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Coping with Different Tutoring Situations

Writers do not bring just their papers to the writing center; they often also bring anxieties, stress, and other personal issues. Thus, you will occasionally encounter some troublesome—or perhaps even difficult—situations while tutoring. A writer who has writing anxiety may come at the last minute, desperate for help. Or, a writer may come only at the insistence of a teacher and be difficult to work with. This chapter offers some specific guidelines for dealing with situations like these. As you work with writers, you will begin to develop your own repertoire of strategies for dealing with uncomfortable tutoring sessions.

The Writer Who Comes at the Last Minute

You will sometimes encounter a writer who comes in for help just before his or her paper is due. Perhaps the paper is due in two hours and the writer has only an incomplete draft with significant problems. Or, the paper is due tomorrow morning and the writer has no clue how to begin. Such writers may come to you in a guilty panic. How do you handle them?

DO

- ✓ Be kind and sympathetic. Help the writer sort through options and figure out what he or she can reasonably do in the time remaining.
- ✓ Help the writer consider other options. If it is not possible to complete an acceptable paper by the deadline, is receiving an extension an option? Is there a penalty for turning in a late paper?
- ✓ Help the writer set goals for future papers. When is the next paper due? Can the writer come in with an outline or a draft a week prior to the due date?



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DON'T

- X Scold or lecture the writer about the need to write papers in a timely manner; you may mean well, but the writer already knows what he or she has done wrong. At this point the writer needs to think clearly and, with your help, figure out the best way to cope with the situation.

The Unresponsive Writer

Teachers sometimes require students to visit the writing center, and occasionally, such writers come with an attitude of resistance. They may refuse to answer your questions, give halfhearted answers, or otherwise indicate that they do not wish to be there. Often, even their body language is telling. They may slump in their seats, avoid eye contact, or avoid facing you. How do you help these writers?

DO

- ✓ Be patient and polite.
- ✓ Remind the writer that you are there to help and that the suggestions you offer are just that—suggestions that he or she may choose to accept or reject.
- ✓ Try to make the tutoring session short but helpful. If you can improve one aspect of a resistant writer's paper, perhaps he or she will see that coming to the writing center is not a waste of time.
- ✓ Engage the writer as much as possible. For example, have the writer read the paper aloud.
- ✓ Recognize that even your best efforts may not change writers' attitudes, at least in the initial tutoring session. With hindsight, resistant writers may realize that getting help with a paper is not altogether unpleasant. Another day, they may return of their own volition.

DON'T

- X Lecture writers about your role or their unresponsiveness.
- X Lose your cool and become angry.
- X Become unresponsive as well. Try to keep the upper hand in this situation.

The Antagonistic Writer

For some writers, composing a paper looms as an extremely frustrating—perhaps even impossible—task. They may be apprehensive about writing in general or upset about demands placed on them by a particular assignment or teacher. Often, they view meeting these demands as being beyond their control. If someone could only tell them exactly how to “fix” things, all would be well. Finding themselves in an impossible position, these writers may become verbally aggressive, redirecting their anger and frustration at you or they may show little interest in the suggestions that you offer.

DO

- ✓ Be patient, polite, and supportive.
- ✓ Allow writers to vent their feelings and tell you what is upsetting them.
- ✓ Acknowledge writers’ anger and frustration with an *I* statement like “I hear how frustrated you are.”
- ✓ Using an *I* statement, rephrase what writers are saying in order to help identify their emotions and problems. You might say, for example, “What I’m hearing is that you’re discouraged because you can’t figure out how to begin this paper.”
- ✓ If noises or other distractions are interfering with the session, move to a quieter place.
- ✓ If writers become verbally aggressive, politely tell them that you are not willing to accept such behavior, but do so using an *I* statement. You might say, “When you yell at me that way, I find it difficult [impossible] to listen.”
- ✓ Remind writers that you are there to help and that the suggestions you offer are just that—suggestions that they may choose to accept or reject.

