

**How Did He Get in Here?**

**By Rich Sonnenberg**

**University of Cincinnati**

*"Who is this guy, Rich? He didn't notice this? He's a tutor? He's an idiot!"*

When I first started as a peer tutor, I felt that I had many inadequacies. First of all, I'm not an English major. In fact, I am still undecided as to my major. I was also never confident with my own writing abilities. It took me forever just to write a one-page paper. I constantly suffered from writer's block and would freak out the night before a paper was due. I never would have guessed that my teacher would ask me to be a peer tutor.

My first tutoring experience was very intimidating. Before opening the lab, one of my professors, Ms. Wallace, offered to assist me with my first tutee. She said I could just observe and jump in anytime I felt I had something to say. A few minutes after the door was opened, Sarah came into the lab asking for help with a revision. We introduced ourselves, sat down, and I asked her to read aloud so that both of us could work together. As soon as Sarah started reading, my mind began to wander. *What am I looking for? What is her thesis? Did I miss it? As soon as Sarah stops reading I know Ms. Wallace is going to ask me for my thoughts. I'd better have something to say.* Then I realized I wasn't paying any attention and wasn't going to have anything to say. I began to question my attention span. How can I be a good tutor if I can't pay attention to a simple two-page essay?

I know that I am not the only person to have entered into tutoring with fears of inadequacy. After our first class, I spoke with another student who expressed similar feelings. She too thought that she would be the lone tutor who was not an English major. She also expressed doubts about her own writing ability. This conversation prompted the first little boost in my confidence. It made me realize that I wasn't alone. It also made me realize that we are peer tutors, suggesting that the only thing that separates us from the tutees is a little experience. We must realize that more likely than not, when we first start something new, such as tutoring, we are not going to be at our best. It is only after trial and error that we learn what it takes to be a good tutor. We must also realize that our teachers know this. They don't expect instant greatness. They have dealt with many tutors' fears and many have had these same fears themselves. All of these fears can be cured with experience. Students come to the lab because they need help, and every little bit counts. All we are really doing is just sharing the knowledge that we learned from being in their shoes.

**From the Other Side**

*By Dawn Hillberg*

*Michigan State University*

Working with clients who speak English as a second language (ESL) in our writing center is proving to be very challenging for me. Language barriers, shifting roles between consultant and client, and unvoiced expectations may contribute to the frustration I experience in this consulting. However, I recently gained a new understanding of the ESL perspective. While working with my French tutor, I had the opportunity to experience a situation similar to our consulting sessions, but from the viewpoint of the client. This experience was very valuable because in the process of workshopping my paper, I experienced many frustrations that our ESL clients must experience when they bring their work to the writing center.

The first problem that arose in our session was deciding the language in which to conduct the session. Although this is not an issue in our writing consultations, it gave me some insight into the intimidation that clients may feel when speaking English with native speakers. I discovered in this session that it was difficult for me to ask the "right" questions, or rather, difficult to formulate language to convey the exact meaning of my question. This intimidation made me not want to ask questions; I wanted to sit back passively and listen to my tutor, rather than take a very active role in revising my paper. Our ESL clients at the writing center may feel this same intimidation because of their perception of consultants as "experts," simply because we are native English speakers. This may be why many of them tend to remain silent during consulting sessions.

The most interesting part, for me, was to see my own attitudes and expectations change during the session. Originally, I had gone into this session intending to treat it like those we have in the writing center. I wanted to look at "big picture issues," content, and organization. Although I knew grammar would be a large concern, I wanted to look for patterns of errors in my grammar, figure out why I was making these mistakes, and determine how I could change them for next time.

What I ended up doing, however, was a different story. I became caught up in the fact that I had a native speaker at my disposal and all my questions became grammar focused. I began to concentrate my energy on making this particular paper perfect, rather than gaining more knowledge about how the language works and working to become a better writer.

