

**Body Language and Eye Contact**

**By Maureen E. Sanford**

**Suffolk Community College, Smithtown, NY**

A lot can be learned about people by observing their body language. Just look around the Writing Center and see the different postures and poses. You see a tutor sitting back in a chair, arms folded across his or her chest, while a student is talking to the tutor. What would you deduce from this scene? Or if you see a student with arms folded while the tutor is talking? How about a tutor and student close together, heads almost touching, looking down at a paper?

Body language can be an important clue in determining if a session is going well or not. I perceive a student or a tutor sitting back in the chair with arms folded as a poor session. There is too much space between tutor and student. Someone seems to be on the defensive or not really interested in what the other is saying or doing. On the other hand, if a tutor and a student are close together, the paper between them and their heads near each other, I perceive this as a good session because both people are involved with the task before them.

As the tutor, I want students to perceive my willingness to help them. I make a conscious effort to be aware of my own body language, as well as the body language of the student. I start my session with a smile and introduce myself by name. If the student extends a hand, I shake it. I sit next to the students, not across from them. As I begin to ask about the assignment, I lean forward and rest my hands on the table in order to present myself as an open-minded, receptive person, who is ready to listen. Usually, students respond positively by leaning toward me.

When a student reads, I want to see what the student is reading because very often students add or change words they think they wrote but didn't. In order to follow along, I will move closer. If the student seems uncomfortable and/or self-conscious, I back off slightly to give the student more space. It is essential to remember that not everyone feels comfortable close to another person, so be careful not to impose yourself into the student's "own space." But do not distance yourself so that the student feels you are trying to get away. Use your own judgment and adjust to each student and session.

Lastly, remember that eye contact is very important during a tutoring session. Eye contact allows you to show the student that you are paying attention to what he or she is saying. It also allows you, the tutor, to see if there is confusion or doubt, as well as understanding or confidence, on the part of the student. So, make sure you look at the student and make eye contact frequently when either of you is speaking.

## **A High School Perspective on Peer Tutoring: My Peer Tutoring Adventure with the Non-Responsive Client**

**By Alexis Kaminsky**

**Manhasset High School**

It's Tuesday. I arrive in the Writing Center a few minutes before the bell rings to tell the teacher who is there that I will be on duty and to sign my name on the board.

A junior high class arrives, and their teacher explains the assignment to me. They have all read biographies and will be giving oral presentations on them this week, but first they must fill out sheets and type up sentence outlines which they will use as notes for their presentations. I understand the assignment and ask if anyone needs help. No one does. I sit...and sit...and sit...Finally, I hear my name and practically jump out of my seat. I walk over to the source of the voice.

"Hi, do you need help?" I ask in what I hope comes across as a friendly tone.

A simple shake of the head is the only reply that I receive from the silent student.

"Okay, if you do, I'll be over there." I return to my chair, flip open the binder labeled LIVES WORTH KNOWING and read.

A few minutes later, the teacher asks me to help the silent student. She tells me I can write down on his sheet what he dictates to me. I sit and look at the sheet. The teacher has divided the project into very distinct sections; all the kids have to do is write a few short sentences about their person's early life, school years, career, defining moments, and the people who have influenced him or her. My client has already filled in facts about the early life of the person in his biography, but his sheet is almost entirely blank. My client's book is on a basketball player; I have no clue who he is. Silently I start to think that this may be more of a challenge than I originally thought.

"So \_\_\_\_, did, um...Hakeem go to college?"

He nods and gives me a look that clearly shows me that my help is not wanted.

"Well, what did he study?"

He shrugs his shoulders and looks over at the other side of the room. I am starting to have a sinking feeling in my stomach – maybe I'm not such a great peer tutor.

"Well, what did you think was important that happened to him while he was in college?"

Another shrug, this time followed by a sigh and a look of combined boredom and misery. I don't know what to do. I am frantically searching for some clue on the page that sits before me, but I find no help there. I am near the point of desperation, but I refuse to give up – at least, not yet.

“Well, did he have a hard time in college?” I’m really fishing now.

