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Breaking Ice and Setting Goals

Tips for Getting Started

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When most students enter one-to-one tutoring situations for the first time, they expect tutors to manage introductions and dictate the way their sessions will go. While tutees often behave like guests and need to be introduced to the writing center and the conferencing process on their first visit, on subsequent visits they may continue to take their cues from tutors. Even when students become familiar with the conferencing process, they may be shy about starting or wait for the tutor to begin out of respect. For all of these reasons, tutors who know how to take the first step, to bring the writer into the conference by offering a friendly greeting and finding a comfortable place to meet, will put students at ease by showing them that they are a welcome part of this peer tutoring duo. This is true for U.S. students and even more so for international ones.

Getting started is often the hardest part of any task or assignment, and it is especially so for English as a second language (ESL) students. The reasons for this are varied, but for many students they include feeling intimidated, fearing being judged, worrying about taking risks, or being unfamiliar with the assignment. These reasons account for many of the students who put off going to the writing center. Aside from procrastination, some students are just not convinced that a visit to the writing center will be worthwhile. Some may also feel that a tutoring conference will be uncomfortable and even scary. They may be afraid to take that first step of walking into the writing center—an unfamiliar place where it is hard to blend into the background and remain anonymous. Just by walking in the door, students are admitting to themselves and everyone there that they need help.

Sami, an ESL student from Saudi Arabia, is a prime example of this conundrum: He needs the help the writing center offers, but he is uncomfortable admitting it. (I discuss my meeting with Sami in Chapter 18.) He revealed that asking for help is actually a cultural taboo for many Arab male students. He

explained how the writing center made him uneasy because it was a public place where other students could see that he needed help. For Sami, working with someone privately was the only answer because he feared the shame of being perceived as weak by others.

In general, international students have had little experience with writing centers. For them, the concept of shared responsibility for writing is often alien. In Chapter 15, Gerd Bräuer says that most ESL students have no idea what a writing center is or how it functions, and because of that, many of them end up avoiding writing centers altogether.

Aware of the uncertainty many ESL students feel about coming to the writing center, tutors have a special obligation to help reduce this anxiety. But how do they do this? One way is to take a few minutes at the beginning of each session to make a plan: to set goals for the conference and discuss ways to accomplish those goals. It is important to note that planning, prioritizing, goal setting, and sticking to a schedule are all markedly Western in nature. The U.S. writing center has in many ways become a microcosm of U.S. society, an artifact of the culture, where values such as education for everyone, punctuality, taking turns, and staying on schedule are enacted every day.

Making a plan is not just helpful for the student, but it can make the tutor's job easier as well. It creates a shared responsibility for how the session will unfold, and it reduces uncertainty about what to do next. When the tutor and student make the plan together, the responsibility for the session is shared, and the tutor doesn't have to worry that she is entirely liable for its outcome. "The student's contributions in these opening minutes," Thomas Newkirk explains, "need to be used to give the conference a mutually agreeable and mutually understood direction."[1] By collaboratively setting goals and creating a visual representation of them at the beginning of a session, the expectations for the conference will be clear and shared.

Tika, an ESL student from Indonesia, shared her first writing center experience with me. In her account, she expresses many of the common fears students have about entering a writing conference, and her statement reminds us of how important it is to make an effort to put students at ease when they visit the writing center.

> I was ready to go there, but I hesitated because there was an afraid feeling inside me. I was so nervous, tense, uneasy—it was a mixed feeling. But then, I would like to experience this new thing because universities in Indonesia don't have this service.
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> When I was approaching the door, I could hear my heart beating so fast. I didn't know what to expect, and there were so many questions in my mind: "What should I tell them when they ask me about my writing? Can I understand when they speak?" I found that most Americans speak very fast like a Concorde jet! That makes me more nervous. "Are they patient people? Would they understand when I speak?" I tend to beat around the bush rather

than get to the point. That is definitely a cultural matter! "What if they find that my writing was really bad, would they laugh at it or get angry at me?" In my country, it's embarrassing to make mistakes.

Having lots of questions made me uneasy.

When the tutor called my name, I was just like, "This is it. Whatever will be will be!" I was trying to comfort myself.

The tutor greeted me and complimented my jacket. We had a very short conversation. Was it an ice-breaker? After that, I found myself totally involved with the conference—no worries anymore.

Tika candidly recounted her feelings as she approached her first tutoring session. While some students want to avoid the writing center, many native English-speaking (NES) students and ESL students are similar to Tika in that they look forward to getting help at the writing center but are unsure of how things will go. Days of stress and apprehension were eased as the tutor casually greeted Tika and began a conversation by offering a positive comment, in this case a compliment on an article of clothing. Showing interest in the student can ease a tense situation and make her feel welcome.

Once introductions have been made and pleasantries exchanged, it is time to focus on the work of the tutoring session. To do that, you need to make a plan. Many tutors skip this step, thinking they can just plunge right in because tutoring sessions have become so routine for them, because they think they know what is best, or because they think it will save time to skip that first step. Tutors may also fear the rigidity of outlining the way the session will go. But this is a mistake. Making a plan will give the conference direction while allowing the tutor to bond with the tutee right from the beginning by deciding and sharing a common goal. Also, organization does not preclude flexibility, and it actually saves time.