Then I began to notice that many of the attitudes I had were similar to those of ESL clients with whom I have consulted and the attitudes that frustrate me the most. I was letting the tutor take charge of the session, and I was writing down her ideas word for word. I started to wonder what I'd really be gaining from this. I realized that we could make this particular paper error-free from a native speaker's point of view, but how would that make me a better writer? What was I learning from this session that I could use the next time I sat down to write in French? These realizations were valuable because

they provoked me to turn the session around and get back to the "larger issues" on which I had originally intended to concentrate.

I'm really glad I was able to experience the flip side of these sessions. As a writing consultant, I think I needed to be reminded of the struggles and frustrations of all clients, but especially ESL writers. This session made me realize that it would be beneficial to talk to the ESL writer first before working on the paper, to find out more about her or his writing processes and frustrations. If my tutor had taken time to talk with me about these issues during our consultation, not only would I have felt less intimidated, but I would have gained better facility with the language. The consultation not only would have improved this one paper, but would have helped me to become a better writer in a foreign language.

### **Ride the Bus; Skin the Cat; Sabotage the Ice Cream Truck: A Consideration of External Factors in the Writing Process**

*By Will Toedtman*

*University of Cincinnati*

My friend Joe has an unconventional habit. Every six months or so, for a couple of weeks he lives on a Greyhound bus in transit, filling notebooks with material for his novel. He once told me he can't write anywhere else. He's inspired by the motion of the bus, the constant changing of environment, and all the other nuances of the ride. They have become instrumental factors in his writing process. While Joe may be eccentric, maybe even a little bent, he seems to have found something worthwhile in the bending. His quixotic lifestyle is a tribute to the idea that the productivity of one's writing can be enhanced given the right conditions.

However, the optimal conditions for facile writing tend to be widely varied and rather personal. I must concede that neither I nor probably anyone I've encountered so far in the writing lab has any immediate intentions of writing a novel, not to mention uprooting oneself every six months in order to do so. But it is also important to note that none of us has led the life of Joe. So before you sink your next paycheck into a bus ticket in order to write that term paper, consider the following.

Stimulated by a bustling social climate or perhaps a bohemian atmosphere, some people feel they can only write in cafes. Others take solace in the library; just being in an environment with many other people who are all intent on their studies (or at least appear to be) can bolster the initiative to write. Still other writers are most comfortable dictating their work into a tape recorder, perhaps leaving any actual writing or typing entirely to someone else. For those inspired by nature, an outdoor setting such as a park or backyard might best invoke the muse. The impetus could really come from anything: your favorite sweater, a cappuccino, a fountain pen, halogen lamplight.

I tend to do my best writing at home when I'm in seclusion and silence—two conditions which are rarely, if ever, absolute. Whenever I sit down to work, my cat Azalea will leap onto my writing surface and demand affection by sprawling herself all over my materials.

If I shut her out of the room, she'll meow and croon at the door until I let her in. Another frequent adversity is an ice cream truck that circuits my neighborhood. Always blaring a stiff, electronic arrangement of the first few lines of Joplin's *Entertainer*, this truck can be heard five blocks away. Then there's the agony of countless refrains growing louder and louder as the truck approaches my street.

Sometimes it's a lost cause. But in general, if I do what I can to minimize distractions and attain some sense of privacy, I'm likely better prepared and more willing to write. I try to do most of my writing in mid-afternoon or late at night. The phone doesn't ring much then, and I am less apt to be bothered by the sounds of traffic, the thundering of car stereos, or other noises. I have a boxed window fan that creates a pleasant din of white noise. The steady hum of the fan belt and blades whirling away drowns out the distraction of lesser noises such as a TV in another room or a cat crooning at the door. It's like the year's first snowfall on a lawn cluttered with leaves. A new level of silence is superimposed with fewer imperfections.

