

## Tutor Handbook

### Director's Welcome

Hello and welcome! I'm looking forward to working with all of you in the coming year, and I think you'll find that the time you spend here will be personally and professionally rewarding. The purpose of The George Mason University Writing Center Handbook is to acquaint tutors with the Writing Center's goals, values, and practices; our varied tuteele of students, faculty, and staff at all of our campuses; and the day-to-day procedures involved in running a smooth and effective tutorial program.

This handbook is intended to be a useful supplement to on-the-job training. While we have tried to anticipate many of the challenges tutors will face as they work with writers with widely diverse abilities and attitudes, nothing can substitute for the actual experience of sitting face to face with a tutee and talking about his or her writing.

It's fun, it's challenging, it's sometimes draining and frustrating. But more often than not, I think you will find tutoring writing a satisfying and pleasurable way to spend your time as well as a good introduction to the pedagogy of teaching writing.

### Code of Ethics

All business conducted in the University Writing Center is conducted with the understanding that our goal is to provide free and unbiased writing assistance to all members of the GMU community. As such, we believe it is very important to build a sense of trust between tutors and tutees by respecting the confidentiality of sessions. We also believe that a collaborative relationship between instructors, tutors, and tutees is the most conducive to writing improvement. Therefore we've developed the following guidelines:

- The content of each tutoring session is private. Tutors make brief notes on sessions but these notes are not shared with others outside of the center.
- Should a professor contact the center about a tutee's session, check the session notes to determine if the tutee has given permission to discuss the session with others.
- If a tutee wishes for a professor to hear about his/her session, the tutee must tell the tutor to record in his/her session notes that permission is granted for the session to be discussed with the tutee's teacher and/or others the tutee designates.
- If session reports do not say a tutee has given such permission, professors should be asked to contact the tutee directly. In such a case, please explain our policy to instructors as politely and helpfully as possible.
- We do not comment to tutees or instructors on the grade a paper has received, nor do we speculate on what grade a paper might/should receive.
- All tutoring is free and should be done at the Writing Center on either the Fairfax campus (Robinson A and Enterprise Hall), the Arlington campus or the Prince William campus under the express rubric of the Writing Center. Tutors are not permitted to receive any money from Writing Center tutees. If a tutor does free-lance editing or tutoring, he/she needs to make arrangements to meet those private tutees at a location other than the Writing Center.
- Tutors who do private, free-lance tutoring should refrain from using the Writing Center's office location, databases, files, or tutee information to solicit new business. Any of these situations could seriously compromise the integrity of the Writing Center.

## Who's Who at the Writing Center

### ***The Director***

The Director is responsible for the overall operation of the Writing Center. This responsibility includes managing the Writing Center budget, hiring personnel, and cultivating institutional contacts across and beyond the university in order to make the Writing Center an integral part of Writing Across the Curriculum.

### ***The Assistants to the Writing Center***

The assistant position was created to streamline the management of the Writing Center initiatives and day-to-day operations.

### ***Graduate Student Tutors***

The majority of the Writing Center's tutors are graduate students in a variety of English department programs, including the MFA programs in fiction, non-fiction, and poetry, as well as other English MA programs at Mason. The Writing Center has in the past also employed tutors from other graduate programs, including the PhD program in Cultural Studies.

### ***ESL Specialist Tutors***

Sponsored by the English Language Institute (ELI), the ESL Specialists have or are pursuing an MA in Linguistics or a related area, and a TESOL certificate. These tutors also have a number of years of experience working with non-native speakers. In addition to 15-20 hours of tutoring a week, ESL Specialists are responsible for tutor training in ESL areas, consulting with faculty on ESL concerns, holding workshops on ESL topics, developing ongoing outreach projects targeting ESL students, and developing and maintaining the OWL and other electronic resources for ESL tutees.

In addition to these duties, ESL tutors may be asked to present workshops for Writing Center tutees or staff. While working with ESL students is their primary responsibility, ESL tutors may be asked to tutor native speakers when the Writing Center is busy.

### ***Peer Tutors***

Each semester the Writing Center enrolls several George Mason undergraduates as Peer Tutors in CAS 390: Peer Tutoring in Writing in the Disciplines. These tutors undergo a separate training and evaluation process, but in all other respects they are treated as equal colleagues, sharing in the privileges and responsibilities belonging to all Writing Center Tutors.

### ***Office Assistants***

Each semester the Writing Center hires several work-study students as office assistants. Office assistants must be detail-oriented and thorough. The most qualified candidates are those who are flexible and work well in unsupervised settings.

Office assistants are responsible for greeting tutees and establishing a welcoming, friendly environment within the Writing Center; assisting the Director of the Writing Center, the Assistant Director, and tutors with light office work (copying, faxing, filing, mailing, etc.); maintaining the organization and appearance of the Writing Center Library; entering relevant information into the

Writing Center database; tracking incoming and outgoing copy requests; and keeping the Writing Center's bulletin boards accurate, attractive and up-to-date.

## About Our Tutees

Just as there are few hard and fast rules for tutoring, there is no such thing as a typical session or a typical tutee. While the George Mason University Writing Center clientele includes students, staff, faculty and alumni, the majority of our tutees are students, so this section will focus on this demographic.

Sometimes Writing Center tutees may seem to be here under some duress, having come to the Writing Center only because they have felt compelled by their instructor to do so. The great majority of our tutees, however, are here because they genuinely want our help. Unfortunately, they don't always know how best to express that request.

