

all that differently from those in another, or is there common ground that tutors can become familiar with? This article offers some insights.

Notes

1. Kenneth Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" *College English* 46 (7) (1984): 642.
2. Bruffee, 640.
3. David Coogan, "E-mail 'Tutoring' as Collaborative Writing," in *Wiring the Center*, ed. Eric H. Hobson (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1998), 30.
4. Research indicates that expert tutors are self-aware; they reflect on themselves as tutors and writers. See Bennett A. Rafoth and Erin K. Murphy, "Expertise in Tutoring," *Maryland English Journal* 29 (1) (Fall 1994): 1-9.
5. Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater and Bonnie Stone Sunstein, *FieldWorking* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Blair Press of Prentice Hall, 1997), 59.
6. While I believe it is important for students to explore the various perspectives they might take, the fact remains that instructors sometimes make it difficult to do this when they make assignments that shoehorn them into choosing from a very limited set of perspectives. The assignment might restrict writers by requiring them to argue for or against one side or the other. Or the restriction might be more subtle, as when an assignment assumes certain values or backgrounds that the students may in fact not share with the instructor. In these cases, I recommend that you continue to explore different perspectives in the tutoring session and then urge the writer to meet with the instructor to discuss why she wants to take a somewhat different approach than what the assignment calls for. At some point, you might wish to read what Marilyn Cooper has to say on the problem of assignments that limit the writer's set of positions (also see Chapter 10, this volume).
7. Donald Murray, *The Craft of Revision*, 2d ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995), 74.

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Tutoring in Unfamiliar Subjects

Alexis Greiner

Writing centers are expected to help students with papers on topics ranging from bouillabaisse to Brazil nuts. While it may seem advantageous to everyone if the writing center staff included someone from every major, this is not realistic or even necessarily desirable. The fact is, writing center consultants, like most composition instructors, help students from all majors and disciplines learn to write. This is true at Rollins College, where I worked as a writing center tutor, and at most writing centers.

Before going any further, I believe it is important to distinguish between a *writing center consultant*, the term used at Rollins and the one I will use in this chapter, and an *academic tutor*. At Rollins, we consider a *tutor* to be someone who helps a student with subject matter, while a *writing center consultant* does not share this goal. Consultants help by provoking thought through conversation, posing questions, and engaging writers in the work of writing. A consultant also helps by urging the student to write because the act of writing is itself a valuable way for writers to discover what they do and do not know about their topic and to figure out what they want to say in their papers. If you are reading this book, you are probably what we at Rollins call a consultant.

How can a consultant majoring in a field such as communication help a student who is writing a paper on a topic like finitely quantifiable abstractions in calculus? At some point, every consultant must recognize when the knowledge gap is too wide and the writer needs to be referred back to the professor for help. The knowledge gap can be a problem even when the consultant and writer are in the same field. Extreme cases are the exception, however, and most of the time tutors can be helpful to writers even when they do not share the same background knowledge on a topic.

Rollins is a liberal arts school where cross-disciplinary writing is an important aspect of the curriculum. By placing our focus more on writing aspects than on the content or subject matter, we are able to use a similar

approach with most papers. This makes it possible to fulfill our mission of helping writers across the broad spectrum of the curriculum.

Some Background

Most literature on writing and writing center theory discusses feedback and conversation, the crux of consulting on a paper you know little about. Peter Elbow details two kinds of feedback: criterion-based and reader-based. The first helps the writer to assess content, thesis, organization, effectiveness of language, and diction. Student writers are most accustomed to criterion-based feedback. Reader-based feedback, on the other hand, leaves the technical stuff behind while the reader expresses the *experience* he gains from reading. Both are useful, but they are applicable in different ways, and at different stages.

Reader-based feedback is a great way to approach unfamiliar matters because it says to the reader, "Look, this is not my field, but your tone and flow reached me through the difficult vocabulary." Or, "The vocabulary you use is specific and difficult, and your writing needs to be super clear to compensate. I feel confused." In such circumstances it is useful to ask clients to assume a reader's role and try to distance themselves from their own writing—so that they can view the paper from a perspective different from their own. This, as Donald Murray says, is in the spirit of teaching students to teach themselves.

What to Do

In the Rollins writing center, like most writing centers, consultants approach each paper in a top-down manner, meaning that we move from a global to a local assessment (see Chapters 1 and 16). Here is a sample from a consultation with a client I'll call Ann. First of all, notice how Ann responds to my question about the assignment.