As students, we have the task of writing imposed on us routinely. Furthermore, it's difficult—even for the best writers. Unfortunately, since we have slightly different motivations than Joe, the intermittent, rambling novelist, writing under optimal conditions may not always be feasible. But, so much as it is an integral part of our lives, we can do well to accommodate our writing by determining the environment in which it will flourish and making use of it whenever possible. Whatever your inclination may be (provided it's nonviolent), honor it. It is bound to ease the burden and, perhaps, exact the joy of writing.

### **Safety First**

***By Michael E. Marcotte***  
***University of Cincinnati***

A situation arose not long ago that gave me some real food for thought. While I was working in our English tutor lab, a young man walked in for help with a writing assignment. He immediately approached the more experienced tutor I am fortunate enough to be paired with. The student smiled, leaned across the table, and asked her if her name was Amy. She replied no and asked if I could take care of him. Being a rookie, I assumed she was simply trying to steer some experience and practice my way. I said sure and sat down with the student while my coworker went into our supervisor's office and closed the door behind her. After the student had gone, the other tutor and my supervisor gave me the lowdown on the student I just assisted. During a previous quarter, he had come in for help while my current coworker was manning the lab. She is a naturally open and friendly person and made small talk with him before tackling his paper. Well, apparently this student took her friendliness as a come-on and started asking her sexual habits and preferences, which made her extremely uncomfortable. The guy gave her the creeps.



My supervisor also told me that within the past year another tutor had actually been stalked by one of her

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tutees. Now, I am 6'2" and tip the scales at 225 pounds, so I don't think it is quite as likely that I will have to deal with situations such as the aforementioned, but it offends me that tutors have to worry about this kind of thing at all. Nevertheless, the whole episode started me thinking about the safety and security aspects of the tutor/tutee relationship. Upon consideration, the issue spawned far more questions than answers. I hope that simply raising the issue is enough. The question of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable behavior immediately gave birth to another: *Is there a clear line between these behaviors?* There *is* a line, but it varies according to the individual tutor. What is offensive to one may not even raise the eyebrow of another. The quick and easy rule is that if a tutee's behavior and/or language makes a tutor uncomfortable, then the tutor has the right to either refer the student to another tutor or the lab supervisor, or to diplomatically let the student know that their behavior is inappropriate. Our lab highly stresses the importance of professional behavior from our tutors, and we reserve the right in turn to be treated in a professional manner by our tutees.

We try to make our "clients" feel comfortable and at ease, but apparently there is such a thing as being too familiar. It is incumbent upon the administrators and teachers in charge of the labs to be aware of these concerns and to make their tutors aware as well. As abhorrent as I find the prospect of the necessity of discussing this matter, it must be done. We all want our tutees to feel comfortable, but it must not be at the expense of our own safety. I welcome responses. I would very much like to know how you, my peers, feel about this subject and to know how administrators and tutors elsewhere have dealt with situations of sexual harassment, stalking, and other related concerns.

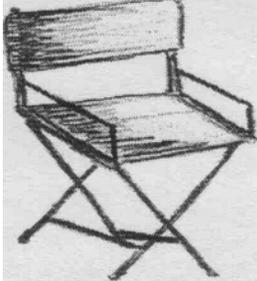
### *Editor's Note:*

*We are really interested in getting feedback on this situation. Recently here at Penn State University, one of our tutors was approached by a writer who asked her to pose nude for some pictures. What can we do about these kinds of situations? How do we keep each other safe? Our writing center responded in part by posting the number for the local walk service that students can call to request an escort home after dark.*

### **Director's Chair**

**By Jon Olson, Writing Center Director**  
**Pennsylvania State University**  
**Writing Center director reflects on writers' enthusiasm...**

### **Jimmy's Killer Soccer Ball**



*[Thanks to the Peer Tutoring in Writing students of Penn State's University Park campus for letting me write their assignments along with them, to Moira Dempsey for helping me remember the writers in this story, and to Cheryl Glenn for helping me change the writers' names.]*