Make a Plan

Why Is This Important?

If you don't take the time to get organized and set goals, you might not use your time together effectively. "It might seem a little odd to make a plan for how you will spend the next thirty minutes together," says William Macauley, Jr., "But there's a worse problem: looking back at the past half hour and realizing you went practically nowhere with your tutoring session because you never really thought about where you wanted to end up."[2]

Because not all cultures prefer the Westernized manner of getting right down to business, an explanation of the time allotted for the session may help the student see the need for an organized plan. Students usually come to the writing center with specific requests in mind, and it is best to give them a chance to discuss what they perceive are their most pressing needs at the

beginning. That way, you will both be sure to consider them when planning the session.

NES and ESL students regularly come to the writing center wanting tutors to check their papers for grammar errors. While many of these students are unfamiliar with writing terminology and simply do not know how to ask for help with anything else, we can't always dismiss this request in favor of what we may consider the higher-order concerns to be.[3] For many ESL students, grammar may in fact be a higher-order concern. For example, almost all Asian students have problems with personal pronouns and articles, and Chinese students in particular have difficulty with verb tenses and verb endings because these are not features of their native languages. Offering suggestions for alternatives to focusing on grammar is beneficial, but we also need to trust our students and be willing to explore grammar concerns with them. (See Chapter 7 for a discussion of grammar vs. higher-order concerns.

When asking for help with grammar, NES and ESL students tend to mean different things. NES students typically want assistance with editing and correctness, whereas ESL students, who are often very knowledgeable about the language and its grammar rules, generally want to make sure they are saying things the way NES students would. Many ESL students have difficulty with collocations and receive comments from professors indicating that their phrasing "just isn't right." When these variations confuse their intended meanings, these seemingly lower-order concerns actually rise to utmost importance.[4] However, along with Ben Rafoth in Chapter 12, I caution tutors not to attempt to fix every phrase just because it sounds different. Sometimes, these variations can be refreshing, if not poignant, and leaving them intact goes a long way toward preserving the student's voice. For example, Jung-jun, an ESL student from Korea, explained to me what it felt like when she found out that her writing center tutor was going to be a person who was also in one of her classes. She said she felt bad because they were in the same class, and she needed help and he didn't. When she realized that, she said, "I feel . . . I shrink." Her phrasing was at once unusual and moving. (I discuss my meeting with Jung-jun in Chapter 18.)

If you do decide together that looking at grammar is the goal, or one of the goals of the session, keep in mind that even checking grammar requires a plan. If you skip this step and plunge right in thinking you can just tackle errors as they come, you will quickly get bogged down. Some of the paper may get edited, but it is unlikely that students will leave with any new understanding of grammar rules or editing techniques they can do on their own. Taking the time to read a bit of the paper and decide which errors are most important and persistent is a more organized and productive approach. Cynthia Linville offers strategies for helping ESL students become proficient self-editors in Chapter 10. But remember, editing an entire paper in one session is typically not a writing center's mission and more often than not will produce a better

piece of writing instead of a better writer.[5] Some ESL students can become consumed by wanting to get their papers *fixed* and lose sight of the big picture; in other words, a tutoring session isn't just about one particular paper; it's about learning expectations for writing in English and learning how to prioritize issues.

Tutors can help ESL students understand how to navigate the English language and the cultural and educational expectations that go along with it. It may be necessary to explain that setting goals for the session will benefit their writing in the long run. But believing that a plan is good is one thing, making the plan is another.

How Do I Do This?

To make an effective plan, first ask the writer a few questions about her work and her expectations for the session. Using the writer's responses, set the goals for the session collaboratively, sketch a map or list that will illustrate those goals, and finally, be ready to change the plan as the need arises.

Find Out What the Student Knows About the Center

One of the first questions to ask is whether the student is familiar with the writing center. If not, take the time to explain the peer tutor format, the goal-setting process, and any other techniques that could be used, such as reading the draft aloud (see Chapter 4) or serving as a scribe while clarifying meanings (see Chapter 7). Explaining how the writing center and the tutoring conference typically operate can go a long way toward easing a student's anxiety. In Chapter 15, Gerd Bräuer discusses the rarity of writing centers abroad and how new the concept is for most ESL writers.

Ask About the Student's Piece of Writing

Regarded as one of the masters of the tutoring conference, Donald Murray suggests asking "questions which draw helpful comments out of the student writer" such as

- "What did you learn from this piece of writing?"
- "What do you intend to do in the next draft?"
- "What do you like best in the piece of writing?"
- "What questions do you have of me?"[6]

ESL students may never have been asked questions like these about a piece of writing, so be patient if the answers don't come easily. Asking open-ended questions will help you learn more about the writer as well as the assignment and the draft so far. Maintaining a dialogue will also reinforce the writer's responsibility in the conference.

