

1

WHY WE TUTOR

This is a book about tutoring writing. You'll read about the techniques of tutoring, the theoretical and practical background that you'll need to be successful, and the specific issues that make writing center work both challenging and rewarding.

To introduce you to tutoring writing and to how we hope this book will help you, we want to start at the beginning. Why do we tutor? The answer to that question forms, for us, the foundation upon which our own lives as tutors and writing center directors are based, and informs each chapter of this book.

We'll first explore the question "Why tutor?" by turning to some voices that you'll hear again and again in this book—the trainees in the Marquette University peer tutoring course. Much that is offered here has been tried out on that willing and generous group, and we coauthors have learned a great deal from their experiences. We think you, too, will find much familiarity with the stories they tell, but in particular, in this chapter, they will talk about what they expected tutoring to be like at the beginning of their course and where they believe those expectations came from. We believe that learning anything new starts with thinking about what you already know and then building upon that knowledge. As you read these responses, think about the experiences that you bring to tutoring writing.

From Jessi:

I remember when I was in fourth grade, I was singled out (I hate when teachers do that) to help a slow kid named Peter with his reading. We sat down during "quiet time" and I helped him go over the lesson we

had learned earlier that day. Each day when we were done, the teacher would give me a sticker, I assume as a reward, that I had to wear on the front of my Catholic school uniform. She never gave Peter a sticker.

Today I am still undecided as to why I was chosen to help Peter. Was it because I have always been good at matters pertaining to English? Did the teacher think Peter would benefit more from my help as a peer? Or was she just lazy and preferred to have "quiet time" to herself? I guess I don't expect a sticker at the end of each of my tutoring sessions these days. I do expect tutoring to be a fulfilling experience for both myself and my students/classmates. I hope to give them something they can walk away with and apply later on, whether it be on that paper or a future one. I hope I can take something I have learned and help them use that knowledge to become better writers.

From Paul:

In my high school, being a tutor meant being a really good speller and knowing MLA style. In fact I remember one of my sophomore year English teachers saying to class one day that with computers being able to spell check and grammar check, proof readers won't be necessary anymore. Now I took this little "gem" of knowledge to mean that tutors were going to be obsolete. Why go and get your writing checked when the computer does it for you? The answer came my freshman year when I went to the writing center. I don't remember my tutor's name. All I remember was he did not care one ounce about my spelling. He wanted to make sure that the paper "flowed." I was dumbfounded; I had no idea what he was talking about. In fact, I didn't even follow his suggestions because anything he said went against the Introduction-Three-Paragraph-Conclusion format I had learned in high school. Well, Dr. Miller gave me a D. I rewrote the paper with the suggestions that my tutor gave me. I got a B.

I learned (the hard way) that tutoring is more than just proofreading. It's about getting the person to realize that there is always more than one set way to go about writing a paper.

From Aesha:

For most of my career as a student, I basically wanted to please my teachers. I was concerned about getting a smiley face on my paper or having my teacher read my paper aloud as an example of what to do for an "A." Therefore, if there was something wrong with my writing that my teachers didn't like, I changed it, even if I liked it. Somehow, I equated an "A" in English from my fifth-grade teacher to mean that she liked me as a per-

son. It wasn't until I came to college that these expectations changed. My English 001 professor, Dr. Gervasi, challenged me to examine my thought processes. If my paper was not "A" material on the first draft, it did not necessarily mean that I was somehow not good enough. Dr. Gervasi showed me this by not being so excited about my hurried grammatical changes (my grade reflected this) as he was about the way I strengthened my support of opinions or even when I changed my mind.

In other words, I don't want the tutee to think that I am somehow judging his/her personality when we are in a session. I want it to be clear that my suggestions, etc. are not the last word, but that he/she must decide what works.