DON'T

- ✗ Lecture students about your role or their behavior.
- ✗ Get into an argument or a shouting match.
- ✗ Become hostile or punitive with statements like “You can’t talk to me like that!”
- ✗ Look away and refuse to deal with the situation.
- ✗ Agree with their judgments and criticisms of assignments, teachers, and grades. Remember that doing so would be unprofessional.

The Writer Who Selects an Inappropriate Topic or Uses Offensive Language

Occasionally, you may work with writers whose papers are laced inappropriately with offensive language, such as racist or sexist terms. Or you may have difficulty tutoring a paper that takes an extreme and offensive position. What can you do in situations like these?

DO

- ✓ Be patient and polite.
- ✓ Remind writers that they are writing for an academic community, and ask them to consider how their audience will react to the language or topic.
- ✓ Respond as a reader and suggest, for example, "Some people might be disturbed by what you say here. I know I am."
- ✓ Ask the writer to respond as a reader. Ask the writer to identify the audience. Then, say something like "Okay, imagine yourself as a member of your audience. How might you respond to this statement? Are you considering all potential responses to this paper?"
- ✓ Show writers how to make language more acceptable. You can explain options for avoiding sexist language and suggest alternative terms or ways of rephrasing (many handbooks and guides to writing include sections on avoiding and eliminating sexist language, and you might want to refer students to such discussions).
- ✓ Occasionally, writers may insist on their right to say what they wish and decline to make any changes. You might suggest to such students that they check with their teacher about the topic (or use of language) before continuing to work on the paper.

DON'T

- ✗ Become angry or hostile.
- ✗ Take writers' viewpoints or language personally.
- ✗ Refuse to deal with the situation.

The Writer Who Plagiarizes

Defining *plagiarism* is difficult at best. Discussions of it often conflate the deliberate use of someone else's work with problems of summarizing, paraphrasing, and documenting sources. On its Web site www.wpacouncil.org, the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) offers the following definition: "In an instructional setting, plagiarism occurs when a writer deliberately uses someone else's language, ideas, or other original (not common-knowledge) material without acknowledging its source." It applies this definition to "texts published in print or on-line, to manuscripts, and to

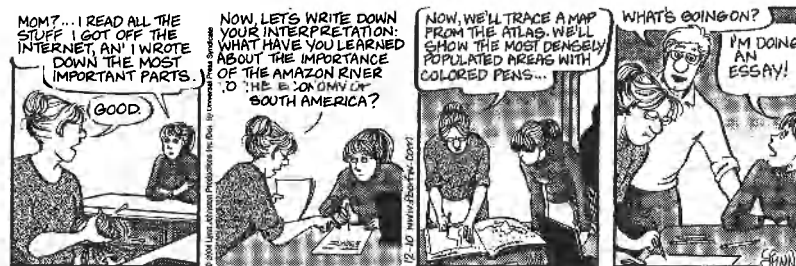


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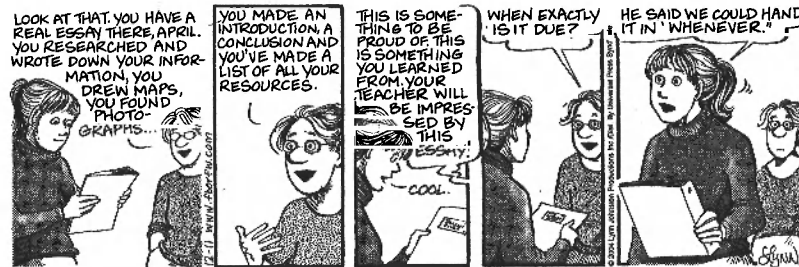
the work of other student writers." It also distinguishes between deliberate appropriation and the "misuse of sources," explaining that "[a] student who attempts (even if clumsily) to identify and credit his or her source, but who misuses a specific citation format or incorrectly uses quotation marks or other forms of identifying material from other sources, has not plagiarized. Instead, such a student should be considered to have failed to cite and document sources appropriately."

In the writing center, you will likely encounter writers who have committed plagiarism across the spectrum of "intentional" and "unintentional," an issue that may be complicated by people's use of the Web and perceptions of online authorship. Many students are very familiar with Web writing, such as blogs or wikis, and consider such formats "community" writing. In the online world, borrowing language without citation is often considered acceptable. But the culture of authorship online is different from the culture of authorship in academic settings, and you may need to explain this distinction to some writers.

