

The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors

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The Writing Center as a Workplace

Tutoring writers can be an exciting, enjoyable, and rewarding experience. You may be tutoring in a writing center, for a company, or on your own; in each case, you become part of a long history of people involved in this profession.

Being engaged in a professional activity has ethical implications for your behavior with writers; it influences how you conduct yourself as part of a group, how you relate to other tutors, and how you function as a representative of the writing center. Tutoring involves both responsibility and trust; therefore, you are encouraged to observe certain principles of conduct in your relationships with writers, other tutors, and teachers. To make apprehensive writers feel more comfortable, writing centers tend deliberately to project an inviting, relaxed atmosphere. Tutors reflect this ambience through their casual friendliness.

Occasionally, however, tutors may be tempted to behave in too casual a manner, forgetting for the moment the professional nature of tutoring. Because you may begin tutoring at the same time that you start reading this book, you should be familiar with some professional principles at the outset.

PROFESSIONALISM TOWARD THE WRITER

- When writers arrive, be pleasant and courteous. They may feel uneasy about showing their writing to a tutor, and those coming in for the first time may be unsure about writing center procedures. Make sure everyone feels welcome. Although you may intend it as a gesture of goodwill, being flippant or sarcastic may put some writers off. If you are working online with a writer, be aware of your tone. It may take a few extra moments to

type out a nice welcome message, but setting a friendly tone for the entire online session is important.

- Greet each writer cheerfully and indicate that you are ready to begin work, even if you are tired or under stress from school or job responsibilities. Especially in the reception area, be careful about discussing whose turn it is to tutor or making comments like, “Who wants to work with this one?” or “I guess I’ll take him.” Such behavior might make a writer wonder what kind of help a grudging tutor will deliver.
- It is fine to be relaxed at the writing center, but excessively informal behavior—conducting personal conversations with other tutors or casually touching students, for instance—may offend writers, especially those from certain cultural backgrounds. Similarly, when working online with a writer, be conscious of how you use digital shorthand like *LOL* or *BTW*. Such slang can be confusing and off-putting for those writers less familiar with it. However, if the writer uses digital shorthand, and it is within the guidelines of your writing center, feel free to continue in this mode, as it may make the writer more comfortable.
- Avoid negative comments about a writer’s topic. The writer may have personal reasons for choosing a particular poem to explicate or something controversial to explore. Even if the writer does not seem happy about the topic, it is best to be positive from the outset to set the tone for the rest of the tutoring session.
- Honor the confidentiality of the tutoring relationship: Don’t comment on or discuss writers or their papers with teachers, in front of other people, or on social media. Idle comments—whether praise or complaints—about writers may get back to them. Such comments may also be overheard by other clients who visit the writing center, making them wonder what will be said about them when they leave. If you need advice or want to vent about a difficult tutoring session, seek out your director or another administrator privately.

PROFESSIONALISM TOWARD OTHER TUTORS

- Being professional means reporting for work on time or calling and/or e-mailing beforehand if something prevents you from being there as scheduled. Like you, other tutors juggle class, work, and home schedules. Your coworkers must pick up the slack when you do not manage your time effectively.
- Be aware that carelessness or delinquency on your part makes someone else’s job more difficult. Make sure that you follow all the procedures and

rules of your workplace, from putting materials away to filling out tutoring reports and timesheets.

- Tutors and writers often work in close quarters, so be aware of the volume of your voice. Tidy up your workstation before you leave so that it will be ready for the next tutor.
- If you have a few idle moments, take the initiative to engage in a helpful task. Beyond tutoring, there are often odd jobs—ranging from making coffee to watering plants to reviewing surveys—that need to be done in order to keep the writing center running smoothly.

PROFESSIONALISM TOWARD TEACHERS

- Teachers need to be sure that they are evaluating a writer’s own work; therefore, refrain from writing any part of a student’s paper. Instead, use guiding questions and comments to help writers recognize areas for improvement and come up with their own solutions for revising their texts. Though you may sometimes recast a sentence or two as an example, be careful about how much of the writer’s work you revise. If you need more examples, make up some or find exercises in a grammar handbook or online writing resource. If you find yourself tempted to revise too much of a writer’s work, put your pencil down or walk away from your computer.
- As a tutor, you will hear writers’ comments about instructors, assignments, and grading policies. Some comments may be negative, and some writers may press you to agree. Be careful, however, never to comment negatively to students about a teacher’s methods, assignments, personality, or grading policies. Recognize that you cannot know everything that transpires in a classroom and that writers are relating their impressions or interpretations, and these may be incomplete or even inaccurate. If you cannot understand an assignment or a grading policy, suggest that the writer ask the teacher for clarification.
- Sometimes a student who is unhappy about a grade will actively seek support from a tutor for his or her dissatisfaction. Never criticize the grade that a teacher has given a paper. Just as suggesting a grade for a paper can lead to trouble, so too can acknowledging to the student that you disagree with a grade. However, you can still support the student. First, you can recognize and validate his frustration with strategies like *restatement* (“I can hear that you are really frustrated by this grade because you worked so hard on this paper”), *empathy* (“I once had a similar experience in a theology class, and I remember it took me a while to even look at the paper again for revision”), or *refocus* (“Can I help you begin to figure out what additional work remains on this paper?”). You may also prompt the

student to try to resolve grade concerns with the teacher, and then, if necessary, with other appropriate people.

