
The Dangling Modifier

Volume 2, Number 1

A National Newsletter by and for Peer Tutors in Writing

Fall 1995

Don't Be A Mute Sounding Board

Jeff Tieman
The Colorado College

We were all taught in our training courses to avoid offering ideas of our own to the writers we tutor. "Help students develop their own ideas." "Ask them thought-provoking questions." "Re-phrase what you hear them saying."

But this philosophy has caused me endless frustration and I suspect the same is true for many of you. I often find myself working with a student who has unconnected ideas which simply need to be tied together. Am I overstepping my bounds if I tell the writer how I see his or her ideas coalescing into a sensible whole? I think not.

I define brainstorming in the context of tutoring as a conversation which brings to the surface and clarifies an argument or idea. And I define a conversation as a two-way dialogue—fair enough, I think. It logically follows that a conversation whose mission is to find and clarify an idea goes both ways. I might come up with something before the writer does. Do I stifle myself from sharing my own insights, fearing that I may be doing too much work for the person I am tutoring? No. What good is a brainstorming session if it becomes a one-way street? Often, students who come to the writing center have already tried on their own to develop ideas and ask the right questions. But they are stuck and that is why they are sitting next to a tutor. Sessions in which tutors offer none of their own thoughts is not only counter-productive, but it also may frustrate writers even more than they were when they walked in.

You can avoid the dreaded times when writers simply lift information from you without their

own equal and independent contribution. When the writer stops thinking and starts transcribing your words, the session needs to change direction. But most often this will not happen. In my experience, half of the ideas I raise in tutoring sessions get rejected. That's how it should be. It is better to offer the writer an idea they hate than to quietly hold back something that might help them get started.

And getting them started may be all you want to do. If a writer accepts one of your ideas and then asks things like, "How do I phrase that?" or "What should I say next?" you will probably want to generalize again, giving the student constructive advice about proceeding on their own.

Most of us have good judgment and know how to have productive conversations with struggling writers. Occasionally someone will come in and want their work done for them—these individuals are usually obvious slackers and require from us a different approach. But for the writers who are seriously engaged and just need a sounding board, don't be afraid to bounce a few ideas back yourself. As we say about the voice in our writing, active is most often better than passive.



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No Pens Allowed

Stacey Martin
Penn State University

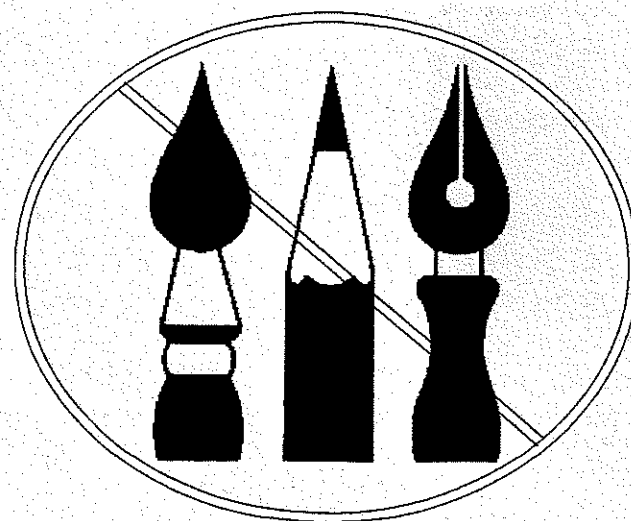
Rob walks into his university's writing center. He sits down and asks the tutor for help with rewriting a paper for his freshman English class. While the student and the tutor discuss the revisions, the tutor marks various sections of the paper: he or she reworks phrases, fixes grammatical errors, and circles sections that the student should rewrite. When Rob leaves the writing center, he notices another tutorial session: At this table, the *student* is marking the paper. In fact, the tutor doesn't have a pen or pencil in sight. The student wonders, "Why is the student writing here; should I have done that? Which tutor was doing the wrong thing? Who's supposed to write on the paper? What am I supposed to do?" In writing centers across the country, tutors heatedly debate this topic and often hold strong opinions about whether or not a tutor should make marks on the tutee's paper. While tutors support both sides of the argument with strong evidence, a tutorial session is more productive and beneficial for the tutee when the tutor does not write on the paper.