From Megan:

I was a junior in high school, and never having struggled with a class, I was forced by my parental units to seek out a tutor in order to find success in physics. As I knew physics would not play a very important part in my future, I needed not to "understand" but rather to pull out of the class having created the idea that I was physics-minded. Mr. Martinson came highly recommended by a number of my friends. Soon, I found out why. We met at the library for our one-hour session. I would hand him my book and my assignment, and he would proceed to complete each problem, showing his work clearly, and usually with a diagram. I would then take the work home, having been "tutored," and I would copy it, memorize it, and give it to any of my friends who also were struggling. I passed physics, and well too, but in retrospect I know that I have little idea what speed two tennis balls shot from opposite sides of the room would have to be thrown in order for them to meet exactly in the middle of the room.

So this being my experience when I became a peer tutor my senior year, I knew what not to do. Don't do their work. Try to simplify the problem. Have the other person explain what they think they are doing wrong. These were the steps I would take.

As a tutor in the writing center, I can see how easy it would be to get "Mr. Martinson Syndrome": to take the dreaded red pen to a paper and edit and rewrite. But I know this is highly ineffective. So to sum it all up: I think my preconceptions about tutoring are only that I am not here to do the work but to help someone else be proud of the work that they have done without feeling that unnecessary struggle is required.

From Adele:

When I was in high school, I started my freshman year out in "honors" English. After that first year, I was asked to move down to regular

English because good ol' Mrs. Johnson thought I could "handle" it better. That ruined most of my aspirations for writing. I accepted C's because I figured I just wasn't a good writer. God must have given me some other talent, and I tried to find it.

It wasn't until sophomore year of college that I found writing again. Thanks to Dr. McBride's English Lit class, I figured out how to write for myself. Prior to this, I never saw the point in tutoring because I always viewed it as a bashing session by "Mrs. Johnson." And Lord knows we all get defensive when our work is torn to shreds by some dominant little know-it-all. So, anyway, I went to talk to McBride about my first analytical paper, expecting him to scrape up all the little lost pieces. I was desperate. But I was totally thrown off by our meeting. The head of the department wanted to know what I thought; HE was the expert! But that session taught me that the writer is the expert. It was MY damn paper, and I had to learn how to write it.

From Sara:

Most of my experiences with tutoring in high school left a bad taste in my mouth. Because I was a good student and a fairly good writer for a high school student, my teachers would often ask me to work with other students who were struggling. Or my friends, who knew that I got good grades, would come to me with questions about homework assignments. A lot of my study halls would get eaten up by answering questions about subjects from chemistry to English. I enjoyed helping people and didn't mind the time I spent with them, but many times I would end up feeling used. I would get sick of working on assignments with people who just wanted to get to the bottom line, but who didn't care about the whole process behind getting there. Looking back on those experiences after our discussions and readings, I see now that I wanted to be a "minimalist" tutor who caused others to think about their writing or other assignments, but I didn't know how to do that.

Since high school, I have worked at the Educational Opportunity Program over in Marquette Hall as a tutor for the Upward Bound program. My experiences there have been a lot better than those in high school. I haven't ever tutored writing, but I learned by working there that the student learns best when he or she does the work. I, as a tutor, am not there to solve their every problem with the assignment, but to help them think through how they can solve those problems on their own. In some ways, I think the goal of a tutor should be to make yourself obsolete. I hope that all of the students I worked with at EOP learned to problem solve on their own. Like Paula said in class—it's okay that the freshmen didn't come back to the writing center after

their first time, so long as they were equipped the first time with the tools to successfully critique their own writing.

As you read these accounts, you might have noticed several common themes. Almost all had their expectations of tutoring formed by being put in a “teacherly” position or by being tutored themselves. And almost all of these writers didn’t like the position of being a know-it-all; instead, they have learned that tutoring involves helping someone become a better writer, not handing out vocabulary words or cleaning up someone else’s paper (and we’ll talk much more about the differences between tutoring and editing in Chapter 3). As Sara wrote, “I, as a tutor, am not there to solve [writers’] every problem with the assignment, but to help them think through how they can solve those problems on their own.” So, how do you do that?