He nods, and I think, well, here we go again.

“Why?” I expect to receive another shrug and a dirty look.

“He didn’t speak English very well.” I can barely hear the quiet voice that finally speaks.  
“And he had to work to pay for college.”

“What do you want to say about that in your presentation?”

My no longer silent client speaks again, and I write frantically. My client actually knows quite a bit about the person he has studied, and he knows what he want to say; I just have to pry it out of him. There is no easy back and forth between us. It is all work and no fun, and I do not feel as if I have made this student any more receptive to peer tutors. I am completely depressed; I feel like I have failed, and the session seems to have been the farthest thing from a model peer tutoring session. I glance down at the end of the period to see that my client’s sheet is almost entirely filled with his own ideas and words, and I think that maybe I’m wrong.

### **Taking a Stand: Should We Tutor Creative Writing at the Writing Center?**

**By Tess Thompson**

**Penn State University**

People bring all sorts of work to the Writing Center; on any given day, a busy tutor might see a personal statement, a rhetorical analysis, or a doctoral dissertation about the mechanics of drilling holes. Sometimes a tutor will even find someone who wants help with a piece of fiction or a poem. Although at first this task may seem easy, tutoring a creative work raises issues that we don’t usually encounter as peer tutors and that we are not trained to deal with. Due to the nature of our peer tutoring program, I believe that creative writing does not have a place at the Writing Center.

The training we receive as tutors at the Writing Center prepares us to tutor writers of expository, rather than creative, writing. In our training class, we study typical assignments for composition classes that all university students must take. These assignments are all similar in that they have well-defined criteria for evaluation. Even though peer tutors should not evaluate a writer’s work, they can help the writer to discover how to improve a paper only if they have a general idea of the evaluation criteria. A successful rhetorical analysis, for example, uses passages from the text to demonstrate the author’s use of ethos, logos, and pathos. Most of us will agree that a poorly structured

## **The Editor's Corner**

***By Tshawna Byerly, Peer Tutor  
The Pennsylvania State University***

As you may have noticed, half the pieces in this issue came from Penn State. When *The Dangling Modifier* staff did not receive many articles from other schools, we had to allow the tutors at Penn State to occupy space available in this issue.

From the number of subscriptions we have received, I know that there is an interest in *The Dangling Modifier* at other writing centers. I would like to ask all of you who read this newsletter to make it more truly **your** newsletter as well as ours. *The Dangling Modifier* staff would really like to hear from other schools because we'd like this newsletter to reflect what is happening in writing centers across the country. (I would like to thank those tutors outside of Penn State who shared their thoughts and ideas with us.)

Submissions can be on any topic that is related to peer tutoring and the daily happenings of the writing center. They don't all have to be in essay form either—they can be cartoons, poems, lists of tips, etc. We would welcome any thoughts that you would like to share with other tutors. Submissions can also be sent at anytime; you don't have to wait until it's close to the deadline to send an article. For more information on submissions and where to send them, see the bottom of page 3.

Let's work together to make this newsletter one with many voices and many views.

Now, onto another topic: The National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. This year the conference is being held in Oklahoma City, hosted by peer tutors at East Central University and Colorado College and their directors, Kevin Davis and Molly Wingate.

The staff here at Penn State has been working since April to prepare for this conference. We've spent a large amount of time in our weekly staff meetings generating material for our presentations and gathering ideas from our colleagues who won't be traveling to Oklahoma. Those of us lucky enough to get the chance to go have also spent hours outside of staff meetings arranging and fine-tuning our presentations.

Preparing for the conference isn't all hard work, though—there are moments of laughter and mirth as we swap stories and brainstorm ideas. Conference preparations have really brought members of our staff together and allowed us to share with each other in ways that we don't always have an opportunity to do. We're very excited about attending this conference so that we can communicate our ideas with other tutors and also hear what they have to say.

*The Dangling Modifier* staff would like to hear other thoughts on the National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing. We'd be especially interested in getting some reactions from peer tutors who attend the conference to share with our readers who may not have had the opportunity to go.