A number of tutees come in asking to have someone proofread their papers. Tutors should avoid the temptation to grant this request or to simply turn the tutee away. Instead explain that while we cannot proofread, we are here to work with writers, to talk with them about their writing, and to help writers learn to find their own patterns of errors so that they can do their own editing and proofreading. Encourage the tutee to make an appointment to see one of our tutors to go over the paper together. Returning students, on the other hand, are familiar with our procedures and often have high expectations for their sessions. These students tend to be very focused

There are also a number of special tutee populations that the Writing Center services. Each of these groups requires different kinds of attention. Non-traditional students are often very realistic about the work involved in the writing process, but can also be discouraged by a tutor who does not take the time to reassure them that they are on the right track. Tutees with learning disabilities may require tutors to think creatively about how they can best help such tutees with their particular areas of difficulty.

Visit <http://www.ada.gov> to learn more about the Americans with Disabilities Act and some characteristics of the written expression of some learning disabled students. Keep in mind, Writing Center tutors do not diagnose learning disabilities, nor do they suggest the possibility that a tutee might have one.

A large number of Writing Center tutees write and/or speak English as a second (sometimes third or fourth) language. Although the percentage varies from one semester to another, usually about 55-60% of Writing Center tutees are ESL students.

One of the situations tutors may encounter with students whose native language is not English is a desire for definite answers. For a variety of reasons, these tutees sometimes are less comfortable with non-directive tutoring. Tutors try, in this case, to resist the urge to "give tutees what they want." To focus on correcting surface-level errors is only to give such students the impression that the product is more important than the process.

A piece of writing should be seen as a holistic unit, a transaction between writer and reader, not as a series of sites of potential errors. Our job, therefore, is to help the writer recognize error patterns—types of errors that he or she is specifically apt to make, errors that the writer may have been making repeatedly over a period of years. (And remember those patterns have accumulated over time; don't expect them to disappear instantly simply because a tutor has helped the writer spot them.) Above all

else our tutors should remember that their work should always be geared toward a tutee's overall writing development.

Tutors should, as much as possible, familiarize themselves with writing conventions and discourses in a variety of disciplines. To assist tutors in their development in this area, the University Writing Center library has multiple books about writing in the disciplines.

Our website is also an excellent resource for both tutors and tutees, especially for information on how to cite print, non-print, and electronic sources in a variety of styles. Tutors may take a tutee to a computer and help the tutee navigate our website before they leave the physical Writing Center.

### ***Referring Students in Distress***

Since the demands of course-work can be stressful for our tutees, tutors should know what to look for, and where to turn, when a tutee appears distressed. GMU's Counseling and Psychological Services have [a helpful guide for staff](#) that can be useful in identifying a student for whom "the stress exceeds their coping resources." Their list of "Signs of Distress" is useful in identifying signals that *might* indicate a potentially upset student, as well as a set of options for how to respond to a student in this situation.

### **Records**

The Writing Center scheduling software keeps track of our tutees' self-reported demographic information. We use these statistics to compile an annual report and to analyze the demographic breakdown of our tutees. It is very important that you keep up with writing reports for individual sessions, as the data are compiled based on the number of sessions reported.

## **Practices and Policies**

### ***Guidelines for Tutors***

You will work out a schedule before the beginning of each semester to determine when you are required to work at the Writing Center. Each tutor is responsible for 15 hours per week in 5-hour shifts. The following is a general guide to a typical 5-hour shift at the Writing Center.

You should arrive 10-15 minutes before your shift begins. During this time, you are expected to look at your schedule for the day and do some quick research on your upcoming tutees. All tutees, if they have already been to the Writing Center, have a record in the Online Writing Center system.

The file will include general information about the tutee as well as notes from that tutee's previous tutoring session(s). These notes, written by the tutor, serve to keep track of what the tutor and tutee worked on during their session and to explain any particular issues the tutee may have in order to aid the next person tutoring that tutee.

### **Personal Days**

Each tutor is allowed one personal/sick day per semester. When a tutor is planning to take a personal day, it is his/her responsibility to swap hours with another tutor and to let the Assistant Director know. Keep in mind, you shouldn't schedule your personal days during a busy time at the Writing Center (generally toward the end of the semester).

If you arrange more than your allotted personal day off, you must get permission from the Assistant Director, find coverage for your shift, and make the time up. Days may be made up, with the permission of the Director, during busy times and with Sunday tutoring.

### **Blog discussions**

All tutors will be responsible for participating in some reflective writing over the course of the first semester about tutoring and teaching.

### **Scratch Hour**

Four out of the five hours you are in the Writing Center will be spent tutoring, while one hour will be designated a "scratch hour." The scratch hour is ideally set, depending on the schedule, so that you will not be tutoring four tutees in a row. Tutoring can be tiring and in order for tutors to be effective, they need time some time away from tutoring.

Though this hour is a break from tutoring, it is not personal time off. You should review your tutee's records for that day during your scratch hour and also be available to answer phones, cover the front desk, or assist in any other Writing Center tasks or projects set by the Director or Assistants to the Writing Center. You may also choose to use this time to contribute to the bi-weekly blog discussion.