Jimmy Riley meant business as he bent over a story he'd written about a killer soccer ball that bit legs. He gripped a pencil in one hand and an eraser in the other. He had come to the University Writing Center with twenty-two other third-graders, his teacher, and a few parents, and now a tutor was listening to him read his story and was asking him questions. When he'd been writing the story back in his classroom and at home, Jimmy had paid more attention to drawing the ball's flesh-tearing teeth than he'd paid to the narrative plot of this soccer ball on a rampage. Now as he answered the tutor's questions, he could see he had some gaps to fill if his story was going to make sense to this fellow writer who really seemed interested in the story. So Jimmy shoved a keyboard aside to give himself more room to write with his dull pencil, and he got busy.

As Jimmy concentrated, he zoned out the other writers' voices around him. He didn't notice his classmate Jeannie Schweinfurth talking. She'd written an essay on the importance of putting out a fire when on a camping trip.

Susie Ferran had written about a six-year-old girl who is ignored because of her younger sister. Susie's mom had just had a baby.

Darrin Johnson had written about a bat named Flutter. His story was full of bat facts: bats eat three hundred mosquitoes a night; they catch mosquitoes with their tails.

David Bowles wrote about the attack of the Slime Monster.

Bobby Cayton had lost the copy of his story about a dragon, but he had it in his head, and he was discussing it with his tutor.

Paula Capell's personal essay was about one of her fears. She began, "When I went into PE that morning, my worst enemy was standing there. The Balance Beam!"

Jamie Barlowe wrote a story called "Bump." Its first paragraph went like this:

One gloomy old fall day, we moved to a spooky old town called Pioneer Village. My mom described it as a peaceful place where there were tons of butterflies and robins. But all I saw was a bunch of sad people and pitbulls and there was noise

everywhere. There were one or two robins but that was it. My mom said the rest will come in the spring, I'm certain. "Yeah right Mom," I whispered to myself.

Fred Wellman was Jamie's tutor that day. Fred was eighty years old and had retired twelve years earlier after a fifty-year career in journalism. When he retired, he'd been an executive of a cable news network. He used to say he'd been so good at firing people that they wouldn't know their throat had been cut until they tried to turn their head to leave the room. When Fred filled out a report form on Jamie, he wrote, "Story telling skill is far superior to that of other nine-year-olds. The story contained excellent setting descriptions, suspense, emotions such as fear and anxiety, and a blessed happy ending. Spelling needs work but will improve with age—like a favorite doll." Jamie read her report out loud to her beaming mother, then ran to join her fellow writers as they huddled to compare what tutors had written on their slips.

As the third-graders gathered in the hallway to discuss with their teacher what had happened, they all wanted to talk at once; meanwhile, back in the Writing Center's conference room, the tutors were doing the same thing, talking excitedly. But as discussion focused the energy in the room, one question emerged: what caused the difference between, on the one hand, those confident, enthusiastic third-grade writers who liked writing and, on the other hand, the often apologetic, fearful university writers with whom the tutors so often worked?

Looking out the window, the tutors could see the third-graders lining up for their bus. As Jimmy Riley waited in the rain for his turn to get on, he hunched with pencil in hand over a damp, smudged story he held to his knee, revising.

**Doubles: Involving More than One Client in a Session**  
*By Justin Felix, Susan Gunn, Chris Roman, and Gerry Winter*  
*Kent State University*

The Kent State University

Writing Center routinely schedules sessions for students from Introduction to College English (KSU's basic writing course) to work in pairs. Our approach to double sessions (affectionately nicknamed doubles by our peer writing assistants) is theoretically grounded in whole language. A double session employs all four language arts: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. A client who comes to the Writing Center is given the opportunity to read her writing to an audience consisting of another client and a peer writing assistant (PWA). This client hears and evaluates the comments she receives from the others and then, as the focus shifts from her to the other client, assumes the role of the responsible listener and critic. In these sessions, there is no idle or waiting time; the client is always either reading, actively listening, commenting, or writing.

