Just Say 'Yes' to Having No Time: Tutoring Tips for the Year-End Crunch

By Ben Ogrodnik

With the end of the semester approaching, time is in short supply at the Writing Center. Oftentimes, there are too many writers and not enough tutors. Instructors also set deadlines for writing assignments around the same time, so even slower shifts get hit with bursts of activity. To better manage tutorials and to accomplish more with less time during these stressful parts of the school year, tutors should consider some simple strategies that can ensure that each tutorial proceeds quickly and effectively.

Wasting time is the tutor's biggest enemy. The key to getting around this problem is to establish a tutorial that sets out to accomplish specific goals. First, find out what the writer wants from the session by asking him or her what the assignment is about, and follow that up by asking what is the biggest aspect of the paper that needs the most work. Mentally keep track of the concerns of the writer while he or she reads the paper aloud. Also pay attention to things that the writer might have missed. At the end of the session, you should have a set of questions ready for the writer. Doing this keeps a balance between the writer's concerns and your own, and you are better able to address multiple areas of the paper that might need to be revised without losing sight of your writer's original goals.

Another way to save time is to have the writer summarize his or her argument before actually reading the paper. This is not orthodox Writing Center protocol, but it definitely clues you in to potential issues with the paper from the get-go. If the writer can't summarize the paper, you'll know the topic needs work. If the writer's summary doesn't match the content on the page, you'll be more prepared to think of ways to fuse the mental argument and the written argument. There are obvious exceptions to this technique, especially when one is dealing with ESL writers. In those situations, it is better to allow the non-native writer to read the paper through once, and then ask for a summary afterward.

One of the easiest ways to ensure a time-effective tutorial is also one of the most obvious: explain the time constraints before the tutorial begins. When reviewing the standard practices of the center, point out to the writer that it might not be possible to address every single aspect of the paper. When you mention that each tutorial generally lasts for thirty minutes (or whatever time your Center designates as appropriate), the writer is more likely to think about the crucial aspects of the paper. This might mean sacrificing some minor concerns (checking grammar or sentence structure) for more important concerns (thesis and organization), but be sure to remind the writer that multiple sessions are possible during your shift. Likewise, mention that there are other resources available if it is not possible to address everything.

Shortening tutorials may be more helpful than having longer tutorials. In longer tutorials, there's a tendency to over-emphasize less important things. We linger over trivial aspects when it would be more helpful to focus on one or two big structural flaws. Also, when a tutorial lasts longer than the typically allotted thirty minutes, we sometimes overlook minor, but crucial, details. We put our tutoring senses on the backburner and ride on auto-pilot, thinking that because we've been helping a person for longer than normal, we must've touched on the major things as well as

the minor things along the way. More often than not, though, this attitude only lulls us into a false sense of completion, so we only shortchange ourselves and writers. Sometimes seeing less truly is seeing more, especially when it means fixing what matters.

Pay attention to the clock, especially during the slower (as well as the busier) parts of the day at the Writing Center. If nobody's around the Center aside from a co-worker and a lone writer, it is very easy to waste time in a longer-than-average tutorial. Whenever the Center is nearly empty, we tend to assume that the lack of activity means we should help the writer for a longer period of time, which results in a better tutoring session overall. Yet doing this forgets that tutors have schedules and deadlines, too; it also increases the potential for the session to incur more interruptions. Generally speaking, it is better to divide time with more writers, partly to maintain a readiness for a sudden influx of writers (for you and your co-workers' sake), and partly to ensure that every writer receives the same amount of attention and the same quality of tutoring service. Also, it goes without saying that with more time and a lack of writers, there's more potential for a longer tutorial to devolve into non-tutoring-related discussions or activities which don't significantly enhance either the writer's learning or the state of his or her paper. So for longer sessions, don't be ignorant of the clock - have a method to manage time and stick to it.

Finally, communication with coworkers is essential. Tutors who work together can accomplish many things they wouldn't be able to do individually. Once when I was working with a fellow tutor, we divided our time so that he would work with two writers back-to-back, during thirty-minute time blocks, while I helped one writer, whose longer paper needed lots of revision, for a longer period of time. This sort of cooperation should not be absent from Writing Centers. When tutors share work and communicate continuously, they are better able to adjust time spent with writers, depending on their needs.

With these tips, the end-of-the-semester madness should turn out a bit less chaotic than usual. And when these strategies are applied throughout the year, we may be able to extend our productivity, even under imperfect circumstances. Whether it is shortening tutorials or taking on more writers, performing time management strategies or collaborating with coworkers, making a few minor adjustments in our behavior could have significant consequences that make our Centers better places overall.