### **Tutor Lounge**

The lounge is a designated area for tutors to use during their time at the Writing Center. This area may be used to store tutor belongings, to eat between sessions or during a scratch hour, or to sit and read. If, on a particularly slow day at the Writing Center, a group of tutors are in the lounge together, it is important to remember to keep noise down. The walls at the Writing Center are open at the top and sound carries very well.

### **Eating/Visiting**

The Writing Center is a professional workspace and should be treated as such. All eating and visiting should happen in the lounge. Be aware, however, that you may be called to come up front and assist if things get busy.

### **Roadshows**

You may be asked, particularly at the beginning of the semester, to do what is called a "Road Show." During the first few weeks of each semester, tutors from the Writing Center visit selected classes to give the students a short (10-15 minute) introduction to who we are, what we do here, and why they should make an appointment to come and see us.

### **No shows**

If a tutee does not show up for an appointment, be sure to mark "no show" in his/her online record and add the person to the daily no show list at the front desk. After two no-shows in one semester, the tutee cannot make another appointment without approval from the Director.

## Sessions

Each tutee will be greeted at the front desk and shown to an open room in the back. Begin each session by introducing yourself. Tutees, particularly those who have never been to the Writing Center, may feel nervous and unsure of what to expect. You might try to get acquainted with the writer by finding out something about him or her before you start talking about writing.

Ask first about the assignment or project the tutee is working on and when it is due. (The due date can significantly alter the nature of the session.) Then ask what the tutee needs help with. It's important for tutors to address what the tutee came in to the Writing Center seeking. Many times students will say they need help with grammar or with "flow." You may find, in reading the paper, there are more pressing problems to address, such as clarifying a thesis or organizing paragraphs. Be sure to make time for what you think is important *and* what the tutee asked for.

Ask the tutee to tell you the "story" (the gist) of the paper. Telling the story often helps a writer focus on his or her thesis and main ideas, things that may not have been apparent to the writer before. Listen to the words the tutee uses to describe his or her own writing problems. Keep these words in mind while tutoring the paper, so that you can use terminology the tutee is familiar with.

Before you begin, set the agenda for the session so that the tutee knows what to expect. Try to develop realistic expectations—not of what a piece "ought to look like," but what you can hope to accomplish in a forty-five minute session.

After finding out what the assignment is (it helps if the student shows you the actual handout from the professor), position the paper so you can both see it, and have the tutee read his/her paper aloud. If the paper is more than 4-5 pages, ask the tutee which pages he/she would like to work on (45 minutes is not enough time to effectively work on a paper longer than 5 pages). Tell the tutee you may make small checks in the margin as he/she reads. These marks are just to remind yourself of the things you'd like to work on. Keep in mind that it's important to mark what the tutee is doing well as well as what you think needs work. Invite the tutee to do the same. Many times as people read their work aloud, they hear what doesn't sound right. If the tutee has not started the assignment, begin with brainstorming and clustering techniques.

After the tutee is finished reading the work aloud, begin tutoring the paper. Here are some things to think about as you tutor:

### **Say something positive**

Try to find something the writer is doing well in his or her paper and communicate it. Do this as soon as the tutee is finished reading the paper and try to find ways to include specific praise throughout the session. It is just as important for writers to understand what they are doing well as it is for them to understand what they need to work on.

### **Start a conversation**

Ask open questions and listen to your tutee. For example, you might ask, *What part of the paper do you like best? What part do you like least?* This is a way to get students to feel more comfortable talking about their writing and to allow them to participate in their own learning. Though conversation is the basis for our sessions, you should make sure that you are not doing most of the talking. Though many new tutors feel uncomfortable with keeping quiet, it is a skill that can be developed. In

fact, research shows that, to be most effective, the tutor should talk 30% or less of the time in any session.

### **Prioritize**

Remember that you want to start with Higher Order concerns (thesis, organization, paragraph structure) and then move into Lower Order concerns (grammar, word choice, punctuation). It is more important for a tutee to grasp the larger or “global” aspects of successful writing, than to focus on small “local” concerns. Try to limit your remarks to two or three kinds of errors or concerns so the writer is not overwhelmed.

### **Encourage note taking**

All tutoring spaces in the Writing Center are equipped with scratch paper and pencils. You might suggest that tutees take notes during the session—making complex revisions in a one-inch margin is usually not the most effective way for tutees to see the changes they are making. Some tutees, however, especially those who feel that one trip to the Writing Center will “fix” their papers, may not be inclined to take their own notes during the session. This reluctance might stem from a variety of cultural, social or personal reasons. You might consider taking notes for these tutees, and then encouraging them to start making their own notes as you continue to work with them. This way you are modeling an important part of the writing process. Even when using this technique, however, you should try to avoid writing directly on the students’ papers. Instead write your notes on a piece of scrap paper and encourage the student to make his or her own notes on the paper.

### **Use intervention rather than correction**

Your goal is not to make immediate changes in the writing, but to make permanent changes in the writer. Some immediate changes will take place, but the writer needs to understand that it took time to develop patterns and it will take time to change them.

### **Take your tutee’s writing seriously**

Just as we want our own writing to be taken seriously, our tutees desire the same amount of attention to their work. Try never to be judgmental. Instead, be sensitive and encouraging. Writing is a difficult, and sometimes emotional, process. It is not always easy to show your work to other people. However, we can attempt to break through students fears and confusions and demonstrate that it is possible to enjoy and value writing, even though it may be some of the hardest work any of us will ever do.