Because whole language theory assumes the social nature of language use, it serves to encourage collaborative work among both participants in a double session. Collaboration between the two clients and the PWA focuses more upon the writer than the paper itself. The PWA's task is not to tell clients what to write but to provide a safe, comfortable

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atmosphere where clients learn to be writers. The PWA models good group work strategies in the double session, leading to more effective peer editing in the classroom. The basic writing instructor becomes, in a sense, a fourth invisible interlocutor as the clients work together to interpret their writing assignments and write papers that meet their teachers' requirements. Our 45-minute sessions allow time for each client to read her paper to the group, respond to the writing of the other, and apply what she has learned to the process of revision. As clients begin revising, the PWA is nearby for assistance with the new material.

Doubles empower our clients because the balance of power is in their favor; they outnumber PWAs two-to-one in sessions. Clients, in addition, maintain control of their own writing at all times. By working with peers and talking about problems they share in common, our clients often collaborate on solutions and find comfort in the knowledge that they are not alone in their struggles with writing. Basic writers actually teach each other, while the PWA guides and facilitates.

The double session does present challenges which cannot be overlooked but can be overcome. Some clients are initially reluctant to share their writing with others. This reluctance provides an opportunity to educate clients regarding the public nature of academic writing and to cultivate the development of audience awareness. Clients in sessions often have differing levels of ability and experience with writing, but this can be turned to an advantage by a skilled PWA who encourages the stronger student to model for the weaker one.

Well-trained PWAs are crucial to the successful management of the double session. During their initial training, PWAs observe sessions, followed by modeling and role playing, as demonstrated in our presentation at the NCPTW last October. Weekly staff meetings provide continuing education in theory and a forum for airing problems, concerns, and successes.

All basic writing students are required to visit the Writing Center at least five times during the semester. To make prospective clients feel at ease, a pair of PWAs visits each basic writing course early in the semester to introduce the Writing Center. They provide information on how to schedule appointments and model a session to give students an idea of what to expect when they come in. The basic writing faculty cooperates by encouraging their students to team up and schedule their sessions in pairs. The director constantly communicates with faculty to ensure that assistants are working in harmony with classroom efforts and that results are meeting, if not exceeding, instructors' expectations. Collaborative learning, in short, is not the domain of our clients alone; it extends to the PWAs and faculty as we continually work together to enable our clients to gain confidence in their ability to actively write, read, speak, and listen. The fact that doubles allow us to accommodate more clients than space and staff limitations would ordinarily allow under a single-session arrangement is an added bonus.

### **Writing Center Profile in Brief: Berea College**

**Director:** Libby Jones

**Number of Consultants:** Approximately fifteen undergraduates from all different majors. The school has around 1500 students, and the tutors at Berea do approximately 1200 sessions per year.

**Philosophy:** They are a center fostering effective written and oral communication and learning, serving the campus community. Their approaches to learning are collaborative, respectful, strategy-based (focused on long-term learning), integrative (of communication modes/skill), need-based, and active.

**Set-up:** They offer both appointments and drop-in sessions (although they urge appointments). Sessions are scheduled for an hour.

**Staff Communication:** The Berea consultants have a weekly staff meeting, a message board, a weekly announcement sheet, and a listserv. Consultants also write reflections in their time logs, which are periodically read by senior staff members who respond to the logs. Senior student staff meets an extra hour a week to plan and solve problems.

**Client feedback:** At the end of each session, consultants ask clients to complete an anonymous evaluation. The evaluations are summarized and posted each month for the whole staff.

**Workshops:** They lead workshops on specific communication modes and assignments and another series for undergrad teaching assistants on strategies for helping with written and oral communication.

**Technology:** They have computers available for consultant/client use, but they do not do much computer or internet consulting. They are also in the process of making a web page.

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