Editor's Note:

The staff of this newsletter does not necessarily agree with all the opinions expressed in all the articles. We do, however, want this newsletter to express the range of ideas and opinions of all our readers. If you find any article particularly controversial, please respond to it with an article of your own.

**The Director's Chair: Translating Research into Practice in Our Writing Center**  
*By Jean Kiedaisch, Writing Center Director*  
*University of Vermont*

A few years ago my colleague Sue Dinitz and I began a research project with a small group of tutors in our writing center. We liked the idea of having directors and tutors do research together, and we were excited about the subject we had chosen: investigating how students revise after they've had a writing center session with a tutor. We reasoned that since we as teachers learn so much from seeing our students' revisions, tutors too would learn from seeing their conversations with student writers translated into revised drafts.

In fact, the tutors did learn some new things: that it's better to work on fewer issues and do so more thoroughly than to try to cover everything; that someone—either student writer or tutor—needs to take notes or whole conversations are forgotten; that students tend not to go beyond what's talked about in the session in their revisions, or if they do, they work on only minor changes.

However, we found the logistics of getting student writers to send us their revisions daunting—even when we sent the students home with pre-addressed campus mail envelopes. Calling to remind them didn't always work, or we got the revisions so late they had limited usefulness to the tutors. Multiplying these headaches by the thirty tutors in our center, we decided to rethink our goals.



We realized at this point that what had been new and useful to us as directors involved in this project was seeing the paper that was being worked on in a session. The paper seemed to give us so much more to talk about with tutors than we'd had in the past, when we'd viewed and discussed their videotaped sessions together.

Hence my new project. This semester I'm experimenting with having tutors photocopy papers (with the students' permission, of course) when they've had sessions they might choose to evaluate with me. This can be done on the spot—no more waiting for campus mail. A discussion of what they did do and might have done with a paper they photocopied has become the new midterm in the tutor training class (replacing the creation of a mock dialogue over a paper I chose).

So my project led me to have more extensive conversations with tutors about how many issues to try to work with in a one hour session, how to help the student writer remember what was talked about, and what it's reasonable to expect the writer to come up with on her own after the session. And it also led to a better way to help tutors reflect on their tutoring.

### **Sharing the Peer Review Process with Other Students**

*By Pei Shen*

*Perm State University*



Penn State's Writing Across the Curriculum Program has greatly increased the demand for our services. Each semester, our staff of 20 peer tutors sees about 1400 students in our three centers. With our limited resources, we have been challenged to come up with new ways to meet the need for our services. One new venture is the in-class

peer review workshop.

As peer tutors in writing, we possess an important skill that all students, not just peer tutors, can learn. This skill is the ability to peer review. However, most students who take writing courses at

Penn State know little about the peer reviewing process.

During these peer review workshops, instructors invite a small group of tutors to their classes to present an interactive workshop about the peer reviewing process. These classes have ranged from a political science class to a metallurgy class. We try to tailor our presentation specifically to meet each class's different needs. Before the class visit, the tutors meet with the instructor to get more information about the class and the types of writing assignments given.

Usually, we present these workshops in two parts. In the first part of the workshop, we introduce students to Kenneth Bruffee's descriptive outline. The descriptive outline helps students understand the difference between what a sentence or paragraph "says" and "does" in the work. We usually use a short piece of writing and have students work in small groups to identify what each sentence does and what it says. This exercise allows students to develop their critical reading skills and to practice using the language needed to communicate effectively about writing.

The next part of the workshop focuses on the evaluative and substantive portions of a review. Here we provide students with some questions to consider when they are reading a paper and evaluating its substance. Finally, students have the opportunity to practice peer reviews with their classmates as peer tutors circulate to answer questions.

As instructors hear more about these workshops, we have been able to serve a greater number of students who we may not see in the Writing Center.