### **Rely on your own good sense**

It is perfectly understandable for tutors to feel nervous in their first few sessions, but if you rely on your own sense of how to treat people courteously and your instincts and expertise about writing, both you and your tutees will survive, and probably prosper. Each session will differ in significant ways from every other session, even those between the same tutee and tutor. Consequently, there is not one “right” way to tutor.

Try to start closing the session about five minutes before the time is up. Review what you have done and ask the tutee what he or she plans to work on. You may work together to create a plan of action, prioritizing their efforts.

## After the Session

The tutee may ask for a visit verification form. Often times instructors request confirmation of a student's visit to the Writing Center. There are forms available for this purpose. Write the tutee's name, your name and the date on the form. You may also write a sentence or two about what you worked on during the session.

Once this is complete, write a session report. In your notes, include the assignment you worked on, the course for which the paper was being written, the topic of the paper, the focus of your session, the tutee's plans for revision, error patterns, and anything else you think would be helpful for the next tutor to know about this tutee. **Remember to keep your comments professional.** While session content is confidential between tutees and the tutors the tutee may ask for their own files at any time.

After writing your session notes, be sure to take a look at your next tutee's report forms.

Should you ever feel frustrated or confused by any situation in the Writing Center (whether or not it has to do with tutoring), talk to the other tutors, Assistant Director and/or the Director. Chances are good they will have had a similar experience or will at least have considered its possibility. Never be reluctant to talk to the Assistant Director or the Director about anything that has to do with the Writing Center. Although we may sometimes appear to get caught up in the day-to-day operation and promotion of the Writing Center, it is always the tutoring and the tutors that matter most.

## Online Writing Lab (OWL) Sessions

The Online Writing Lab (OWL) is our email-based tutoring system. Online, or e-mail, tutoring is becoming more and more prevalent in writing centers across the country, as it accommodates people with busy schedules, like many of us. Also, as technology advances, more people are comfortable conversing online. However, e-mail tutoring is not without its flaws. While it opens doors to people who simply cannot physically get to their university writing center, it also limits many of the tools tutors use in their sessions. It is harder to build a rapport with tutees, and it is harder for tutors to use non-directive strategies in order to help the tutee to explore and discover answers for themselves. Many tutees also have misperceptions of what happens in an e-mail session, and they are more apt to expect or want "editing" and "proofreading." Being aware of the limitations of our one e-mail system can only make tutors more conscious of the tools they can use to get the most out of a session

### What are the advantages of e-mail sessions?

The biggest advantage e-mail sessions give tutors is simply time. The tutor does not have to think up an answer on the spot and has time to formulate a well-worded response with examples. Looking at a computer screen, rather than a tutee searching for answers, certainly helps take the pressure off of the tutor. Also, tutors have time to read and mentally process the tutee's paper without distractions and can read the whole paper through before beginning to make any comments. Reading the whole paper through once gives the tutor a chance to process the paper as a whole rather than focusing on the individual parts.

Another advantage of e-mail sessions is the ability to point the writer to many resources through internet links to books and web based resources. If a tutee e-mails their paper, they obviously have some level of access to the internet. Also, it seems more likely tutees will follow up a link in an e-mail rather than typing it in from a piece of paper that can easily get misplaced.

### What are the limitations of e-mail sessions?

There are many limitations to an e-mail session other than just the missing rapport building that occurs in face to face (f2f) sessions. Agenda setting often becomes an issue with e-mail sessions since the tutor cannot ask the tutee what they would like to work on. Instead, the tutor must rely on the information that the tutee provides in their e-mail. Often, this will include such broad statements such as, "I need help with grammar" or "I want to make sure the paper flows," which is the same thing that would happen in a f2f session. However, in a f2f session, the tutor can ask the tutee for more information. The lack or difficulty of agenda setting also leads to another issue, which is time management. Tutors can get bogged down with a paper and lose track of time because it can be difficult to focus the session.

Another limitation is that while many writing centers now use synchronous chat, which makes it easier to replicate the f2f session, as well as asynchronous e-mail sessions, not every writing center has the resources to implement a synchronous chat system. Instead, many writing centers use a web based e-mail system, which gives the tutee and tutor one turn each during a session. Turn taking is an important part of f2f sessions where the tutor and tutee collaborate to find answers. Also, a tutor cannot initiate a traditional dialogue as in a f2f session.

In addition, another limitation is that e-mail sessions often persuade tutors, even experienced tutors, to do things they would not normally do. Having the whole paper there and not the tutee encourages a tutor to work with the text rather than the tutee. This issue can be resolved by changing the way tutors read papers. It is very tempting to simply go back through and edit the tutee's paper, especially using Microsoft Word's "Insert Comments" feature, as tutors often see the "ideal paper" that lies underneath the tutee's "errors" and try to bring that paper out. The tutor should always remember not to take control of the tutee's paper. Also, the "Insert Comment" feature encourages tutors to work on lower level, or sentence level, concerns before higher order concerns.

ESL tutees, by the nature of their needs as well as tutors' overwhelming desire to help them write the "perfect" paper, can persuade a tutor to work in a more directive manner, and often they do need a more direct approach than native speakers. After all, you cannot pull out answers from tutees that they simply do not have. Tutors may have to change the way they read the paper in order to tutor more effectively. Instead of looking for that ideal paper that lies beneath the tutee's writing, tutors should work on less ambitious steps that will allow the ESL tutee to really grow and develop their writing skills. Finally, e-mail sessions persuade the tutor to make a plethora of comments on ESL papers, which can often overwhelm tutees. In those situations, tutees often correct the surface problems without dealing with the higher order concerns since it is easier to edit than revise (see Ben Rafoth's "Tutoring ESL Papers Online").

