

## Cracking the Code

By Jesse Keyes

Writing lab tutorials are filled with challenges and victories, and tutors must be aware of a number of different grammatical rules and structures to best aid students. However, tutoring is not simply utilizing a strong grasp of grammar and correcting spelling. While tutoring, consultants must examine the personality of each individual student in order to have the most successful, writer-based tutoring session. During many tutorials, the students who seek aid are quiet and do not want to contribute to the collaborative process.

Because tutoring sessions are about the growth and progress of writers, not the ability of tutors to correct petty errors, tutors are faced with the challenge of recognizing quiet and unwilling students and helping them to open up and participate in their writing processes. Students who initially refuse to participate in their tutorials and do not help the tutor define and fix problems are like locked vaults. While tutors may have difficulty finding the correct combination for unenthusiastic students, once they unlock the vault, the inside holds the reward of an involved and caring writer, with interesting and personal ideas for her writing.

Unwilling students in writing lab tutorials may be facing a number of obstacles which keep them from opening up to the tutor. Muriel Harris's article, "Talk to Me: Engaging Reluctant Writers," offers some reasons why students might not want to actively participate in a tutorial session. Students may be overwhelmed with other schoolwork and personal issues; students may think that they are not talented writers and may be embarrassed to speak with a tutor; students may have been forced by a professor to attend a tutorial, even though the students may think their writing is strong. (Harris 25-27) Whatever the individual case of a student might be, the tutor must be understanding and willing to help the writer connect with the process of the tutorial and her own writing.

The simplest and most effective way for tutors to interact with students in the writing lab is to empathize, especially with those tutees reluctant to participate. A simple comment from a tutor such as, "I know how hard it is to juggle classes and write papers for different professors," helps break down the barrier of reluctant students. A friendly statement such as this lets the student know that the tutor is not a grammar robot who will criticize and degrade them. The student can then realize that the tutor is a peer who has been through struggles of her own and is only trying to help the writer become stronger.

With shy students, tutors can empathize by saying, "It can be kind of awkward to talk about your personal writing with a total stranger, let's talk about your weekend first." Beverly Lyon Clark, an English professor at Wheaton College, calls this informal speaking "preliminary talk" and encourages tutors, "You could ask the student about herself, her attitude to writing, her previous experiences with writing, her course, her assignment, her strengths and weaknesses." (111) By recognizing why a student is not opening up and empathizing with her issues for a few minutes, a tutor can gain the trust and respect of the student, creating a more successful and helpful tutorial for both the tutor and the writer. As the writer becomes comfortable and opens up, the tutor can engage the student to recognize her own errors in the writing process, helping the writer have better overall writing rather than just a better paper. By assessing students' personalities and

finding their personal vault combinations, tutors can unlock the gifts of writing students have to offer.

#### [Works Cited](#)