As a tutor, you should become familiar with your institution's code of academic integrity, with its definitions of academic dishonesty, and with the guidelines that it uses to enforce them. At some schools, tutors must report their suspicions of plagiarism; at other schools, tutors may explain what plagiarism is and advise writers to be careful about how they use and document information.



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DO

- ✓ Be familiar with your school's academic code of integrity.
- ✓ Be familiar with your writing center's resources (manuals, handbooks, handouts, online explanations) for properly summarizing, paraphrasing, and documenting information.
- ✓ Explain the importance of carefully taking notes from sources. Remind writers to indicate the author's words clearly and to gather accurately all information that might be required for a citation.
- ✓ If you encounter a suspicious passage or phrase, explain that the text sounds "different" or "funny" and seems to be taken from another source. Explain that material taken from another source that is not common knowledge must be documented, whether it is quoted directly, paraphrased, or summarized.
- ✓ Keep in mind that some writers concentrate on content in early drafts and do not include all information for citing portions of their papers at that stage; they add those details later. Or, an entire class may be responding to the same reading(s), and the teacher may have said that citations are therefore not necessary in this paper. If you are unsure, ask the writer for more information about the citation requirements for that assignment.
- ✓ Explain that acknowledging sources is an ethical issue, a matter of giving credit for ideas and/or words to the person who came up with them. Documenting sources appropriately both acknowledges the original writer and allows readers to locate that resource easily if so desired. Remember that this policy applies to Web writing as well.
- ✓ Speak with your director or supervisor if you are unsure about how to handle a suspected case of plagiarism.

DON'T

- ✗ Accuse a writer directly of plagiarism.

The Writer with the “Perfect” Paper

The “perfect” paper really is not a problem because it does not exist. Even if the paper seems to meet all the criteria for the assignment and the writer has expressed his or her thoughts well, you can still encourage the writer to look for areas that might be improved.

For a paper that is quite strong, some refining at the editing and revision stage can make the paper even more effective. Usually, such refinements amount to tweaking the paper at the sentence level. Furthermore, for some writers, effective writing is more intuitive than conscious. It also may be helpful for the writer to reflect on the strong aspects of the paper. Consciousness of these good writing skills and patterns can then be conveyed to future papers.

On the other hand, you may encounter a writer who is confident that he or she has written the perfect paper and may even announce that fact. Rather than challenge that statement, a good place to start is to praise aspects that appear to be well done, then ease into pointing out places where there is room for improvement. Responding as a reader works well in such instances, for you can note an inviting introduction and good transitional sentences, then identify one or two places where the evidence, sentence structure, or word choice could be even stronger. Once you work through one or two issues, she or he may be more open to the revising process.

DO

- ✓ Ask the writer which areas he or she thinks need more work. Being more familiar with the material and topic of the paper, the writer may know specifically what part needs stronger development.
- ✓ See what stylistic changes might be made, like combining sentences or shifting a phrase for better emphasis.
- ✓ Examine vocabulary carefully. Where might a better, more precise word replace an already good word?
- ✓ Identify and discuss particularly strong passages with the writer.

DON'T

- ✗ Assure the writer that he or she has an excellent paper. High praise may seem to be in order, but it should come from the teacher, not you. Remember that you may be unaware of some aspect of the assignment that may influence the grade.

The Writer with the Long Paper

You will see a variety of paper topics, genres, and lengths in the writing center. This diversity is part of the fun of tutoring! But it can also be a challenge. The majority of writers you tutor in the writing center will likely bring in papers less than ten pages long. However, occasionally you will

encounter a writer with a much longer paper, perhaps a capstone paper or honors thesis. Along with the writer, your task is to identify what the two of you can reasonably accomplish in a session, which usually means focusing on a particular aspect or portion of the paper.