Many tutors still defend the opposing side of this idea, believing that a session is productive when the tutor is in control of the pen or the pencil. These tutors argue that this method is more efficient than relying on the tutee's note taking. The tutor knows what to correct and how to correct it and can therefore write it quickly and clearly. Then, he or she has more time to discuss and develop with the student other aspects of the assignment. Tutors also feel more comfortable making notes and corrections because they are in control of the direction of the session. Often, they worry that the student lacks the confidence or concern needed to make notes and revisions. By controlling the pen, tutors hope that they create in the tutee a feeling of confidence and trust.

The student feels assured because the tutor wrote something on the paper—if the tutor wrote it down, it must be correct. The students then have concrete revisions or notes on their papers and will feel more secure later when working on the assignment alone.

While these pen-wielding tutors present a valid and understandable argument, students *do* benefit more from a tutorial session when the tutor does not write on the paper. A student initially seeks help at his or her writing center because of a desire to improve and learn writing skills. Part of the student's learning experience is the responsibility of actually doing the work, rather than allowing the tutor to do it for him or her. When it is the student's responsibility to take notes and make revisions, he or she is learning through a hands-on experience. The student is more likely to comprehend and remember the lesson or advice if he or she writes it down. By allowing the student the time necessary to write and revise, the tutor is giving the tutee the opportunity to process and analyze information and ask questions if necessary. If a tutor corrects sentences and circles problematic areas, it is very easy for the student to not fully concentrate or process the information. When the student uses the pen or pencil, the session is not only a lesson in writing skills but also a lesson in concentration, analysis, and responsibility.

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On Tutoring Poetry

Suzanne Strugalla
University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point

If you have ever written poetry, you probably have some idea of what it is like to revise a poem until you get it to sound just right. Now imagine helping someone else revise their own poetry without making direct suggestions. Sound difficult? Among the many obstacles I faced as a poetry tutor this past semester, this was perhaps the most challenging.

During my tutoring sessions, I worked with two English 157 students. Both of them wrote private poetry—poetry which is more or less for the poet's eyes only. The hardest part, for me anyway, was "How do I maintain the role of collaborator and not assume the role of editor, as I would do with my own work?" The solution I found to be most effective was to ask the student lots of questions, for instance: How do you feel about this poem? What does it mean to you? Are the images effective? What are the poem's strongest features? Is the message clear?

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"You don't write because you want to say something; you write because you've got something to say."

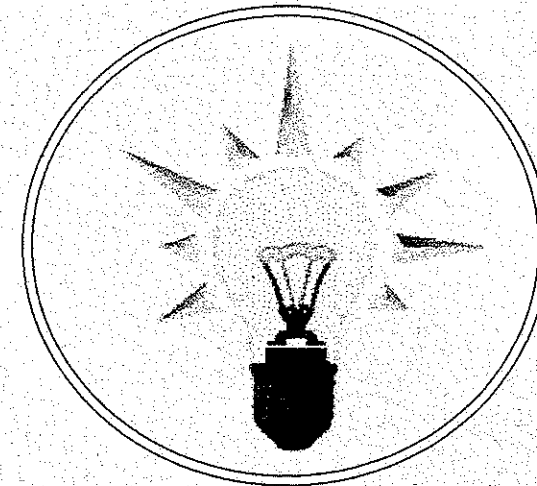
- F. Scott Fitzgerald

"I love being a writer. What I can't stand is the paperwork."

- Peter De Vries

"I always do the first line well, but I have trouble doing the others."