**To Tutor or Not to Tutor**

**By Rick Sides**

**Former Perm State University Tutor**

*Here's a poem we found in our "archives" here at Penn State that we hope you'll enjoy.*

To tutor or not to tutor, that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of defensive writers,  
Or to take arms against a swarm of papers  
And by counseling help them. To write—to revise,  
No more; and by a revision, to say we end  
The heartache and the thousand writer's blocks  
That authors are heirs to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To write, to revise;  
To revise, perchance to fail—ay, there's the rub:  
For in that revision of depth what grades may drop,  
When we have shuffled off this sloppy construction,  
Must give us pause—there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long semester.  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of rhetorical analysis,  
Th'addresser's wrong, the proud freshman's contumely,  
The pangs of displaced commas, the budget's decay,  
The insolence of instructors, and the spurns  
That patient merit of th'unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With bare apathy? Who would drop-ins bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary two hours,  
But that the dread of something after the session,  
The unoccupied cubicle, from whose three walls  
No writer returns unscathed, puzzles the will,  
And makes us rather groom those skills we have  
Than to fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of liquid paper,  
And enterprises of great pitch and moment  
With this regard their currents turn away  
And lose the name of action. Soft you now,  
The learned Bruffee! Sage, in thy orisons  
Be all my flaws remembered.

*(continued from page 3)*

paper or an awkwardly worded sentence is not effective. In creative works, however, the criteria are far less rigid; if William Faulkner were to walk into the Writing Center, most tutors would suggest that he restructure his sentences to make them easier to follow. A tutor not familiar with postmodernism or stream of consciousness could easily mistake careful artistic choices for careless writing. However, learning about all possible esthetics is far beyond the scope of a one-semester tutor training class. Even after taking several advanced fiction and poetry writing classes, I feel uncomfortable reacting to someone's creative writing in a peer tutoring situation. As most writers and students of literature know, learning to appreciate different kinds of creative literature can take a lifetime.

Even aside from considerations of tutor qualifications, peer tutoring is an inappropriate forum to discuss creative works. Most creative writing classes are held in a workshop format, which means that an author gets feedback from all members of her class, as well as from the instructor, who presumably provided guidelines for class discussion. In a workshop setting, as opposed to peer tutoring, people are encouraged to evaluate creative works and state critical opinions. They mark freely on one another's papers and make detailed suggestions for improvement. This process allows the writer to weigh several different critiques and heed the ones that adhere most closely to her artistic vision. However, peer tutors are taught not to evaluate the writing they see before them. This neutrality becomes a hindrance when dealing with creative writing.

When a student writer submits a creative work for class review, her implied question to the class is "Do you think this is working on an artistic level?" This is a vital question that peer tutors are neither trained nor allowed to answer. In fairness to the writers with whom we work, tutors at the Writing Center should not tutor creative pieces.

### **Writer Comments on Our Services**

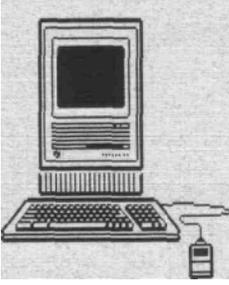
*Compiled by Elizabeth Santoro and Tshawna Byerly  
Penn State University*

*At Penn State we give each writer a form that we call an exit evaluation. The form includes the tutor's name but not the writer's. It asks writers to comment honestly on how their session went, what they thought of their tutor, and how they think our service could improve. Of course, sometimes writers are in a hurry and we get answers like "fine" and "yes," but sometimes these exit evaluations can really show us what we're doing right and what we may need to improve. Below are some samples that we've taken from our exit evaluations.*

#### **The tutor...**

- \_ made good points overlooked by myself and reinforced the strong points.
- \_ was very personable and helpful.
- \_ really took a lot of time discussing my questions.
- \_ was helpful and I felt comfortable.
- \_ was very constructive in her criticism and incorporated my input into it.
- \_ is EXCELLENT!
- \_ cleared up all my questions and helped me finish my ideas.

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- \_ helped me feel confident about my paper.
- \_ helped me a lot! I would suggest this to other people in my class.
- \_ not only helped me with my grammar but taught me a few things.
- \_ showed he was really interested in my concerns and answered my questions to the best of his ability.
- \_ has a passion for writing.
- \_ was very honest and exact.
- \_ helped me focus on problems and things that needed to be changed without telling me what to do—good exchange of ideas!