DO

- ✓ Find out if your writing center has a policy on paper length; some writing centers set limits on pages per session, while others ask that writers submit longer papers ahead of time so that consultants can read beforehand.
- ✓ Ask the writer to prioritize the writing difficulties that she or he is having.
- ✓ Ask the writer to identify a manageable portion of the paper that may be fairly representative of these writing difficulties.
- ✓ Suggest that the writer return to the writing center with another section of the paper after she or he has further revised.

DON'T

- ✗ Feel obligated to “get through” the entire paper. This will only force you to rush through the session and potentially overwhelm the writer.

Exercises for Coping with Different Tutoring Situations

EXERCISE 8A Role-Playing Different Tutoring Situations

Read through each of the following three scenarios twice. (If you are using this guide as part of a tutoring class, you and other tutors may want to act out the different parts.) As you do the preliminary read, consider the following questions:

1. How is the tutor probably feeling? How do you know? What verbal and nonverbal clues indicate his or her feelings?
2. How is the writer probably feeling? How do you know? What verbal and nonverbal clues can you find?

As you go through the scenarios the second time, consider the following questions:

1. What are the tutor's expectations?
2. What are the writer's expectations?
3. What are some other ways in which the tutor might have handled the situation?

These scenarios provide excellent material for group discussion, and you can use the preceding questions as departure points.

SCENARIO 1

Tutor: Hi! [Smiles.] My name's Chris. We can just sit over here. Grab that chair. [They sit.] What can I do for you?

Writer: Well, I'm Jeremy, and I have this paper [hands it to tutor], and, uh, my teacher said, I had to come here and, uh, get some help 'cause my last paper... [looks down] was a D.

Tutor: Then maybe we should just begin by reading through it out loud. Do you want to read, or would you rather I did?

Writer: [Motions to tutor and mutters "You," then folds arms across chest and gazes off into space.]

Tutor: [Begins reading but is clearly having trouble. Stumbles over words and stops several times to clarify a word. As tutor reads, writer occasionally sighs, taps fingers on desk and feet on floor.] Listen, I'm really having trouble reading your handwriting. It would probably be easier if you read your paper to me. Would you mind?

Writer: [Hesitates.] Naw, I guess not. [Reads about halfway down page, suddenly stops and slams hand down on desk and looks at tutor.] I really don't see the point of this.

Tutor: Well, it's just easier for me to tutor, to help you with your paper, if I hear what you've written.

Writer: [Waits a few moments, then tosses paper in front of tutor and speaks in a demanding way.] Can't you just check it and fix it?

Tutor: When you come here and ask to have a paper proofread, the receptionist will tell you that the writing center isn't a proofreading service. It's a tutoring service. You can have a tutor like me look at your paper with you and discuss your problems and then try to show you how to correct them. We don't just correct students' papers!

Writer: [Annoyed.] Well, I was told that you did! My friend said I could just have a tutor correct my grammar.

Tutor: [Firmly.] Well, I'm sorry. I don't tutor that way. [Silence.]

Tutor: If you want me to continue reading through...

Writer: [Cuts tutor off, snatches paper away from tutor, looks quickly at watch.] I just don't have time for this. Nothing against you, but I just don't have time for this. [Collects papers quickly and gets up.]

Tutor: [Stares in disbelief.] I'm really sorry. I just don't tutor that way.

Writer: That's okay. It's nothing against you. [Walks out.]

SCENARIO 2

[The tutor is sitting at a computer, and a student IMs her for a writing center online chat.]

Tutor: Hi! I'm Jomeka. What can I do to help you?

Writer: I don't know if you can. I only have a draft of a paper, or the start of one. Not sure what to do. Just wrote some stuff down. Parts of it just don't sound right.

Tutor: What's your assignment?

Writer: A book review for history. Nothing specific, really, just a review. The book's *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, by Garry Wills.

Tutor: © Great! Have you ever written a book review before? Do you know what you're supposed to include?

Writer: Sort of. I think I'm supposed to give my opinion.

Tutor: Something like that. What you're supposed to do is evaluate it and use evidence from the book—like quotes and examples and references—to back up what you say. So tell me some of your ideas. What did you like about the book? Take your time; I'll be here!

[The cursor blinks for a few minutes.]