Meeting and Assignment

Me: OK, then, let's get started. What is the assignment?

Ann: Well, I wrote a paper on quantum physics and the nature of the protein RNA synthetase and then connected the ideas.

Instead of describing the assignment, which would require her to take her instructor's point of view, Ann tells me what she wrote her paper on. But the two may or may not match, and an experienced consultant knows that now is a good time for a reality check. Ask the client to read the assignment aloud, or at least to consider how her paper does what the assignment asks. (In this example, it turns out that Ann's paper has followed the assignment.) Next, look for key points.

Review Drafting and Pick Out One or Two Key Points

Me: OK. What have you done so far?

Ann: I have written two drafts and now I am trying to get it into a clearer shape to turn in.

Me: Alright, could you, in a sentence maybe, tell me what the connection is that you have found between the ideas?

Ann: I'll try. During cell reproduction there is an interaction between proteins that is affected by laws of quantum physics. I think that is the key to the whole thing.

Me: It sounds like *affected* is a key term. Would you agree? [*Ann agrees*] What exactly do you mean by *affected*? I ask because its meaning might be the focus of your paper.

Ann: Well, some of the protein behavior is limited, and some of it is made possible by these laws. And yes, I think that is the focus.

Me: You seem to have a clear grasp on the basics of your idea. Which is a good thing, because it's Greek to me! Let me ask you something else before I read it. Are you comfortable with the organization of your ideas?

Notice how the tutor (me) tries to pick up on things the writer says to help focus attention on what seem like key points. Also, notice how the tutor depends on Ann to confirm what the tutor thinks Ann is getting at. Let's continue.

Read with a Focus

Ann: Yeah, pretty much. I am more used to writing straightforward lab reports, but this is a little different. I wrote it as an essay for a journal, so I modified the structure to include an abstract and then all the rest of it is like a big discussion of the results.

Me: Good. I'll go ahead and read through it now, and I'll focus on the clarity of *affected* and the other things you've told me, and we'll work from there. OK?

Ann: Sounds good.

All consulting is about discovery through conversation, and this situation is no different. If consultants do not know the subject matter, they can use their own curiosity to draw ideas out of the client. By asking the writer to explain what he knows and to view the paper from a distance, the consultant can help the client use his own knowledge to greater advantage in the writing process.

In my experience and those of other consultants at Rollins, the most commonly noted problem is that the work needs better clarity, usually at the paragraph and sentence level, through improved style and diction. If I notice this in Ann's paper, I do not say it immediately. First I engage her in conversation about what she has written.

Kennedy, Mary Lynch, William J. Kennedy, and Hadley M. Smith. 2003. *Writing in the Disciplines*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

This is one of a number of books that deals with the different standards and conventions for writing in the sciences, humanities, and social sciences. Another is *The Harcourt Brace Guide to Writing in the Disciplines* by Patrick Bizzaro and Robert W. Jones (1997). Though not a substitute for the knowledge about writing that someone in the field has, books like this are a good reference to keep on the shelf in your writing center.

Works Cited

- Elbow, P. 1998. *Writing with Power*. 2d ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
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Developing Genre Discourse

Graduate Student Writing

Carol Ellis

Graduate student writing is high stakes. From here to a career. Schooled in the ories and methodologies, the writer feels compelled to hit it out of the park but ends up searching for a place just to enter the conversation. On quiet days the staff—we call them neither tutors nor consultants but instructors—and I sit around and talk, reenacting Roland Barthes' "pleasure of the text." There is laughter. At least once a day we laugh because laughter lightens the seriousness and creates community in a commuter graduate school of two thousand students where loneliness is part of the price of learning. We create necessary community through talking. We are open twelve months of the year, ready to discover the thesis statement cleverly buried on page ten.

The instructors in this graduate writing center use reader response, blatant curiosity, and questioning to show that writing itself is a genre and thus not obvious, not something arbitrary: it has to be worked up. They instruct writing workshops of their own designs. They walk the talk. The staff of the writing center writes and reads session proposals for conferences, essays for a variety of graduate courses, theses, and dissertations. As Derridian difference is written into being, they become comfortable with the diversity of styles, genders, and cultures that descend into our basement. Beside tutoring appointments, every summer there is a five-week writing workshop on writing articles for professional journals in the disciplines, a continuous creative writing workshop, and a weekly conversation with someone who is finally ready to write a dissertation after four years of research. We are impressed by the responsibility we handle.