- You may have had the same teacher or faced a similar situation as a student you are tutoring. Though you may commiserate, focus on helping the writer find strategies to cope rather than sharing stories. Try to support the writer and allow her to express frustrations and questions without adding your opinion. If it is appropriate, you can empower the writer by explaining the procedures in place for discussing an issue or registering a complaint.
- Some writers may ask “Is this paper good enough for a B?” and others may pressure you to suggest a grade. Assigning grades is a subjective matter that requires experience and training, and it is the teacher’s job, not the tutor’s. Furthermore, suggesting or insinuating a grade could create conflicts among the teacher, the student, and the writing center. Even if a paper seems well written, it is wise to be judicious with your praise. A writer may interpret your comment that “this is a good paper” to mean that it deserves an A.

As a tutor, you will help many friendly, hardworking, conscientious students become better writers. However, as in any professional setting, you may occasionally encounter some difficult situations. Whether it is the fifth paper on school uniforms you have seen, a consistently late coworker, a writer who wants you to predict a grade, or a teacher who approaches you to discuss his student’s paper, we hope that these principles will help you conduct yourself in a professional manner.

To the writers you encounter, you represent the writing center. They judge the writing center not only by the competency of your tutoring but also by the attitudes, courtesy, and respect you display toward them and your coworkers.

THE MANY HATS TUTORS WEAR

Many former tutors report that their work tutoring writing prepared them well for their future professional positions. They note that paying attention to others’ writing skills inevitably means honing your own, and writing well matters in any job. Important, too, however, is the development of people skills—the ability to empathize, and to adapt and respond appropriately to each individual writer’s situation. Doing so means that, just like other jobs you may have had (or will have), in the writing center you will find yourself wearing many hats.

A tutor’s role varies from session to session. With one writer, you ask question after question to help him figure out what he has to say about a scene in *Beowulf*. With the next, you explain the various ways of defining a



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term in a definition paper. In the midst of this session, the writer vents some frustrations about being a returning student and balancing her time, so you direct her to a series of workshops for returning students. Then, a multilingual writer arrives. He is having a bit of trouble with subject and verb agreement; you pull out a piece of paper and start explaining. In your tutoring, you function variously as an ally, a coach, a commentator, a collaborator, a writing “expert,” a learner, and a counselor.

The Ally

You are a friend who offers support to a writer coping with a difficult task—writing a paper. You are sympathetic, empathetic, and encouraging, and best of all, you are supportive and helpful. You explain things in terms that the writer can understand. You answer questions that may seem silly or stupid, but you take them seriously. You smile (in person or online: ☺). You understand. You commiserate. (You also have a history paper due tomorrow, and you do not expect to get much sleep tonight either!)

The Coach

In sports, coaches instruct players and direct team strategy. They do not actually do the work for the team, but rather they stand on the sidelines observing how the team functions, looking at what is going well and what needs improvement. Likewise, you stand on the sidelines. The work of writers needs to be their own, but by asking questions, making comments, and functioning as a reader, you encourage writers to think through problems and to find their own answers. You suggest ways of accomplishing tasks. You describe how to organize a comparison and contrast paper, clarify the rules for using a semicolon, or explain and help writers implement strategies for invention.

The Commentator

Sports commentators give play-by-play accounts, but they also give a picture of the whole game as it progresses. Likewise, you describe process and progress in a broader context than a writer might otherwise see. As former

Purdue University professor and writing lab director Muriel Harris explains, "The tutor-commentator provides perspective, makes connections to larger issues, gives students a sense of when and how they are moving forward."¹ You enable writers to see a paper as a whole by working with them to establish goals and by explaining what work lies ahead. You help them to acquire strategies and skills that will work not just for this paper but for others as well. You point out that making a correction in spelling or punctuation is not simply a matter of following a convention but rather of making their writing more accessible for a reader.

The Collaborator

You know that writers are supposed to do all of the work themselves, but you are discussing ideas for a paper with a particularly astute and engaged writer. She has read Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and has focused on examining the color imagery in it. You have just read the book, so you know what she is talking about. She mentions the dinner scene, and you have an idea about the color yellow in it. Do you keep it to yourself? Probably not. More likely, the two of you discuss ideas about the imagery in a mutually engaging and even exhilarating exchange; she profits from your input and you from hers.

