphasize the validity of the student’s thoughts while promoting an understanding of context by creating a dialogue between the student and the task in front of them.

- Another useful strategy is to model and explain the perspective of the specific discourse community in which the student is writing. Reminding students of their broader audience emphasizes that the tutor’s opinions are not the correct solution but rather a way of approaching academic communication. It can be helpful to provide students with information about the specific framework they are operating within in order to make the boundaries of their discourse apparent. Comments like, “These are some conventions of this writing style, what are some ways your idea can fulfill this
requirement?” encourage students to create new approaches while acknowledging the structure of academic writing. Students gain a better understanding of the relevance of their ideas by contextualizing the assignment within its larger purpose.

- No matter what approach one takes to tutoring the question remains, how much should I focus on grammar? While social constructivism does not offer a direct solution, it does suggest some useful perspectives. This theory maintains that the primary function of writing is communication. Grammar which interferes with this goal, then, comes as a priority over that which does not. Furthermore, rather than simply “fix” errors, tutors can approach grammar from the point of view of how different structures convey different ideas. While helping students come up with alternatives tutors can ask questions like, “How do you think this style of writing will affect the reader?” By creating a conversation about the way choices in writing style effect meaning students gain greater insight into the options available to their task and the methods for assessing those possibilities.

Rather than focus on the “correct” interpretation of assignments, social construction theory maintains that diverse ideas and expectations can be incorporated into new ways of understanding. Tutors model the process of collaboration by encouraging a critical evaluation of the student’s own thought process as well as the context of the discourse community, the teacher, and the specific assignment. Social construction encourages students to recognize that the creation of knowledge is a continuous process of collaboration and they are through active participants their writing.

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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 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.

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