If Necessary, Ask More Direct Questions

If you have not gotten enough specific information, you may need to ask more direct questions. Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner offer three basic questions that will get right to the point:

- "What was the assignment?"
- "What is your central point or main argument?"
- "What concerns you, or what do you want me to pay careful attention to?"[7]

The first question will familiarize you with the student's task, and the second will give you insight into how the student has approached the task. The second question skillfully avoids using the term *thesis*, which could be troubling for some students. The last question brings us to the next step in the process: setting the goals for the session. Let the writer know that his input is important. Remember, the best kind of plan is the one that tutor and tutee devise together. However, tutors should be prepared for ESL students who are uncomfortable or unwilling to take an active role because they see the tutor as the authority. These students may insist on repeatedly asking a tutor what she thinks and might leave the tutoring session feeling it was a waste of time if the tutor refuses to do or say anything directive. In these cases, the tutor can take the lead, and with multiple visits, these students will likely become accustomed to actively participating in writing center tutorials. (See Chapter 7 for a discussion of the difference between being *direct* and being *directive*.)

Set Goals Together

If the student only wants an editing session and you feel that she would benefit from spending time on global items, you could acknowledge the student's request and add a request of your own. Your ideas are valuable to the student and to the success of the session. You could say, "Okay, we will address one or two grammar issues, but if I see any unclear meanings, we will take a look at them as well." Collaboration fosters a dialogue that will help develop trust between tutor and tutee while preserving the student's ownership of the piece and responsibility in the session. "When the map is negotiated," says Macauley, the session is planned "without either dominating."[8]

The number of goals for each session will vary. There is no set formula for determining how many items you will have time to address. With practice, you will become more accurate at gauging the amount of time certain goals take. If global writing concerns are on the agenda, tackling one or two goals will probably be all you can expect to cover. If issues of mechanics are to be the focus, you may have time to cover two, three, or even four goals. Sometimes it is okay to overplan because it will remind the student of items that still need attention after the conference ends.

Make the Plan Visible

Once you have both become stakeholders in the conference by agreeing on a set of goals, it is time to make the plan visible. Methods such as listing, clustering, and formal and informal outlining are familiar to ESL students, but there are also ways to be creative in visually representing the goals for the session. Creative representations aid visual learners, and for ESL students, where language fails, visuals can fill in. Sociolinguistics professor Nancy Hayward shared an anecdote with me about a graduate ESL student who was having trouble grasping the concept of an overarching idea. She said she finally turned the student's paper over and drew a picture of an umbrella. She wrote the broad idea across the umbrella and then filled in all of the different components that made up the idea underneath. She said the student caught on immediately.[9]

Visual representations of plans for tutoring sessions can take many forms. Play with different ideas and see which ones work for you and the students you meet. Keep in mind that it may not be possible to fill in the specific grammar, punctuation, or formatting goals for the session until you read some of the student's paper. The student may be unaware of these issues and therefore unable to tell you about them at the beginning of the session.

Once you have an idea of what type of visual aid will work best for the goals you have established, even if it is just a list, sketch an outline of it on a piece of paper so that it remains visible throughout the conference. Explain the sketch to the student and how it represents the goals for the conference. Involve him in the process by inviting him to help fill in the sketch with the goals.

Points to Remember

- *Let the plan guide you but remember to remain flexible.* While making a plan is important, writing and conferencing are, without a doubt, unpredictable processes. "A tutoring session," Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad explain, "shows emergent adaptation as the session is negotiated and defined through the conversation of tutor and writer."[10] Refer to your map, but don't be afraid to revise it: Add to it, scratch out items, arrow in new items, circle or highlight items that emerge as the most important, and star items that you probably won't get to cover so that the student will remember to address these issues on her own. (In Chapter 18, Zahara and Jane discuss taking notes so that they can remember to address issues on their own after a conference.)
- *It will be easy to assess what you have accomplished during the conference by referring to the map as the session concludes.* You can go over it together and check off the items you have completed, or if you checked them off along the way, you can enjoy reviewing how much you covered during the session. Even if you only got to a couple of items, it will be

pleasing to know that one or two of the goals you set were covered completely. Of course, it is important to note that the pleasure of checking off items on the to-do list is Western in nature. "We are a doing society rather than a being society," Hayward asserts, "We are judged and we judge people on their accomplishments."[11]

- *If you haven't done so already, explain to the student that the value of the map extends far beyond this single tutoring session.* It will serve as a guide when he revises the paper on his own, and it could give him ideas for outlining and goal setting for his next assignment. It will help tutors as well when it comes to filling out faculty reports or writing center logs on student conferences. Going over the map at the end of the session will provide a visual representation of what has been accomplished and will bring closure to the conference while providing the student with direction for the revisions he will now make on his own.

Most important, remember that when you tutor ESL students you are dealing with much more than main ideas and verb endings. You are helping to further introduce a student to U.S. cultural and educational expectations.

Notes

1. Newkirk, 313.
2. Macauley, 1.
3. McAndrew and Reigstad, 42.
4. McAndrew and Reigstad, 56.
5. North, 438.
6. Murray, 68.
7. Gillespie and Lerner, 29–30.
8. Macauley, 3.
9. Hayward, personal communication, December 11, 2003.
10. McAndrew and Reigstad, 28.
11. Hayward, personal communication, December 11, 2003.

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