- Moliere



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Unfortunately, students like Rob, who question pen placement, will always see this debate at collegiate writing centers. Since both sides hold valid arguments, it is difficult for tutors to reach a consensus on the issue. However, writing centers can take several actions in order to prove to their employees that a tutorial is more beneficial when the tutee holds the pen and marks the paper. First of all, when the future tutees are trained, the teacher should tell them that the only correct way in which to tutor is to do so without a pen or pencil in hand. If the tutors get used to this method in their training and practicum, they will have no need or urge to use a writing utensil when they work. Secondly, in order to encourage pen-holding tutors to alter their methods, the center should organize workshops in which tutoring styles are restructured. A "retraining," with input from the center head, teachers, and tutors who do not mark the paper, would illustrate to the tutors the importance and benefits of not writing on the paper. Finally, a university's writing center can tell each tutee upon entering the center that it is his or her responsibility to mark the paper—not the tutor's. By following these ideas, not only will a center's styles and techniques be united, but its tutors will engage in more productive tutorial sessions since they will not write on the tutees' papers.



The Director's Chair

Kevin Davis

East Central University, Ada, Oklahoma

Maybe, we should call ourselves "writing out lands" instead of "writing centers." In the past, I have even gone so far as to suggest that all writing center directors remain academic renegades, outsiders, and subversives. That's easy for me to say, as director, but how easy is it for peer tutors to accomplish in their own centers? Let me offer a few suggestions for would-be fringe dwellers.

First, subvert the institution. Remember, you work for the writer, not the person who hired you, not the school. And remember that your boss, your client's teacher, and the person to whom your student might turn for help all work for this institution. It's important, therefore, that you take the student's side in conflict and practice, always working as an advocate for the student, actively working against the institution if you have to. If a professor is giving impossible writing tasks or marking papers incorrectly, you must stick up for the client. Usually, this will mean reporting the information to your director, who can then intervene. But never bow under false authority.

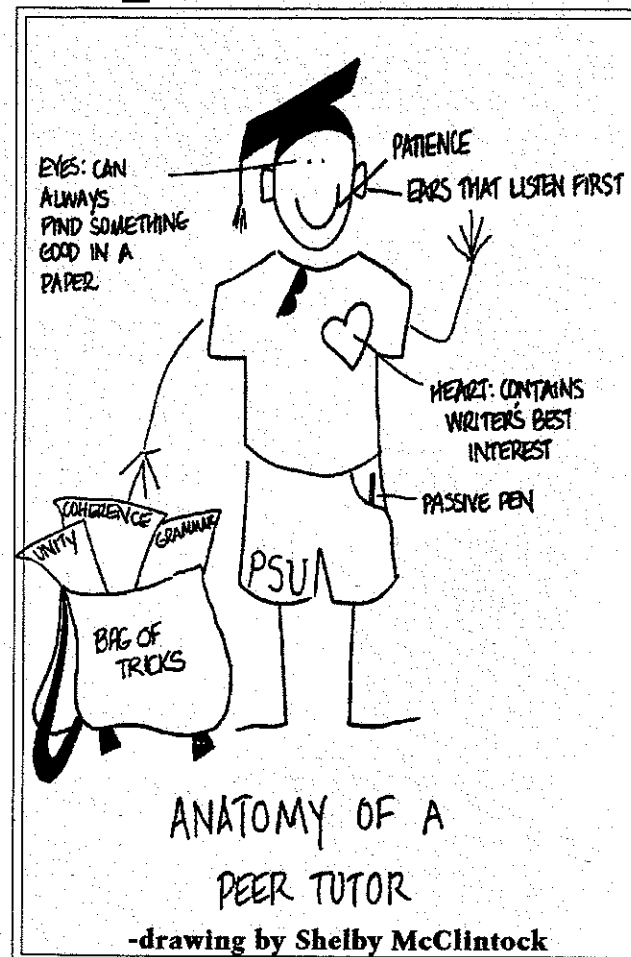
Second, break rules. Your long-range goal, helping a writer, and your short-range goal, helping a writing, sometimes conflict with the situation. When that happens, break the rules; nothing is sacred. I, for example, have no proof-reading and no-marking-on-papers rules, but I expect my employees to have enough sense to break those rules when the client needs the deviation.

Third, practice expediency. Remember that your short-range goal might sometimes conflict with your long-range goal. Sure, we want the writer to learn to write for his or her self, but not if that means failing a paper in the short run. I wouldn't want my employees to write a client's paper, but I expect them to draw out a thesis and organizational scheme, including making structural changes in the next-to-last draft.