### **Why Tutees Keep Coming Back:**

- \_ She was honest.
- \_ I like to hear different people's opinions about my paper.
- \_ She was very attuned to my concerns and gave me great suggestions.
- \_ I just think the Writing Center is a real good idea to help students (like me especially).
- \_ We personalized throughout the session—I'm so glad you're here!
- \_ She cleared up most of my problems.

### **What Tutees Would Like To See:**

- \_ It would help if she had more knowledge of the literary work I was analyzing.
- \_ The time was not sufficient.
- \_ Need more time... 1/2 hour is not enough!
- \_ More tutors should be available so that you don't have to wait so long.

## **Getting on the Web**

*By Elizabeth Santoro  
Penn State University*

All right, it's embarrassing, but I admit it: I used to be scared to death of the Internet. The way my computer-literate friends rattled off web site addresses that started "http://www" as if they were reciting their ABCs made me glance nervously at the nearest exit. I had my e-mail, thank you very much, and that was all the technology I needed in my world. Sandra Bullock, whom I considered to be a fine and sensible person, was out there making a movie about a woman whose entire life was very nearly ruined by "The Net." I was afraid of the Internet the way people of long ago were afraid of falling off the edge of a flat world: I just didn't know the facts about it. As soon as I screwed up my courage and got one of my computer science major friends to guide and reassure me during my very first voyage "on-line," I discovered that it wasn't scary at all. In fact, it was more like a big playground that had all the information I could possibly want to know on it. "Surely," you say, "you can't mean EVERYTHING," but I do. The complete works of Montaigne which I was writing a report on for my French Literature class? It's there. A copy of Sun Tsu's *The Art of War* to use as research for my International Politics paper? No problem.

But why stop at Academia? I could also find biographies on my favorite music artists and where I could get tickets for their latest concerts. There were sites about vacation spots that I could consider for Spring Break, complete with an on-line form to fill out to make reservations. Now whenever I need information on a subject, no matter how obscure, one

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of the first places I look is on the Internet. So when I found out that our Writing Center here at Penn State was building a web page, I didn't dash for the door, but for the computer screen.

Making a web page is a lot like writing a paper, something with which, as tutors, we are all intimately acquainted. The first step: understanding the assignment. In order to do this, the first thing I did was look at the types of web pages that other centers across the country already had up and running, so I would know what was possible and what worked well. The University of Maine (<http://ume.maine.edu/-wcenter/>), Michigan Tech University (<http://www.hu.mtu.edu/jdcolman/wc/welcome.html>), Purdue University (<http://owl.trc.purdue.edu>), and the University of Texas (<http://www.utexas.edu/depts/uwc/.html/main.html>) were just a few of the sites that attracted my attention. The next step was, of course, to consider the audience. For our center that was six basic groups: people who are already peer tutors, people who are interested in becoming peer tutors, students who are interested in learning about and using the services we provide, faculty who want to know who we are and what we do so they can consider recommending our services to their students, people from other writing centers who are interested in knowing how our center works, and subscribers to *The Dangling Modifier*. These six groups were easy to incorporate into one web page, because the information they each wanted was similar. Links on the front page of our site could help them to go directly to the area of information they wanted. Links to other pages, such as the Penn State English Department, other University Learning Centers at Penn State, and writing center pages at other universities, would help visitors to our page to find any information they may not find on our page. Some of our ideas currently include information on who we are, what we do (and don't do), our philosophy, how we are trained, what writers can expect from a session, excerpts from previous issues of *The Dangling Modifier* and even pictures of our center and staff.

Creating a web page is a fun and exciting process, because the Internet is an increasingly important and used resource for everyone, especially students. The purpose of the Internet is not very much different from the purpose of the Writing Center: to help people get the information they need in their daily lives, and even to get some enjoyment out of the process of learning this information. The Penn State Writing Center's page will be going up this coming spring. So when it's time to boldly go where thousands of information-seekers have gone before, don't be afraid. You'll find what you need, soon including the Penn State Writing Center, on the Internet. I'll see you there.

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