CONTRASTING CONCEPTS

One other theme from the tutor stories is that many concepts that surround tutoring writing seem to be in opposition—tutor/editor, novice/expert, process/product, control/flexibility, tutor/teacher. These contrasts frame many of the minute-by-minute decisions we make as tutors. In this book we will expand on each of these contrasts, showing how experienced tutors don’t simply reject one concept in favor of its opposite, but instead adjust their actions by being sensitive to a writer’s needs and the context of any individual tutoring session. In other words, each of these contrasts exists as ends of a continuum, and any place on that scale contains qualities of both extremes. As an analogy, imagine a color scale with blue on one end and yellow on the other. The exact middle of that scale is green—a fifty-fifty blending of blue and yellow—but as you get closer to the blue end, that green becomes bluer and bluer, and when you get closer to the yellow end, that green begins to pale. In this text we’ll often refer to concepts that aren’t either/or choices (for example, we won’t claim that writing center work is *either* challenging *or* rewarding—it’s both!), but instead we’ll invoke these contrasts to attest to the complexity of the work you are about to enter. You’ll often find yourself closer to one end of the continuum than the other, sometimes in the middle, sometimes at several places over the course of any given session. If this technique sounds active and responsive, well, those are two qualities that experienced tutors often display.

One additional contrast is the prescriptive/descriptive continuum. In this book, we don’t want necessarily to *prescribe* what we think an effective tutor should do (after all, there’s no way we can anticipate every situation you’ll be in), nor do we think that the best way for you to learn is for us to

tell you what you should be doing. Instead, we'll mainly *describe*, allowing new and experienced tutors to do much of the talking, whether that's in the form of first-person accounts, essays, or transcripts from actual sessions. Although some of the advice we give might come off as more telling than showing, our ultimate goal for you is to use this book in order to become a more strategic tutor, to have a variety of resources you can call on to help you succeed in any tutoring situation, and to pose questions so that you can learn from your experiences. We know what has worked for us as tutors, and we'll share that advice (as well as that of many peer tutors), but you'll have to adapt that advice to your contexts, your individual style, and your needs. In jazz improvisation, learning a new sequence often starts with copying someone else's spontaneous riff; after a while, you make that riff your own, adding shading, tone, or sounds that are unique to you. So it goes with tutoring writing. We hope our book can contribute to that development.

THE WRITING CENTER AND THE WRITING PROCESS

In the next chapter we'll delve more deeply into the writing process and what it means for you both personally and as a tutor. First, however, we want you to consider both the role of the writing center in the ways that writers approach an assignment and how you as a tutor will represent the writing center. The following are two undergraduate writers' descriptions of their writing processes.

Dyana, a sophomore English major:

Traditionally when I hear about a paper usually it's two weeks in advance till the due date, and I usually put it off for about a day or two, and then I go and do some research regardless of what the paper is. I always do library research just to get a better feel for what I'm doing. And then I jot down some ideas and then usually walk away from it for about a day. And then a lot of times I'll go to the writing center without anything, without having anything really except notes written and just say, "Okay this is what I need to do," because I really need to talk through my ideas to actually develop them. I can sit there and think about them, but they won't come into words unless I talk through them. And so I kind of just go there a lot of times to bounce things off of [my tutor], and she gives me a lot of insight, too. But then I usually write like two, sometimes if I'm feeling very ambitious, three drafts. That's about my whole process.

Yu, a School of Management freshman:

I will first read the [assignment]. And then after that I try to think about what I can do without reading [the assigned text]. And then I start reading [the assigned text] for the first time, without taking notes. And after that I just throw the [readings] away for awhile. And I go back and then take notes like I'm marking what's important. And I try to keep thinking [about] what I should write between the time that I decided to write and the time I finish my reading. Before I start writing I would normally read an editorial in the newspaper where I will just pick it up and read it and then I will do my writing for the first time. I think [an] editorial provides background, and also it's just weird that I think it gets me started.

You might see familiarities in these descriptions, as well as distinct differences from the writing processes you use. Such is the idiosyncratic nature of writing.