Fourth, undermine grades. Let's face it:

Grades are the single biggest detriment to learning and knowledge in education. If you are worried about learning, you'd never cram before a test or be tempted to cheat on a quiz or to plagiarize a paper. As you work with clients, emphasize learning, not evaluation. Fifth, make decisions; expect support. Analyze every situation as a new situation, and decide how to act according to what you know. And once you've acted, no matter how unfortunate those actions, expect the support of the center director. No peer tutor should ever be left hanging.

After all, at the "center" of the institution you find administrators, classes, grades, rigid rules. But we're different—we work with writers, conferences, learning, and flexibility; we work in the writing outland.



"Go To The Writing Center"

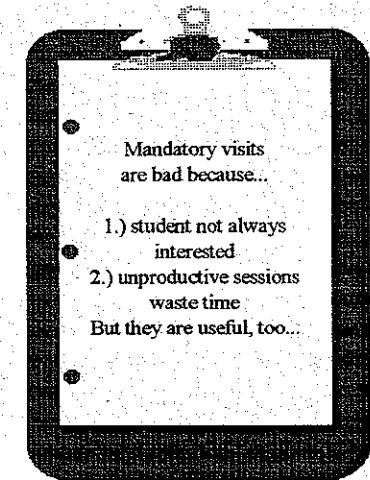
Deb D'Agati & Tina McBrearty
University of Vermont

Teachers, as teachers, do not need to and cannot use the writing center. Only writers need it, and only writers can use it. You cannot parcel out some portion of a given student for us to deal with. Nor should you require that all of your students drop by with an early draft of a research paper to get a reading from a fresh audience. You should not scrawl at the bottom of a failing paper, "Go to the Writing Center."

Stephen M. North

Stephen North's charge, made in "Idea of a Writing Center" given above, came up in a conversation between the two of us during an informal discussion about mandatory visits to the writing center. Both of us have writing center experience. Tina currently works in the University of Vermont writing center. Deb worked in the Merrimack College writing center as an undergraduate and is now writing a thesis connected to writing centers. Initially, both of us felt that mandatory visits were a bad idea. But after several days and many pros and cons scrawled on a napkin, we discovered that we had been too harsh on something that we never quite explored the usefulness of. What came out of that discussion is this article.

We began by creating a list of reasons why we disliked the idea of mandatory visits to the writing center. We shared a few negative experiences about such sessions; as tutors, we've all had one of them—the student doesn't want to be there, and you're sweating trying to make the time useful. Also we felt that it was a waste of our valuable time to participate in unproductive sessions when there are other students out there who are unable to get appointments when necessary. We also felt like there was something kind of shady about the way mandatory visits inflate the number of users in the center. As we know, some university administrations call on



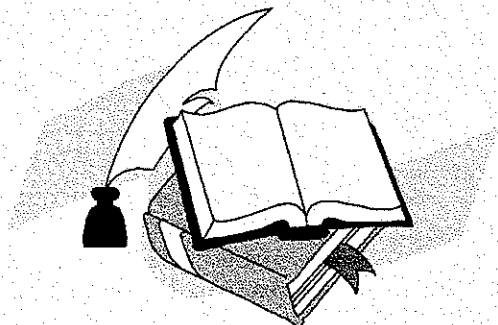
us to produce the number of users in the center to justify our ever-increasing need for funding. Over the next several days, we chewed on the issue during late night chocolate chip cookie fits, walks around campus, and dinners of tortellini in alfredo sauce at a local Italian restaurant. We decided to explore the ways mandatory visits might actually be useful. They bring in students who might otherwise not have come to the center at all. They also may produce repeat visits when the student finds out how useful a visit can be. As we all know, just about any paper can be improved with one visit to the center. The reason which most swayed our opinion as to why mandatory visits might be a good idea is that they take away any stigmas about the writing center being only for remedial help. When was the last time you saw a senior English major come in for help with a seminar paper? Or when was the last time you talked with a graduate student about a thesis? Probably not recently, if at all. Not wanting our writing centers to be viewed by faculty—and more importantly by student—as places for "bad" writer, we have been leery of forced sessions for struggling writers. We fear it gives a negative connotation about the center. However, mandatory sessions for all students may help to dispel the remedial myth. When a teacher requires that all students in her class take a paper to the writing center, what she says, in effect, is that all papers can benefit from discussion. Moreover, the teacher reinforces a notion important to the Writing Center—that all writers can benefit from talking about their writing.

