



# Peer Tutor Handbook

George Mason University Writing Center

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**Welcome to the George Mason University Writing Center!** We think you will find this to be a lively and, at times, unpredictable adventure in your university career. You'll work with a highly diverse group of tutors and students all focused on the same goal: to develop and grow as writers in the academy and beyond. Your tutoring experience here promises to be challenging and rewarding in ways you may never have imagined.

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## **What's the big picture?**

### **The University Writing Center Mission Statement**

The University Writing Center seeks to foster a positive writing climate on campus and beyond. Our mission is fivefold:

- To serve the entire George Mason community by empowering students, faculty, staff, and alumni to become better writers, critical thinkers, and communicators.
- To create face-to-face partnerships between writers and tutors, one-on-one and in small groups, as well as virtual partnerships through the Online Writing Lab (OWL).
- To participate actively in Writing Across the Curriculum initiatives through tutoring writing in all majors and degree programs, offering workshops on writing and research, building an array of online and on-site resources for writers, and collaborating with units across campus to provide various discipline-specific services.
- To participate actively in English as a Second Language (ESL) initiatives by providing specialized services and support to non-native speakers of English.

## **The who, how, when, and what of peer tutoring**

### **Who are Peer Tutors?**

Well, you already know who *you* are because you have gone through the peer tutor selection process, but for those other readers of this manual a brief review of the prerequisites and the interview process may be in order. Overall, peer tutors are talented and accomplished undergraduate writers and scholars from across all academic disciplines. They typically have a strong desire to help others in the Mason community

become successful writers in their courses and beyond. To be considered as a peer tutor, interested undergraduates will have

- Completed 45 credit hours.
- Achieved a grade of "A" or proficiency credit in English 302: Advanced Writing in the Disciplines.
- Earned an overall GPA of at least 3.5 in their major and a 3.0 overall.

With these prerequisites met, the prospective peer tutor spends an hour or more interviewing with the director of the writing center who looks at and discusses papers the candidate has written for a variety of courses. Next the aspiring tutor is asked to demonstrate knowledge of the elements of a composition by ‘tutoring’ a few writing samples and discussing them with the director. Here’s where the director determines how well the candidate can diagnose and describe a writing problem and explain what to do to fix the problem. With the interview successfully completed and two teacher recommendations secured and sent to the director, the peer tutor is invited to register for CHSS 390.

## **You’re in. Now what?**

### **Overview of the basics:**

CHSS 390 is an experiential learning course designed to provide you with training in both the theory and practice of tutoring writing. The one-credit course focuses on the practical application of writing theory and pedagogy derived from course readings, on the development of tutoring skills, and on self-reflection through journals and a final paper. You may repeat the course three times for a total of three credits.

Once the class begins (the first week of the semester), you're expected to be in the writing center for two to three hours a week. For the first six weeks of the semester, the hours are generally divided as follows:

- While CHSS 390 is meeting on a weekly basis, you spend one hour a week in class and one to two hours training and observing with an additional hour or so devoted to writing journal responses to the course readings and your training experiences. Your training schedule can be somewhat flexible as long as you let your tutor-mentor know the days and times you'll be coming in.
- Once you begin tutoring solo, usually by the end of the sixth week, you are put on the writing center schedule to tutor for three hours a week, either simultaneously or in segments of time that suit you. If you do not feel you are ready to tutor by the end of the sixth week, you may arrange to spend more time observing tutoring activities and/or tutoring with observation.

**Now for more details:**

In the first six weeks of the course, you will meet once a week with the class and director to discuss tutoring theory and application techniques. Meeting times are decided based on the best times available for all of the participants. At the first meeting, you'll be given a packet of readings and a copy of *The Bedford Guide for Peer Tutors*. Your readings will be put into practice right away in your training and also when you begin to tutor solo.