From Dyana's description, you can see that some writers know well how the writing center can help. For others, particularly for writers who are required to meet with you, it might not be so obvious. As a representative of the writing center, you have a chance to help writers understand just how useful you can be. Ideally, a writer will meet with you several times over the course of completing any writing task: when the paper is first assigned so that together you can clarify the assignment and brainstorm initial ideas; after the writer has done some drafting so that you can discuss points of development or possible ways of structuring the ideas; while the writer is revising so that you can guide him or her to focus on the higher-order concerns and put aside editing/proofreading until the very end; and at that very end so that you can help the writer become a more detailed reader of his or her own work. Overall, you can help writers learn how to learn, an idea that we'll discuss in the next two chapters.

We bring up this topic because it might happen that you see writers whose understanding of the writing tutor's role is that of proofreader or cleaner of texts—more contrasts that complicate our work. Just as less-experienced writers exhibit less-developed strategies when they write, they also do not fully appreciate the collaborative nature of writing and how important a writing tutor can be at any point in the process. Once again, you have an opportunity not only to increase a writer's strategic repertoire, but to stress the role the writing center can play. Muriel Harris has noted that "all writers need writing tutors," and this is the foundation upon which modern writing centers are based.

IT'S A MATTER OF TRUST

You might have noticed that we use the term *writer* to refer to those folks whom we work with in our writing centers. We've chosen this term with specific purpose. While *student*, *tuttee*, *client*, or *respondent* all are accurate descriptions to a degree, we truly believe that it's important for you to see the people you work with as writers, just as you are. Of course, writers are at various levels of accomplishment and experience, but all deserve the opportunity to find meaning in what they write and to share that meaning with others. All writers deserve our trust.

Trust is essential to the writing processes. Above all, writers need to trust themselves. That trust may help writers have the patience to wade through pages of a truly rough draft, the kind of writing they wouldn't dare show anyone else (as the early versions of this book were). And it may help them to know that they can turn that rough writing into polished prose. Writers also need to trust their readers (whether real or imagined). Readers will do what the writer asks, at least initially: accept the premises of the argument if it's logical, follow the thread of a narrative if it's entertaining, and picture the details of a description if it's well rendered. So many *ifs*, it seems. Perhaps that's why the writing process is such a complicated act, one seemingly both social and individual, public and private at the same time. You might be writing away in your room, on a park bench, or in your backyard, feeling isolated or at least oblivious to the immediate world around you. Yet, at the same time, you're in a social world, one that involves you, your reader, and your content. Even if you're writing fiction, you're creating a social world; in many kinds of nonfiction, you're re-creating a world in order to render it faithfully to your reader.

Trust is no less important in the relationship between tutors and writers. It's one thing to know and to trust the ways that work best for you as a writer. It's an entirely different thing to consider the ways that the writing center tutor functions within students' writing processes. As a student and a successful writer, you have great insight to share. As a writing center tutor, you'll create an atmosphere of trust for the writers who seek your help. In that environment, you and the writers with whom you meet can accomplish truly important work.

It's also essential that you trust yourself—as a tutor and as a peer. You have the unique opportunity to accomplish work that most teachers cannot do: You're not going to give a grade to a writer's essay, you have great insight into what it means to be a student, and you'll have many things in common with many of the writers you meet. You need to trust these great advantages. The rapport that you can create with writers is one of your best assets as a tutor.

So why do we tutor? Well, what we have learned is that tutoring allows us to connect, whether it's with writers' ideas, with writers' struggle to make meaning, or simply with writers as fellow human beings sitting beside us in the writing center.

We hope the chapters in this book help you gain an understanding of why you tutor, both now and by the time you are an old hand at helping student writers. You'll learn about the writing process and the tutoring process, and you'll spend more time thinking about the expectations you bring to tutoring. You'll also have concrete guidance in taking your first steps toward observing, participating in, and then analyzing your writing center sessions. Finally, we'll focus on specific kinds of challenges you'll encounter: writers with reading difficulties, ESL writers, and writers who present a variety of ethical and practical dilemmas.

Most important, we want to welcome you to an experience that can change your life if you allow it to, just as it has done for us. That's a grand promise, we know, but we don't make it lightly. We offer that promise as an invitation—to come explore the work of tutoring writing. We hope that this book can act as a trustworthy guide in that exploration.