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So, we came away from our discussion three days and several chocolate chip cookies later feeling differently than we had about mandatory sessions. We concluded that mandatory visits weren't such a bad idea. By making all students, regardless of writing skill, go to the center, the stigma of remediality is eradicated. Ridding our communities of this myth is one way we open the writing center to a larger population within the university community.

And what about North? It is important to expose our underlying assumption for this article. We believe that it is important to engage theorists such as North in dialogue with the tutors who are on the front line in our writing centers. We must always think independently and read with a critical eye. And in order to contribute to the furthering of the Writing Center, much like Stephen North has, we must always remain in a dialogue with each other about writing and writing centers.



"We give nothing so freely as advice."

- Francois de la Rochefoucauld

"Words are your material, and if you can use them, then fight with them and wrestle them because they are alive."

- Jeannette Winterson

Letter From Peer Tutor Past...

Nathan Seward

Temple University

Dear Writing Center Staff,

Greetings and salutations from Philadelphia. As I begin my graduate studies in Counseling Psychology at Temple University and my job as a residential counselor for homeless adolescents at the Salvation Army, I cannot help but think about the indispensable role that peer tutoring played in my post-graduate success. This may sound a little cheezy, but it's true.

When I had my interview at Temple, our main topic of conversation was collaboration and peer tutoring and, no, I wasn't the one who brought it up. The interviewer seemed genuinely interested in how the Writing Center worked and how I could apply the principles I learned there to my graduate studies. As it turns out, there are countless correlations between the two. Even as I tested the waters of the job market, I still met with considerable interest in the topic of peer tutoring and I would go so far as to say that it is the main reason why I got my counseling job. For this position, there was no interview—just a glance at the title "Peer Tutor" on my rather short resumé.

I'll get off my soapbox now. I just wanted to give you an idea of how valuable your writing center experience can be in your future careers and life experiences. I say "can" instead of "will" because, like everything else in life, you get out of it exactly what you put into it. Two years ago, while languishing in "Peer Tutor Training," wondering why I should care about descriptive outlines and strawman arguments, I had no clue what this information possibly could do for me. Now, I can see the usefulness of reading Kenneth Bruffee—well, almost.

Okay, I'll really get off my soapbox now and bid you adieu. To all of the new tutors, it may all seem overwhelming in the beginning, but hang in there. I'm not saying it's going to get any easier, but it'll definitely be worth it. Thanks for the memories.

Nate



Writer Or Instructor—Whose Side Is The Tutor On?

Lisa Kaminsky

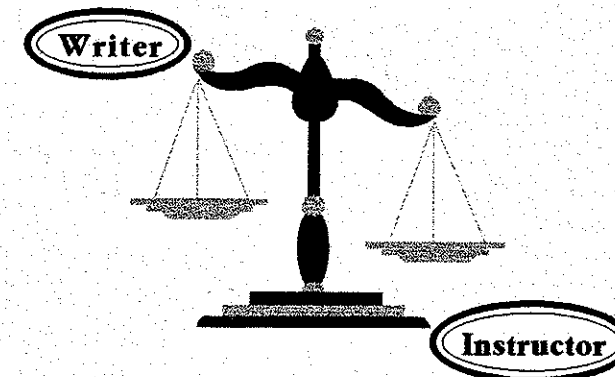
Penn State University

Our Writing Center has a policy about "contact reports," or letters to instructors. The purpose of this letter is to describe the events that transpired during the session for writing center records and perhaps to be sent to the instructor. Each university may have a different policy, depending on the style of tutoring they employ in their center. But there may be a problem with the requirement of our contact report. In our attempt to be honest and tactful, we may fill out a dishonest contact report. Can we change this method of relaying information, what is the true purpose of the policy, and what exactly is our responsibility, as tutors, to the instructor and to the writer? These questions are often heatedly debated, but there really doesn't seem to be a clearcut solution.