### **How do tutors tutor in an e-mail session?**

Despite the numerous limitations in an e-mail session, there are many different approaches tutors can take in an e-mail session, and it is a great chance for tutors to show their personality in what can be a rather impersonal environment. However, no matter what method the tutor chooses to use, they should always include a front note and an end note (see Appendix I for technical instructions on how to access and track OWLs).

#### *Front Note*

The front note will do the work of confirming the agenda for the session. Also, give an overall summary and evaluation before getting into specifics. The front note is important for setting the agenda and rapport building. The front note not only opens the conference, but it should discuss the assignment parameters, address the tutee's concerns, and summarize the writer's strengths while offering revision strategies (Monroe 7). Here is an example of a front note:

Hi! I'm Sarah W, and I will be tutoring your paper today. :) Overall, your paper is pretty concise and clear. I really enjoyed reading about the songbirds! Also, thanks for sending such a detailed assignment. It really helped me know exactly what you should be doing. There were a few places where your sentences were four lines or longer, and I recommend breaking them into more than one and trimming them down (I pointed to them within the text of your paper). Remember, scientific writing should be concise, clear, and to the point. As far as the structure goes, the headings make the structure strong and everything falls into place where it should.

### *End Note*

The end note summarizes what has happened in a session and is comparable to the session wrap up at the end of f2f sessions. Here the tutor should help the tutee lay out a plan of action for revision and reemphasize key points. Also, many tutors use the end note as a place to provide some sort of disclaimer "in part to delimit their authority, should their advice prove different from that of the evaluating TA or professor, but also in large part, to reassert tutees' agency in taking or leaving tutors' advice" (Monroe 22). Here is an example of an end note:

I think you are really off to a great start on your paper, and the way you organized it is very clear and allows the reader to follow you logically. Good job! Also, as a whole I did not notice very many issues that stem from being a non-native speaker. Just take your time proofreading and make sure that you have all of your words spelled correctly. Spell checker doesn't get them all. :) Also, your APA citations are not quite what they want (APA is so tricky!), so here is a link to a great website that gives you lots of examples of APA citations.

[http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/social\\_sciences/intext.html](http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/social_sciences/intext.html). Hope you have a great evening, and feel free to use our services again with another draft of your paper. Oh yeah, I also attached a handout about thesis statements since that was one of your concerns.

Both the front note and the end note can do a lot to help replicate the rapport building, agenda setting, and charting of the tutee's next steps to take with the paper that occurs in f2f sessions. Also, using these notes help to generate a friendly tone and make a tutee more receptive to a tutor's comments. Using these notes makes the tutor seem less like an authority figure bent on criticism. When using any of the methods listed below, a tutor should always try not to overwhelm the tutee with a laundry list of problems.

### *Intertextual Commentary*

The real "meat" of the e-mail session is the intertextual commentary, and it should be a place where the tutor recreates conversation with the tutee, a conversation between peers. Also, the intertextual commentary allows the tutor to tend to lower level concerns with specificity. You may choose to use the "insert comment" function in Microsoft Word, write comments in a different colored text within the text, use "track changes" to track all comments you are adding to the document... it depends on personal comfort of the tutor and knowledge of Word.

For maximum effectiveness there should be both some attention to the text itself and also some initial and closing comments. This format not only mimics the face-to-face tutorial, but it shows the tutee you have worked through the essay systematically and with full attention to both the smaller details on the sentence level, and also to the tutee's work on the whole.

## General OWL Advice

*Don't forget to ask questions.*

- Just because a tutor might not get the answer does not mean that the tutor should stop asking questions.
- Asking questions is a great way to get the tutee thinking about the paper in ways that they would normally not.

*Remember to praise but do so specifically.*

- One thing that often gets lost in e-mail sessions is praise.
- The front note is a great place to tell the tutee what they are doing right.
- As always, be specific and refer to certain points in the text, such as "Your topic/transitional sentences at the beginning of each paragraph are strong and tie each paragraph to the next one," rather than "You have good transitions."
- Also, be sure to praise in the closing note as well.
- Avoid using "but" after a comment that praises. Using "but" will devalue the praise that was just given.

*Explain things simply and clearly.*

- Always take the time to explain your suggestions simply and clearly. Do not assume that your tutee will understand what a "thesis" is, or a "coordinating conjunction"
- If possible, point to a place in the tutee's own writing where they are doing something effectively as an example for what you are trying to explain.
- As tutors, we need to help tutees acclimate to the use of academic language/discourse/jargon that they may never have been exposed to previously. By sharing this knowledge with tutees tutors can help include them in our academic world rather than closing them out.

*Highlight words/phrases in different colors to show "error" patterns in the tutee's paper.*

- This principle is the same as highlighting patterns in a f2f session. It allows visual learners to realize the patterns that occur in their papers.
- This same concept can be applied to thesis statements, topic sentences, and transitions as well.