Such an exchange often seems like the best part of tutoring, but if you do share your ideas with writers, be wary of two potential problems. First, writers should always be responsible for and in control of their own papers. Lazy or unsure writers may try to rely on you to produce most or all of the ideas for papers—in effect, to write the paper—which should be their own work. Conversely, the overzealous tutor may usurp papers, interjecting too many ideas and leaving writers confused, no longer in control of the paper, and perhaps less confident about their writing abilities.

The Writing Expert

You may not be a writing teacher or a writing expert; nonetheless, students usually come to you assuming that you know more about writing than they do. The truth is that you probably do. Just by being a tutor, you become more knowledgeable about writing. You are an example of the adage that we learn best when we explain something to someone else.

But what do you do when you realize that you are in over your head, that you do not know how to explain a grammatical point or the options available when writing a résumé? The simple answer is to admit that you do not know and then to seek help. Check—or have the writer check—a textbook, handbook, or website; thus, you model how one can use available resources.

¹Muriel Harris. "The Roles a Tutor Plays: Effective Tutoring Techniques." *English Journal* 69.9 (1980): 62–65.

You can also ask another tutor, who can often be an excellent resource. Occasionally, you may need to turn the writer over to a more knowledgeable tutor. In that case, you might sit in (or join in the chatroom if tutoring online) and learn something for the next time that you encounter a similar situation.

The Learner

This role is slightly different from the others in this list because, while it has some benefits for writers, you are the one who really gains. Writers bring papers on a wide variety of topics, some of which will be partially or entirely new to you. What, for example, causes chondromalacia, or "runner's knee," and how is it treated? How is oil extracted from shale? What does Chief Seattle say about environmental issues in his 1854 speech? What is the Ghost Dance, and how did it contribute to the massacre at Wounded Knee on the South Dakota Pine Ridge reservation? What made Robben Island, located off Cape Town, South Africa, a good location for a leper colony, an animal quarantine station, and finally, a prison? As you talk with writers, you get to enjoy learning about these and other topics. Even if you are familiar with a topic, the perspective that the writer takes may help you see it in a new or different way. For example, a student's discussion of Isabella in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* as a kind of "typical teenager" may lead you to consider that character differently.

Knowing little or nothing about a topic often makes you a perfect audience for a paper, so writers actually gain from your lack of expertise. Writers often have difficulty accommodating an audience; as they answer your questions and clarify their writing for you, they will learn how to adapt their texts for an audience.

The Counselor

A student's life includes much more than the writing assignment at hand, and often other issues and concerns interfere with completing the assignment. Sometimes you may find yourself playing the role of counselor, listening to writers' concerns and dealing with such issues as attitude and motivation. You may encounter a transfer student who is disgruntled because she has lost credits in changing schools, a returning student who wonders if he can continue to juggle his job and school successfully, or a graduating senior who has lost interest in school and just can't seem to get motivated. In such cases, you offer support, sympathy, and suggestions as appropriate. You refer students to workshops or programs on campus: for example, conversation groups for English language learners, time-management or study-skills seminars, résumé workshops, or GRE reviews.

You may encounter a writer whose paper is deeply personal and reveals worrisome content that makes you feel uncomfortable or ill prepared to address.

If you think a student may need professional help, speak with your director or other administrator, who will know the appropriate campus resources and can refer the student. You are not violating any privacy concerns by going to your director or administrator, and it is generally better to err on the side of caution when students reveal sentiments or ideas that make you uncomfortable.

WHEN IS A TUTOR NOT A TUTOR?

Once your friends and neighbors—or even writers you work with—realize that you are a writing tutor, they may seek your help with assignments outside the writing center. Except in special cases that only you can decide (helping a roommate or coworker, for example), it is best to restrict your tutoring to the writing center. Otherwise, you may find yourself coerced into spending your study, sleep, or family time working on someone else's paper. If you have difficulty establishing boundaries with people requesting help outside of writing center hours, talk with your director or other administrator.

EXERCISE 1A: Keeping a Personal Tutoring Journal

A journal provides a way to record your progress as a tutor, to give voice to your observations, and to write your way toward solutions to problems that you may encounter in the writing center. Your journal can be paper or online; pick the medium that feels most comfortable and natural to you. For the first several weeks of your time in the writing center, write in your journal at least once a week about your tutoring experiences. Consider including:

- Your experiences tutoring a variety of students and assignments.
- Your reflections on successful and less-than-successful tutoring sessions.
- Your observations regarding the writing process.
- Your reactions to readings, writing assignments, or topics covered in tutor meetings or other classes involving writing.