Tutors ask writers if they would like a copy of the report sent to the instructor who made the assignment. Usually, students prefer to send them to their professors to let them know they are taking advantage of the services the Center has to offer. But students do not know what will be written, only that they will not be evaluated. However, the writer does not realize that these reports are not always entirely accurate and truthful.

The writer's understanding should be our main focus. Instead, we fail to mention the discussion during the session if it isn't entirely relevant to the subject material that the instructor has assigned. If we don't tell the instructors the truth, then our reports become dull, repetitive, and lack substance. There is no variety, and we, as tutors, lose interest in writing them, because we know they are false. If we didn't have the restriction of "telling, not evaluating," then we would be free of this dilemma. But the policy does serve a purpose.

We are not instructors, we are peer tutors, and our job is not to grade the student's papers. Our job is to inform, give advice, and maintain a casual,



stress-free environment. The responsibility of grading belongs with the instructors, and they are not in favor of tutors giving recommendations as to what grades should be. Although, they do want their students to visit the center to have an objective viewpoint on writing, they don't want to hear about it. They send their students to the Center for frank criticism, but they do not want an exact transcript of the conversation between the tutor and the writer. Instructors do not want another person intervening in their teaching methods. So what is our role?

As tutors, we know that this paradox exists between contact report and actual events. We want the writer to benefit from the session, but we don't let his or her instructor know of the problems. Contact reports may have their flaws, but they're definitely a good way to communicate with professors who may not always be clear about assignments, or to let them know that their students are concerned about their writing. It is our obligation to remain truthful and tactful in the report when discussing a writer's session. It isn't the tutor's business or responsibility to critique the writer. Instructors are well aware of our policy to describe and not evaluate, so this leaves us with the dilemma of deciding what is appropriate and acceptable to tell the instructor, and what is appropriate and acceptable to tell the writer.



Tutoring Tension

Susie Rankin
Colby College

One of the most vital parts of a tutorial session is breaking the initial tension that may be lingering when the tutor and writer first meet. The writer is probably entering the center hesitantly, wondering if this will be a wasted hour. For many students, it's difficult enough for them to call and make an appointment, which, for some, ignites a neon sign that says, "I need help." Thus, the most essential part is for the tutor to make the writer feel comfortable and natural. The Writer's Center is there for their use—there is no need for anyone to feel like they are walking into a psychiatrist's office.

Smile. Everyone feels better with a smile and an energetic "hello." It should not be much different than meeting someone in a social atmosphere. We are peer tutors, not professors, mothers, or doctors. Find out a little bit about the person, or at least how their day is going before asking what the assignment is. The more comfortable the writer feels, the better the session will go; the writer will not be afraid to speak his or her thoughts, unvarnished by superficial worries ("Is this a stupid question? I don't like that idea, but I am afraid to criticize my tutor. I don't understand that correction, but I just want to get out and go to lunch)."

Likewise, it is also crucial that the tutor feels comfortable. Usually it is the tutor that sets the atmosphere, so if you are relaxed but engaged, the writer will be the same. We need to show, through body language and tone, that we feel at ease helping another student and also confident that we are qualified to help.

In most cases, it is these first few minutes that determine how the session will go. Most likely if both the tutor and the writer are at ease, there is no tension in the air to disturb the communication and success of the tutorial.



TIPS

for Tutoring...

Heather Skumatz
University of Wisconsin at Stevens Point

When writers ask difficult questions... Clarify the question by asking questions. Then consult other resources (i.e. handbooks, information from files, other staff members) to find the answer you need. Don't panic, and don't be afraid to refer your writer to an outside source somewhere else that may be of greater help. You can still play a very effective role as a guide even if you can't give all the answers.