For example:

I noticed a few patterns of "error" in the paper. I changed the color of the text corresponding to the pattern of error. Instances of passive voice are purple, and verb tense issues are blue. Hopefully, this will help you to see the pattern a little more clearly. First, you want to avoid the passive voice when at all possible. Go back and look at these places (purple) in the paper (passive voice is usually accompanied by a form of the "to be" verb), and see if you can reword them with a more active verb tense, such as simple past tense ("we were playing" versus "we played"). Second, the other issue I noticed was verb tense agreement. I changed those places to blue...

*Make up model sentences to go with your explanations.*

- Modeling is an important strategy in any tutoring session, and it can still be done in e-mail sessions.
- Tutors can make up a sentence that illustrates the rule they are trying to explain.

For example, in a recent response to a tutee's paper:

Not all of the coordinating conjunctions I marked need a comma, but it is up to you to figure out which ones do and which ones don't (this sentence is actually an example of when you do need one!).

*Attach handouts pertaining to areas that are issues in the tutee's paper.*

- For example, after explaining a pattern of comma error, attach the comma handout. By attaching the handout, the tutor gives the tutee access to the same information and rules that they have.
- To attach a handout, go to the website and insert the link to the appropriate handout in your comments.

Point to other resources as well, such as books and websites like Diana Hacker Online.

- Don't limit yourself to attaching handouts.
- Feel free to point the tutee to books and web sources that would be helpful.

Here is a list of helpful resources:

- Online grammar guides--[http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/esl/gram\\_punct.html](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/esl/gram_punct.html)
- Diana Hacker Online—<http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc>
- APA Style--<http://www.apastyle.org>
- Discipline specific guides— <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/resources/specialized.html>
- Engineering and Science--<http://www.writing.vt.edu> and <http://standards.ieee.org/guides/style>
- Handbook for Technical Writers--<http://stipo.larc.nasa.gov/sp7084/sp7084cont.html>
- Strunk & White Online (grammar and mechanics)—<http://www.bartleby.com/141>
- Grammar and Mechanics Exercises—<http://www.bedfordbooks.com/exercisecentral>
- Ask Oxford (writing and language links)—<http://www.askoxford.com/>
- Model papers—<http://bedfordstmartins.com/modeld>

## Instructions

Tutees sign up for an OWL the same way they sign up for face-to-face sessions, using our online scheduling system. They sign up for an hour block knowing that they will be emailed their comments by the end of that hour.

To access OWL sessions:

- Go to the scheduler, find your tutee and time slot.
- Log in to mail.gmu.edu with the username "owl" and the password "weliketowrite"
- Find the corresponding assignment for the tutee in the inbox and get started!

- NOTE: If there is no email from the tutee signed up for the session you should mark that person as a “no-show”
- Since they scheduled the session in our scheduler, you should always write a session report, just like you would for a face-to-face session.
- When you are finished with the paper and have sent the message back with the paper and/or your comments attached, move the message to the “Completed OWLs” folder.

## Guidelines for Session Observations

Periodically, the Director, Assistant Director, and/or another tutor will ask to observe you. Before we can observe a session, you'll need to ask permission from your tutee. We encourage you to think of these observations as opportunities to learn more about your own tutoring styles, as there will be a debriefing time after the session. One important question we'll ask, as should you, is: What are the one or two most important lessons the tutee learned about writing or him/herself as a writer from being in this session today? Here are some of the specific things we'll be looking for when we observe:

### The Session Agenda

- Has the tutor established the due date and course for which the paper is being written?
- Is an assignment asked for? If there is a written assignment, how does the tutor go about discussing the assignment requirements with the tutee? If there is no written assignment, how does the tutor ascertain the assignment requirements?
- How does the tutor determine the tutee's perception of teacher expectations apart from what may be written on an assignment?
- In setting the session agenda, how does the tutor respond to either direct or indirect statements about what the tutee wants to work on?
- Has the tutor tried to create a friendly, supportive environment?
- From where they are sitting, do both tutor and tutee have visible access to the paper?

### The Session

- What kinds of questions does the tutor ask? Do the questions move the session along in productive ways?
- If a tutee wants an editing session, how does the tutor respond? Does the session entail line-by-line editing? If so, is line-by-line attention the best strategy for this session?
- Does the conversation ever seem to get stuck or misguided? How did the conversation seem to take that turn?
- What gets written down during the session? By whom?
- Does the tutor talk no more than 50% of the conference? If more, what is the reason?
- What activities occur in the session? Writing? Brainstorming--on paper or in conversation? Talking? Reading out loud? Outlining? Sketching out ideas?
- Who seems to be working harder in the session--the tutor or the tutee?
- If appropriate, are reference materials, including the writing center and library website, used effectively?
- What does the tutor do if he/she can't answer a tutee's question?

### Closing the Session

- How does the session end? Does the tutor have to persuade the tutee that time is up? Does the tutee leave early? If the latter, why is this the case?
- Is the tutee given a written or verbal summary of what has been accomplished and what are the next steps? Does the tutee seem to understand what he/she needs to do as a next step? Do both tutor and tutee seem satisfied with the way the session has gone?

## Special Tutoring Sessions

### ESL Tutoring

Many tutees in the Writing Center (about 55-60%) are Non-Native Speakers. Sessions with such writers can sometimes be frustrating for tutors. If you feel any serious anxiety about tutoring people whose cultures and languages differ from your own, the ESL Specialist Tutor can work with you to overcome your concerns.

Here are some tips to think about before tutoring ESL students.