This journal may be entirely private, or it could be part of a class or writing center online forum (a blog or discussion board), where your director, other tutors-in-training, or tutors in the center are invited to read and respond. Additionally, the instructor, director, or tutors may post prompts on a regular basis (perhaps weekly) to explore issues and questions that arise as you tutor or to continue discussions about tutoring and writing begun in class or in meetings. Remember, however, that this forum must be private to maintain confidentiality and professionalism; the contents of these journals may include information that is helpful as you process various tutoring sessions.

EXERCISE 1B: Participating in Public Online Discussion Forums

Public online discussion forums are a wonderful way for tutors to connect cross-institutionally. Participating in online forums will help you gain perspective on a variety of writing center practices and will provide you with the opportunity to contribute to the larger writing center community. But you don't have to contribute to participate! You should feel free to “interlope” by simply following a listserv thread or reading a blog regularly. Here are two popular options:

- E-mail listserv: Wcenter (writingcenters.org/resources/join-the-wcenter-listserv/)
- Blog: PeerCentered (www.peercentered.org/)

Additionally, many writing centers and regional writing center associations have their own social media, including blogs, and they invite contributions from anyone. See, for example, The University of Wisconsin-Madison's active blog, “Another Word,” at writing.wisc.edu/blog/.

EXERCISE 1C: Investigating Your Writing Center's History

Many writing centers have existed for years, and their histories are fascinating and diverse. The following activities can help you learn more about your writing center:

- **Conduct an interview.** Find people knowledgeable about your writing center's background: the director, a previous director, the writing program director, senior faculty members, and former tutors. Consider asking the following questions:
 - When and why was the writing center established?
 - Has its mission changed over time? If so, how and why?
 - In what other ways has the writing center changed? (In the number and kinds of tutors? In services? In the number and kinds of writers served? In location? In the influences of technology?)
 - What stories can this person share about earlier days?
- **Host a panel.** Ask your director if you can pull together and facilitate a panel of people previously involved in your writing center (former directors, teachers, staff, and tutors) to address the writing center staff and talk about their experiences in the writing center. Consider recording the panel and posting it online.
- **Create an archive.** Many writing centers have boxes of “stuff” and digital files just begging to be organized and categorized: old tutoring manuals, tutor training syllabi, faculty workshop materials, writing center conference programs, etc.
- **Participate in the Peer Writing Tutor Alumni Research Project.** This

Gillespie, and Brad Hughes—who wanted to assess in tangible ways the impact of tutors' writing center training and experience on their lives and jobs post-graduation. Go to www.writing.wisc.edu/pwtarp/ to get started with their step-by-step guide.

- **Publish.** Share what you learn with your campus community! If your writing center or school publishes a newsletter or newspaper, consider submitting an article about your writing center's history based on your research.

EXERCISE 1D: Exploring Tutors' Roles

The roles described in this chapter are not the only ones that tutors play. Sometimes, you may find yourself functioning as parent, therapist, actor, guru, or comedian. Exploring these potential roles can be interesting and informative.

Make a list of all the roles you can imagine tutors playing, then list the strengths and weaknesses of each: What is positive or negative about each role within a tutoring session? How do these strengths and weaknesses affect tutoring? If you are working with other tutors, you might do this exercise in groups, with each group exploring the same or different roles.

2

Inside the Tutoring Session

GETTING STARTED

It is not by accident that many writing centers appear welcoming and friendly. To make writers feel more comfortable, centers are often furnished with plants, bright posters, comfortable chairs, and tables instead of desks. Writing centers often extend that friendly ambience online, with a web and social media presence that is active and helpful and offers user-friendly language and resources. Whether you meet writers in person or online, you should try to put them at ease. A casual but interested greeting and a smile—or an emoticon—can immediately make them less apprehensive about the prospect of sharing their writing. Be alert for those reluctant writers who hover about the doorway or hang out quietly in a writing center online chatroom, unsure of what to do or how to begin. Engage them with a cheerful “Can I help you?”

The following are tips to help establish rapport at the beginning of the tutoring session:

- **Introduce yourself.** Smile and ask the writer her name. Once you have settled into a comfortable place for the two of you to work, ask about the assignment and how it is going. If you have worked with the writer before, ask how the last assignment went. The exchange of pleasantries at the beginning of a session helps put the writer at ease and gets the session off to a good start. In an online environment, also ask the writer if she has had any technical difficulties or concerns that you can help resolve before you start.
- **Sit side-by-side.** Such a setup suggests that you are an ally, not an authoritarian figure who dispenses advice from behind a desk. Sitting side-by-side allows you and the writer to look at the work in progress together, but you can still position your chairs to look at each other as you converse if