When writer and tutor disagree... Tact is required in this sticky situation. Make sure to let your writer know you don't see eye to eye; insincerity or coddling can ruin a learning relationship. Discuss the problem as equals, and don't attempt to be the authority. Be sure to validate your writer's viewpoint and discuss various opinions. Most importantly, don't try to change your writer's mind. If it is an obstacle, change the subject to a lighter topic or drop the issue as completely as possible.

When writers show disinterest... You can try to reverse this indifference if you are certain that it has nothing to do with you. Confronting a motivation problem requires both patience and sensitivity. Keep an open mind. Search for common ground.

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These questions were productive because they allowed my writers to do the talking and often gave me additional insight into what their poems meant. Letting your writers do the talking also helps them to strengthen their own work because, by discussing a particular poem, than they may discover weak points which weren't noticed before.

Although questioning my writers was effective, after a number of meetings I ran into what I believe to be the second most challenging obstacle that a poetry tutor must face: "How can I vary the sessions so that I am not always asking the same questions, thus making the time more exciting for both of us?" It was after a particularly frustrating session, in which I felt my writer could almost read my mind and foresee the next question, that I raided the poetry drawer of the Tutoring-Learning Center's (TLC) filing cabinet and found a solution: In-session exercises.

If you're looking for a way to make your tutoring sessions more interesting for both you and your writer, I highly recommend incorporating some activities that you can do together.

In particular I recommend using the "Collaboration" exercise because it requires that you and the writer share the responsibility of writing and revising a poem. First the writer writes a line, then you, etc., until you have both created a poem or start of a poem that you can revise together and/or continue to build upon. I also suggest trying the "Cut-up poem" exercise because it will provide both you and your writer with a different means of creating poetry.

The first step is to free-write about a topic for a length of time. Cut the page into four parts and look for interesting ideas and phrases. Finally, write down those phrases and try to incorporate them into a poem.

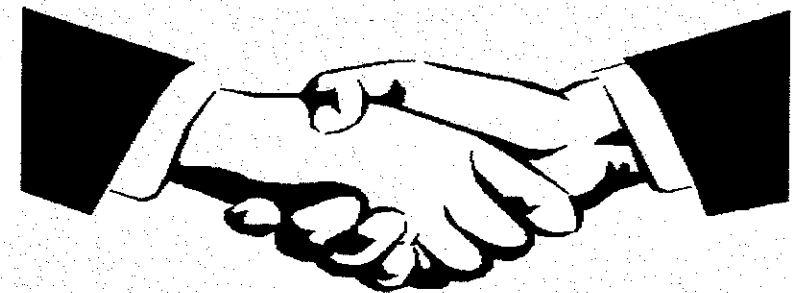
In addition to being challenging, my experience as a poetry tutor at the TLC has been positive and rewarding. I have learned a lot about myself and how to relate to other people. As a starting point, if you are new to tutoring poetry like I was, I would recommend the following: In addition to being challenging, my experience as a poetry tutor at the TLC has been positive and rewarding. I have learned a lot about myself and how to relate to other people. As a starting point, if you are new to tutoring poetry like I was, I would recommend the following: In addition to being challenging, my experience as a poetry tutor at the TLC has been positive and rewarding. I have learned a lot about myself and how to relate to other people. As a starting point, if you are new to tutoring

poetry like I was, I would recommend the following:
1. Asking your writers about their background in poetry so you can use appropriate exercises to help them experiment with their work and

continue to advance

2. Talking with your writers about what type of poetry they would like to write
3. Finding out what the writer's expectations are of you as a tutor

If you're still stumped for ideas, don't be afraid to ask staff members or other experienced tutors for additional insight as well.



"I am part of all that I have met."

- Alfred Lord Tennyson

"Writers are the engineers of human souls."