Writer: Well, I don't really know. Have you read it? What do you think about it?

Tutor: Nope, haven't read it. Sorry! Why don't you just tell me some of your ideas. That will be a good starting point.

Writer: If you haven't read the book, I don't see how you can help me.

Tutor: I understand your frustration! But I think I can still help. In fact, it's probably better that I haven't read it. You'll have to explain things to me, and that'll help you sort out your ideas. If you just tell me what some of your ideas are, we can chat about them and I can help you think them through a bit. I do that all the time here.

Writer: I just don't see how that will work. I mean, if you haven't read the book... ©

Tutor: Yes, but you have, so it's really not a problem. I can tell that this is frustrating for you, but I can help.

[The cursor blinks again for a minute or so.]

Tutor: You have read the book, haven't you?

Writer: Most of it. I mean, it's really long, and I don't know. I can't get into it.

Tutor: Well, maybe you could tell me about the parts you have read, and we can at least start working from there. You said you wrote some things down. Can you e-mail me or copy and paste what you do have? It'll be a good start...

SCENARIO 3

[The tutor is sitting. The writer sits down beside the tutor.]

Tutor: [Cheerfully.] Hi! I'm Lee. What are you working on?

Writer: I have to do a five-page paper analyzing this poem. It's due tomorrow morning—early. I don't know. It's really hard to do that stuff, don't you think? Why do teachers give assignments like this, anyway?

Tutor: Well, they do. And, I know, sometimes it's just not easy.

Writer: [Hesitates.] Uh, I haven't really started it yet. Because I can't figure out what I'm supposed to do. Here's the poem and here's the assignment sheet. [Hands poem and assignment sheet to tutor.] What should I do? I really don't understand what the teacher wants.

Tutor: [Glances at papers.] Oh, I know that poem. [Looks up.] Did the teacher explain anything about the paper in class?

Writer: Yeah, we're supposed to read the poem and analyze it, but I just don't know what she wants. [Looks baffled.] How do you analyze a poem?

Tutor: Well, let's see what the assignment sheet says.

Writer: [Sighs.] I can't figure out the assignment sheet. It's so confusing to read. Can you read it and tell me what I'm supposed to do?

Tutor: [Hesitates, glances at it, and then smiles.] Sure, let me read it. It's short. [Reads it over.] Oh, here it is! At the bottom it tells you what to do.

Writer: Oh, I didn't read that far. I got confused by the beginning stuff, with all those terms. The teacher never really explains anything to us. I hate that.

Tutor: Well, let's see if we can sort it out. The poem...

Writer: [Interrupts.] Don't you just hate when teachers don't tell you what they want? If they just would tell me, I think I would be able to write it. [Pauses and grins.] So, you figured out the assignment? What am I supposed to do?

Tutor: [Pauses.] You know, what I'm hearing is that you're frustrated because you don't know what to do and the paper's due tomorrow. Let's look at the assignment sheet together. You can tell me which parts confuse you, and I can try to explain...

Writer: [Angrily.] Look, I have to pass this class and I have to do the paper to pass it. Just tell me what to do! You know the poem and you know what I'm supposed to do...

Tutor: [Firmly but politely.] Yes, but I can't do the paper for you. I can help you, but it's your paper.

Writer: I know, I know, I know, but what am I supposed to do? It's due tomorrow! [Emphatically.] I hate poetry!

Tutor: Well, I'm trying to help, but...

Writer: Yeah, but it's so late. Just tell me what to say! Aren't you supposed to help me?

Tutor: I can help you, but if you don't want to do your share of the work, there's not much I can do.

Writer: [Grabs the papers.] Yeah, well, thanks for nothing. I should have figured you tutors would be just like the teacher.

EXERCISE 8B Reflecting on Different Tutoring Situations

Think about a tutoring session in which you were not satisfied with the outcome. What made the situation so unpleasant, both for you and for the writer? How did you handle the situation? What are some other ways you might have handled it? Now think about a tutoring session in which you were satisfied with the outcome. What made the situation pleasant for both you and the writer? What did you learn from this situation and how might it help you navigate future difficult tutoring sessions?