**Reading and tutoring logs:** As part of the class, you'll be keeping two kinds of logs, one a hard-copy response to the readings and the other an email description of your training and reactions to what you've been observing and learning. Each of these is due weekly. You'll send your email logs to everyone in the peer tutor class. Later, when you become a full-fledged tutor, you'll continue to write email logs describing your observations on and responses to working with clients. These logs are an opportunity for you to reflect on your own experiences as well as to engage the other peer tutors in discussions about writing. The goal of the logs is to lead you to a greater awareness of both your own writing processes, the differences among others' writing processes, and the variety of

strategies that tutors use to be effective in their sessions. While weekly email logs are no longer required after the sixth week, you should plan to write to everyone at least bi-weekly. Do feel free to write more often.

**Final paper:** Your final paper for CHSS 390, due during exam week, is 8-10 pages of detailed reflection on the assigned readings, your experiences as a tutor, and the knowledge you gained about writers and writing during your time in the Writing Center. You'll find you'll want to draw on your journal entries—both paper and online—so save all of those entries. You might consider some of the following questions for your paper: What has tutoring taught you about writing processes? About writing in disciplines? About differences in writers' approaches and styles? What were problems/challenges you faced as a tutor? How has being a tutor influenced your writing style and techniques? What do you think your strengths are as a tutor? When did you feel most successful and/or most helpful? What were the most difficult sessions for you?

Note: You will be asked to share a draft of this final paper with the other tutors in CHSS 390. You may meet with the other tutors face to face (f2f) or send drafts to one another online for comments and observations. By sharing drafts, you also share experience.

### **The weeks detailed:**

Though there is no set time that a peer tutor must be ready to work with clients, in general CHSS 390 prepares undergraduates to tutor according to the following schedule:

**Week 1-4:** You'll attend meetings with the director and CHSS 390 class, read selected course materials about tutoring, be tutored on your own work, observe "real" tutoring sessions, practice tutoring with sample essays, and write reflective journals that detail all of these activities. Along the way, you'll learn how to check the schedule and client records and write session reports.

**Week 5-6:** You'll begin tutoring with supervision from the graduate student tutors. The tutor supervising you usually will not participate unless you ask for

their expertise. The tutor will debrief with you after the session and assist you in writing up the session report.

**Week 6 or 7:** You'll begin tutoring independently and will continue to do so for the rest of the semester.

### **You and your graduate mentor:**

As soon as you've decided on your training schedule, you'll be paired up with a graduate student tutor who will serve as your mentor throughout the course. The graduate tutors are MFA and MA students in English Studies who work ten to fifteen hours a week in the Writing Center as part of their graduate assistantship. They comprise the majority of the tutors in the Writing Center and are a great source of advice and reassurance during your transition to tutoring, so take advantage of their skills and experience!

The purpose of the mentor relationship is to provide each of you with one experienced individual who can serve as your resource to the inner workings of the Writing Center. Mentors will teach you how to read the online schedule, set session agendas with clients, write up session reports online, and arrange for you to observe sessions and tutor tutors. Initially, you are encouraged to meet with your mentor after each training session to discuss client situations, tutoring stumbling blocks, trouble shooting techniques, and any other questions or problems that might arise within sessions.

Once you've completed training, mentors are responsible for making sure that you receive enough opportunities to tutor a full three hours each week. For example, if your appointment is a no-show, the mentor will arrange for you to tutor someone else's client. Likewise, it is your responsibility to inform your mentor of any difficulties you encounter with scheduling so that the mentor might help resolve it. Since good communication is essential to this relationship, mentors should also be included in the email logs you send to the other peer tutors and the writing center director.

## **A word about writing processes:**

Because every person processes information and approaches writing differently, there is no one correct way to tutor or to write, but being aware of these differences is a must while tutoring. That's one reason you'll be asked in the peer tutor course to write about your writing process. Understanding some ways in which individual writers vary will give you a wider lens through which to view the diverse clientele who come to the writing center. Here is a description of one peer tutor's writing process:

### **My Writing Process**

When I am assigned a piece of writing, I usually read over the assignment once in class and then I don't look at it again until a couple of days before it is due. During the time when I am not explicitly working on the assignment (in other words, when I am actively procrastinating...), it lingers in the back of my mind and vague ideas begin to take root. When I sit down to actually begin, I usually re-read any relevant notes from class, and then try to generate an elementary structure. My notes are always chaotic- full of circles and arrows scattered across notebook pages and handouts. My papers usually begin in a similar fashion. I cannot write my draft unless I am writing it out by hand on the margins of the assignment sheet. As far as timing is concerned, I consolidate my ideas and structure, and then write an introduction in one sitting. I write the whole draft on the next day. These drafts are pretty embarrassing- my language use resembles that of a kindergartener and my ideas are considerably underdeveloped. When I type up the hand-written draft, I make huge revisions in structure and language. These revisions take place over a couple of sittings as well. After I finish, I usually make my roommate read my paper and add her own suggestions. I consider these and make appropriate changes, read the paper one more time, and then print it out and run to class because I am already ten minutes late by the time I finish!