- Joseph Stalin

Tutor Training

Leslie Bradley, Instructor
Penn State University

Even the most tutor-friendly writing instructors can learn something new about peer tutors when they teach a peer tutor training course. Last Spring semester, I was lucky enough to teach English 250, Penn State's semester-long, 3-credit peer tutoring course, for the first time. Here's what I discovered in the process:

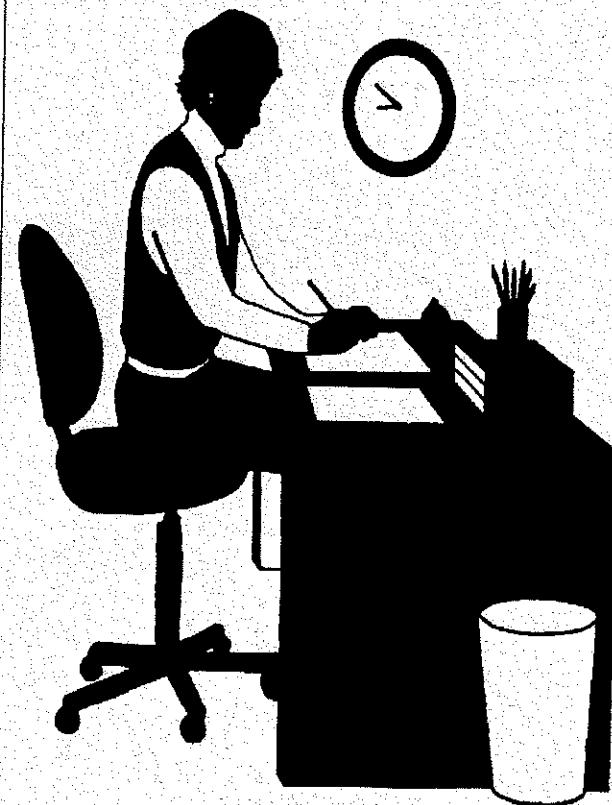
Peer tutors are fascinating people. Sure, I'd always known that peer tutors are bright, helpful folks—good writers committed to our Writing Center's goals. But over the many years peer tutors assisted my students, I hadn't shared a conversation with more than one or two. I was just plain delighted to get to know my English 250 students and the veteran peer tutors I enlisted to talk to the class. What did I find out? Peer tutors are Resident Assistants, literary magazine editors, medical missionaries, actors, singers, volunteer workers—even returning adult students who balance families and school. You serve on University committees; you write technical prose and experimental fiction; you are funny, full of energy, informed.

Peer tutors have guts. Though poised and accomplished, the peer tutors in training still felt mighty nervous as they approached the practicum component of our course. Each of my students was paired with a tutee who truly wanted help; they would meet once a week for eight weeks. The tutees' needs weighed heavily on my students, who expressed their discomfort in a single oft-repeated question: What if we let them down? Though this anxiety eased over the course of the semester, it represented a substantial hurdle for most members of my class. And here's my true confession: Before I taught the course, I had never even considered that peer tutors needed guts to claim their roles in the Writing Center.

Peer tutors are flexible—very flexible. Here's my biggest discovery: Peer tutoring is a very demanding job. (Not news to you, eh?)

How do I explain my pre-250 ignorance? I'm not really sure. I knew, even then, that peer tutors serve the whole university community, offering writing help to any student in any discipline. But I think, somehow, that I missed the meaning of this broad charge. When I sat in the Writing Center, hour after hour, observing my students and their more experienced colleagues, I finally got it: you do everything. Writers appeared with civil engineering dissertations, poems, lab reports, and resumes; they held freshmen composition, philosophy papers, and scholarship applications. Their problems ranged from the rhetorical to the merely mechanical—and you dealt with them all, usually within pressing time constraints, and always with a smile.

Need I tell you that I think peer tutors are terrific—more terrific than I had supposed? I promise you that I'll spread the word.



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Submissions for the next issue of *The Dangling Modifier* should be submitted to the Penn State Writing Center. We welcome submissions 500 words or less and strongly encourage you to submit shorter pieces. Editors reserve the right to edit submissions for grammar and length. Please include your address and telephone number so we can contact you about any stylistic changes. Feel free to contact us by phone with any questions at (814) 865-1841. Our address is given on the back cover of *The Dangling Modifier*. Thank you.



The Dangling Modifier Editors: Lisa Kaminsky, Stacey Martin
Special Thanks to Ron Maxwell and Angela Rogers