#### **Be aware of common sentence-level errors in ESL writing**

It is somewhat dangerous to attempt to group the kinds of errors that ESL writers make, primarily because the categories are so slippery. Nor is it fair to assume that every ESL speaker will have the same problems. Research, however, has shown that the following are areas in which dialect interference is most common:

- subject-verb agreement
- pronoun-antecedent agreement
- use of prepositions
- collective count, and noncount nouns
- verb endings/tenses
- verbs with particles
- articles (noun markers)

The ESL Specialist is available to help all other tutors with the recognition of these errors and useful methods of working with ESL tutees. There are also handouts available in the Writing Center and our website to help tutors and ESL students in the above areas.

#### **Listen carefully and holistically**

This applies to all tutees, but especially to ESL tutees who may take a meandering route to get to a point. Some papers that ESL writers produce will exhibit a less linear, more circuitous approach to problem solving than is normally expected in American academia. Introductions in such papers may appear weak, lacking those direct assertions that can quickly catch a reader's interest. Paradoxically, other papers by ESL writers may be characterized by a degree of exaggerated assertiveness that a native writer would find discomfiting. Not all cultures argue in the same structural conventions, tone and voice.

Cultures express ideas using different organizational patterns and types of support, which results, often, in a grammatically correct piece of writing with an idiosyncratic development. Be sensitive to these kinds of cultural differences and try to help the writer understand the differences between American academic expectations for writing and the expectations of his or her own culture. Try to

help the tutee shape his or her ideas into what is expected in American academia without changing what the tutee is trying to say.

### **Ask for clarification**

Again, this applies to all tutees. But what might make perfect sense to you as a native speaker might not make sense to a non-native speaker. And vice versa. Sometimes, you may have to ask several times for clarification. You should always try to reword your questions if the tutee is not understanding.

### **Look for patterns**

For example, a Japanese tutee might put a proper article before a stand-alone countable noun (**A** book on **the** table), but might not put an article in front of a modified noun (*Red book on round table*). If you can recognize a pattern of errors, point it out in one or two places and have the tutee find the rest. This way the tutee can find the problem on his or her own in the future.

### **Familiarize yourself with the language of those learning English**

In other words, learn how to explain grammar in terms tutees are used to hearing. Many times, native speakers know when something is right or wrong in English by the way it sounds, but they can't explain the problem in grammatical terms. ESL students learning the language are familiar with grammatical terms and many times feel comfortable talking on this level.

### **Help out with pronunciation**

In some cases, you should let the tutee watch you physically make the sound. For example, many ESL tutees have trouble pronouncing /θ/ (*thick*) and /θ/ (*thin*) sounds in English. The sound is made in almost the same way as /t/ and /d/ except that at the start of the sound, the tip of the tongue is between the teeth instead of behind the back of the top front teeth. It is almost impossible not to pronounce /θ/ and /θ/ if the tongue is between the teeth. If tutees can see the physical aspects of making a sound, they are more likely to remember it.

### **Don't be afraid to laugh at some interlanguage mistakes**

ESL students would much rather see their mistakes cause a smile than disapproval.

### **Use your own knowledge of foreign languages to solve problems**

For example, a native Spanish-speaking student might have written the first part of this sentence as "a native Spanish-speaking student." In Spanish, words with s and another consonant at the beginning are preceded by e. This example is admittedly a stretch, but it has shown up in writing on more than one occasion. Another example of a situation where this kind of knowledge can help you is with Japanese students. Japanese sentence structure is SOV (subject-object-verb) and a Japanese student may write an English sentence this way.

### **Group Tutoring**

Learning communities are an integral part of many programs on campus. The Writing Center tries to become involved with these learning communities by pinpointing the needs of each community and offering tutoring, both in-person and electronically, to members of the community as a group rather than as individuals.

It is important to remember when tutoring a group to allow each person in the group to participate equally. This means that at times tutors may have to encourage particularly reticent students to speak up or ask someone to allow other members of the group to have a chance to participate. Some of the specific services we can offer groups include:

- Training peer groups
- Offering feedback on the critiques the group has already generated

## In-House and Campus Resources

### [The Writing Center Website](#)

To make our virtual environment as complete and realistic as possible, the Writing Center offers online workshops, style guides and reference sources, as well as an online handout cabinet stocked with the same handouts in our actual handout cabinets onsite.

### **The Writing Center Library**

In the conference room of the Writing Center tutors will find a small but useful library. The materials in it are always at tutors' disposal. We have a good selection of anthologies, readers, composition texts, ESL handbooks, style manuals, books on technical writing, and more. We also have a collection of journals on composition and writing centers, including *Writing Center Journal*, *Writing Lab Newsletter*, and other related publications.

### [Handout Cabinets](#)

Each branch of the Writing Center holds various handouts and articles on specific aspects of writing. Students and professors are encouraged to come in as often as they like and help themselves to any of our handouts. We also have worksheets available for student use, although on the whole it is more useful for tutees to recognize the patterns in their own writing than merely practice massaging a group of canned sentences. These handouts and worksheets are also available on our website.

### [Counseling Center](#)

Because writing can be an especially personal enterprise, tutors sometimes find themselves with tutees who are looking for more help than we can provide—help that that we are neither trained nor competent to provide. The Writing Center has a supply of Counseling Center brochures on hand each semester to make available to our tutees. The Counseling Center offers a variety of services, including peer support groups, workshops on relationships, time management, study skills, and other topics, as well as one-to-one and group counseling.