"I'm on the go," my mother used to say when she was very busy. "I'm running around like a madwoman." Although I am not mad, writing center directors often have the desire to be so as a way of taking a short vacation. There is no escaping the issue of identity in university culture, though. Who is a writing

Test Out Ideas

Me: Ann, I took this sentence here to be your thesis.

Ann: Good—that was my intention.

Me: And then I thought that you used the following paragraphs to support your thesis. Real quickly, I'd like to go through each paragraph and tell you what I got from it in a nutshell. Again, this is not my area, so if I miss something I want you to tell me.

Then,

Ask Thought-Provoking Questions and Build on the Client's Response

Me: This is hard for me to understand. It seems like you are putting forth a formula and then you explain why it works in those reactions. Is that right?

Ann: Close, but not really. I was trying to illustrate a flaw in a fairly well-known theorem as it applies to intercellular interactions.

Me: Ahh. OK, you could make that really clearer to me by introducing the flaw—"A well-known theorem that has held true in some cases does not in this one . . ."—and so on.

Ann: Oh yeah. That's a good idea.

Me: Go ahead and write, if you want. I'll wait.

I try to establish a pattern that adheres closely to the writer's text and work on that rather than getting into a discussion about general principles of organization, which may not apply in this case (see Chapter 11).

There are many ways to make the consultation valuable by relying on your skills at conversation. Be confident in your ability to provide feedback the writer can use. Remember, too, that the client knows that you are not in her field and you can remind her to take this into account when hearing your feedback. If you are still unsure about what to say to the writer or how to be helpful, be frank about your doubts and let the writer tell you what kind of feedback she feels would be most productive—asking thought-provoking questions, perhaps, or working on specific aspects that may be subject-independent or quasi-independent, like organization, tone, diction, sentence structure, and flow. Be confident of your ability to reach a mutual understanding with the writer.

Complicating Matters

Probably the most important thing to be concerned about when working with a client on an unfamiliar topic is to be sure that she understands the limits of your background knowledge and to be sure that you are both in agreement on

how best to approach the paper. By explaining your limitations, you ensure that the client is informed about what she can expect from her visit to the writing center, and by agreeing on the approach you ensure a good chance for bringing what you have to offer as close as possible to what she needs.

When reading a text in an unfamiliar subject, it is easy to feel put off by the language and even the tone of the work. It may sound jargon-filled and be frustrating to read and follow. While these responses are natural, it is important to trust the writer's instincts and not try to change the writing to reflect your sense of how an essay should sound. This is important because your client probably has a better sense of the writing in her discipline than you do, yet she may not yet fully trust her own instincts and might yield to your advice thinking you are a writing expert. In short, if you cannot articulate a reason for why you think something should be changed, leave it alone, and trust the client's ear over your own about how the paper sounds. (See Chapter 3.)

Finally, as a way of learning about writing standards in different disciplines, I recommend inviting faculty from those disciplines to writing center staff meetings, especially if they tend to refer their students to the writing center a lot. Keeping a diverse staff of tutors helps, too. In the end, though, it all comes down to you and the student, maybe even someone with a paper on finitely quantifiable abstractions. Try to understand the paper as best you can, be frank about your limitations, and build on ideas the writer brings up in conversation.

Further Reading

Blair, Catherine Pastore. 1988. "Only One of the Voices: Dialogic Writing Across the Curriculum." *College English* 50 (April): 383–89.

If your school has a writing-across-the-curriculum (WAC) program, this article may be of interest. Many supporters of WAC suggest that each academic discipline has its own way of using language, which can be understood only in its own disciplinary context. Tutors will be interested in Blair's argument that the discipline of English knows only its own way of using language, not all the others, and does not provide an all-purpose academic discourse. So, Blair says, there is no reason for all writing instruction to be taught by the English department faculty. A WAC program should be taught instead by faculty from all disciplines. One possible implication of Blair's article is that tutors can at best know only the discourse of their own disciplines—a different perspective than the one I offer in this chapter.

Gillespie, Paula, and Neal Lerner, eds. 2003. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*. 2d ed. New York: Longman.

Chapter 13 of this book offers a good selection of scenarios for discussion with your director or other tutors. Other chapters in this book cover expectations about tutoring, effective practices, and writing center research.