-Katie Fair, Social Work

## **ESL Clients, Peer Tutors, and ESL Writing Specialists**

The majority of the clients in the Writing Center are Non-Native Speakers (NNSs). While their mastery of spoken English ranges from weak to excellent, many of them become ensnared by the complex (and at times illogical) rules that govern written English. Because so much of writing for a native speaker is intuitive, sessions with ESL students can easily become both intimidating and frustrating for tutor and client. It is difficult to lump together the writing problems of ESL students because the categories often overlap and blend together in a hodgepodge of slippery grammar, or syntax knots. Also, it is unfair to assume that all ESL students will have the same difficulties.

During your training period you will work with ESL clients under the supervision of other tutors and ESL specialists, which will expose you to various approaches and techniques specific to working with NNSs. ESL tutors and specialists are specially trained to work with ESL clients, but they are not the only tutors able to aid the needs of these diverse students. *If you feel uneasy about working with ESL clients, the ESL tutors and specialists are more than happy to work with you to overcome these concerns. Do not hesitate to ask others for help.*

## **Nuts and bolts about schedules and getting paid:**

### **Making your schedule:**

When you begin your independent tutoring within the Writing Center, you will be placed on the tutoring schedule for three hours a week of your choosing. While these hours can be set up to suit your schedule, they must be consistent and approved by the Assistant Director who handles the scheduling of the Writing Center activities. If problems arise, such as illness, personal emergencies, etc., accommodations can be made, but the hours missed must be made up later through additional tutoring in the Writing Center. You should consult your graduate mentor and the Assistant Director regarding the details of scheduling.

### **Getting paid your stipend:**

You will be paid a stipend by the University Writing Center for your semester service through George Mason University payroll direct deposit as a university employee. If you have never been employed by George Mason University before, you will need to fill out an I-9 form and attach a voided check for direct deposit to be set up into your account. These forms should be turned into the GMU payroll offices located in Commerce 1, Room 300 by hand, fax, or standard mail. Human Resources and Payroll are located at:

Human Resources and Payroll  
4087 University Dr.  
Fairfax, Va. 22030-4444  
MSN 3C3

(703) 993-2600 Voice  
(703) 993-2601 Fax

The stipend will arrive in your account towards the end of the semester, usually within the last two months.

## **Smile!**

We want all of our tutors represented on the “Who We Are” pages of our website and on our bulletin board. So, by the third week of the semester, you’ll send the person in charge of the “Who We Are” project a short bio and photo or representative image of yourself to be posted. The bio is a short creative paragraph in which you describe yourself to the curious clients of the Writing Center. It can be as straightforward or goofy as you like. Just have fun with it. This is an opportunity for the Writing Center folks to display our diverse personalities and talents to the large Mason community as well as a chance for us to share some of the qualities that can be obscured for clients behind the general title of “tutor.” Here’s an example from Theresa Koucheravy, author of this handbook:

### **Theresa Helen Koucheravy, Undergraduate Tutor**



Theresa first began expressing herself in large crayon knee-level sketches spanning her family’s dining room walls. Her parents quickly introduced her to paper and pencil, which have remained her choice of medium ever since. She is happily embedded in her final year at

Mason as an English major with a concentration in nonfiction. If all is well in the universe, she will graduate in December 2005 with honors.

## **That’s All Folks!**

If you have additional questions regarding the operations and services of the Writing Center or your role as a peer tutor, do not hesitate to ask those around you. The University Writing Center is rich in resources--tutors, new and returning, handouts, and numerous texts about tutoring and writing just waiting to be consulted.