### [Learning Services Center](#)

The Learning Services Center allows students to hire tutors to help them with various subjects outside of writing. These tutors do, however, charge for their services. The Learning Services Center also runs a series of helpful workshops each semester. Occasionally tutors may see tutees in the Writing Center whose needs are outside the parameters of our [Mission Statement](#). Tutors may wish to refer these tutees to the Learning Services Center.

### [Disability Support Services](#)

The Writing Center also sees a number of tutees with physical and learning disabilities. Please be sure these students are aware of the Disability Support Services office. This office can provide a wide range of services to assist disabled student to gain greater access to all areas of university life.

In 1994, former English Department chair, Rosemary Jann outlined the English department policy regarding the Americans with Disabilities Act:

The Americans with Disabilities Act requires us to make “reasonable” accommodations to help students with disabilities complete required course work. What is “reasonable” depends on a number of factors, which DSS can help you sort out. Often it involves giving students extra time to complete work or allowing various kinds of aids that can maximize their performance.

For privacy reasons, it is up to the disabled student to identify him or herself and request accommodation, although you can make this easier by making a statement in class or on your syllabus inviting any students who might need accommodation to discuss this with you. Only those students who have been officially recognized as disabled by DSS qualify for accommodation. These students should be able to produce a letter from DSS identifying them; DSS will also suggest specific kinds of accommodation that would be appropriate, given what they know about the particular student’s condition.

Although many disabilities are obvious, some (especially learning disabilities) may be invisible, at least until you see the student’s written work. If you suspect that a student is learning disabled and has not told you so, you may (privately and tactfully) bring up the possibility. If you think the student is learning disabled and does not know it, you can refer him or her to the DSS office for testing.

## **ESL Support Services**

[The English Language Institute](#) offers English language courses for Non-native speakers (NNSs) at all levels, from beginning to advanced. These courses are designed to prepare students for academic coursework and to assimilate NNSs into the American academic environment.

The ELI also has a Referral, Assessment, and Tutoring Service. NNSs who are referred by their instructor/advisor/tutor can receive up to twelve free tutoring sessions with an ELI faculty member focusing on their specific needs.

The [Office of International Programs and Services](#) offers assistance to GMU’s international student community regarding immigration, housing and student life.

The [International Student Umbrella](#) coordinates the activities of more than thirty international clubs.

## **Collaborations Around Campus and Beyond**

### **Robinson Hall**

This is the main branch of the Writing Center, which is located on the Fairfax campus.

### **Enterprise Hall**

The Writing Center keeps daily tutoring hours on the ground floor of Enterprise Hall in a space provided by the GMU School of Management. School of Management students are encouraged to make use of this site by making appointments online in advance. Should any appointment slots

remain at the beginning of the day, scheduling at Enterprise become “same-day sign up”—students (outside of the School of Management) may sign up for a session later in that day or drop in if there is an opening.

### **Arlington Campus**

This branch of the Writing Center aims to serve students at the Arlington campus. It offers the same tutoring and workshop benefits as the Robinson location. Students schedule appointments online for this location as well.

### **Prince William Campus**

This branch of the Writing Center aims to serve students at the Prince William Campus. It offers the same tutoring and workshop benefits as the Robinson location. Students schedule appointments online as for this location as well.

### **On-Site Research Paper Workshops**

The Writing Center runs on average four in-house workshops to help with various aspects of writing research papers. These workshops are given by tutors throughout the semester. Tutors are responsible for familiarizing themselves with the workshops in advance of their presentations.

### **Peer Tutors**

**Writing Fellows** In some cases, peer tutors will be specifically assigned to professors across the curriculum who request a “writing fellow,” a peer tutor assigned specifically to one class in order to help those students with their writing. These assignments are often made at the tutor’s initiative, and seek to strengthen the Writing Center’s commitment to campus-wide collaboration and WAC.

### **Online Writing Lab (OWL)**

The Online Writing Lab allows students, alumni, faculty and staff to take advantage of the Writing Center’s one on one tutoring approach from anywhere they have access to the internet.

### **GMU Review, Phoebe & So to Speak**

The Writing Center acts as a distribution point for three GMU journals: the [George Mason Review](#), a yearly publication filled with exemplary essays drawn from George Mason students; [Phoebe](#), GMU’s national literary review of fiction and poetry; and [So to Speak](#), GMU’s national literary review of feminist fiction, nonfiction and poetry.

## **Peer Tutor Mentorships**

Peer Tutoring in Writing in the Disciplines at the University Writing Center is unique among peer tutoring programs in that it envisions the relationship between peer tutors, tutors, and instructors as a three-way, interdisciplinary relationship in which all parties share their expertise with one another. Graduate tutors may be asked to mentor undergraduate peer tutors on strategies for tutoring writing in the disciplines.

In this mentoring relationship, undergraduate peer tutors hone their writing and critical reading skills while increasing their knowledge base in their given field. Graduate tutors become better informed

about pedagogical concerns and also develop a greater familiarity with the conventions and discourse of a particular discipline. Classroom instructors benefit from the tutors' insights into the ways students are reading and responding to assignments.

CHSS 390 is designed to be a way for the University Writing Center to increase its efficacy as a vital part of Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC). We also wish to use the peer tutoring program to recognize and encourage writing excellence at the undergraduate level.