Baylor School Writing Tutor Manual

by

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"Writing well isn't a gift God gives to a chosen few."  Nancie Atwell
The Baylor Writing Center Philosophy

A writing center is a beyond-the-classroom space where students can explore confusing or challenging educational issues through dialogic relationships. In other words, a writing center is a place for talk. This talk can consist of brainstorming ideas or considering writing content, writing development, and writing style and correctness. Such working with others is a useful strategy for learning that can serve students throughout their educational and work lives. Tutors, as well, learn to communicate better as well as improve their own understandings of writing.

The following guide the writing center:

- a desire to create a non-threatening, comfortable environment for students,
- an intention of dealing with the student rather than simply her paper,
- a hope of connecting principles of good writing with social issues,
- a recognition of the need to understand an assignment in context,
- a practice of addressing priorities (a hierarchy) in the writing process (e.g. clarity over commas),
- a practice of attentively listening to students,
- a practice of starting to work with students at where they are rather than where they should be,
- a practice of showing students choices as well as encouraging them to set goals,
- an evidence of professional courtesy to the faculty,
- a desire to participate in self-reflective practices that joins a national conversation about writing center practice.

A writing center, as a student-centered collaborative site, seeks to enhance students’ self-worth and confidence by working within non-evaluative relationships of trust. It is not a place for merely getting a text proofread; rather it is a place where a student and a tutor work together to discover effective writing strategies as well as approaches to reading and writing that are particularly useful to the individual student. This writing center work typically changes a student’s attitude towards writing because a writing center focuses on the individual student more than a single paper and seeks to tackle big problems before little ones.

Importantly, tutors also should remember that what they hear and learn in the Center is confidential. This information about students and tutors should not be shared outside the writing center.
Preface

I want to welcome you to working in the writing center. The tutoring world you are entering will, I hope, help you to become a more empathetic and supportive citizen of the world. Certainly the interpersonal and communication skills you will learn here will help you as you move on to college, to graduate school, and to the workplace.

The following guide is intended to help Baylor students move from simply being collaborative helpers (as in classroom peer groups) to becoming writing center tutors who support their tutees. That said, it is important for Baylor writing tutors to remember that it is only the tutee/writer who actually writes assignments in the Center.

To begin, there are some essential golden rules for tutors.

1. **The writer should be the only one holding the pen** above the assignment paper (although you may take notes and transcribe on a separate page or write dictated sentences on the white board).
2. Remember you are not a teacher or editor; you are a tutor. Don’t try to act like a teacher.
3. Always refer the writer to his or her teacher for the final word.
4. Help the tutee learn actively by asking questions, not simply answering them. You should be working to encourage the tutee to speak and speak often.
5. You cannot tutor anyone in your own class or taking the same class with the same teacher. You cannot officially tutor outside the Center.
6. Don’t answer a question to which you don’t know the answer. Ask someone for help or go to a reference book.
7. Follow English Department guidelines (see the next page).
8. Always respect the writer and every other person at Baylor. Practice professional courtesy towards teachers. Remember to treat your work confidentially.
9. **Behave appropriately.** For example, the Center is not a dating service. You should not use your work as a tutor to “pick up” dates.
10. Remember that the student, not the paper, is the ultimate priority. The Center’s goal is not to produce perfect papers but to change student attitudes and approaches towards writings. Therefore, helping the student “reflect” (thinking about where she has been as a writer and where she is going) is an important ongoing activity.
11. Help students understand they have both choices and goals.
12. **When in doubt, ask** the Director (even after the fact).
13. Show up for appointments on time. If you “forget,” you not only personally let down your students, but you also damage the reputation of the Center.

I want to thank you for your enthusiasm and commitment to helping others through your work in the Baylor Writing Center. I hope you will learn to share my excitement at working with Baylor writers.

*Marsha Penti, Director*
Baylor School English Department Guidelines for Tutoring

In order to preserve the integrity of a student’s own work, English teachers ask that tutors offer the same kinds of advice that we ourselves do before a student hands in an essay. Work submitted should always be the student’s work. In particular—

Tutors may:

1. help a student with brainstorming;
2. encourage a student to talk about what he or she wants to say, what details to include, what points to make;
3. have the student read a rough draft (being sure the reading is identical to the written text) and then offer general advice (e.g. “Let’s check your thesis and see if it addresses the assignment question.”)
4. assist a student in identifying errors and providing practice at correction in the context of an ongoing tutoring relationship; for international students by correcting the first error for the purpose of demonstration but then having the tutee work on correcting the others, often with the support of an appropriate handbook
5. help a student use appropriate online resources.

Tutors should not:

1. provide a thesis statement;
2. provide specific details;
3. suggest specific wording (except in the case of international students as above);
4. point out specific errors or correct them (except in the case of international students as above);
5. type a student’s essay, do research online, or provide documentation.

(Revised June 2007)
The Complexities of Tutoring

Being a tutor means doing more than answering questions about grammar. It means being a student advocate (The MTU Writing Center Handbook 75-8). Think about how you can be one.

How much of a peer should I be?

You want to make students feel comfortable. In other words, you want to be friendly during coaching sessions. However, you also to make sure that your session is productive. How do you balance talking about the upcoming soccer game with talking about a draft? How can you act professionally as a tutor and also be friendly?

Other writing centers see being friendly as part of the professionalism of tutoring (Matthews in The MTU Writing Center Handbook 20). A tutor’s display of friendship as well as professionalism is shown in the following behavior:

- Being an enthusiastic and supportive tutor
- Remembering details of past sessions
- Being on time for appointments
- Talking about your own experiences of writing and school.

Sylvia Matthews, tutor coordinator at Michigan Tech, explains her own tutoring: “In the friendly talk I can learn what a student is good at or likes to do, and if I am clever I can try to make a connection to how that applies to a difficulty the student is having with writing” (20).

How much should I talk, and how much should I listen?

This is one of the most difficult questions to answer. In early sessions a student often expects a tutor to tell her exactly what to do, answer all her questions, as well as to fix her paper. At first students want to make sure they are gaining something tangible from sessions. Once students understand what the writing center is, they should be able to help set agendas for themselves.

Tutoring is not a one-way street. A good tutoring session requires a sharing of the conversation. **Just as a tutor does not hold the pen, she also should not hold the floor.** However, it may take time for a writer to learn to speak up. If you work with a student week after week, you will find out that the tutee gradually learns to be more responsible for his agenda. You may have to begin by asking questions such as “Does this sentence work in this place?,” “Does this part make sense?,” or “Do you think this sentence/phrase is awkward?.” In time the writer should ask these questions herself.

Being a **good listener** often is the best tactic for a tutor even with the quietest students. Do not be afraid of silence. Give writers time to think. If a student seems reluctant to talk (remember some folks come in under stress), you might put her at ease by talking about times you have found it difficult to share a draft or talking about parts of the writing process you have found difficult. Such sharing helps the student feel more comfortable. Be sure to remember that the session is not about your writing but about the tutee’s.

Another part of being a good listener is to remember and repeat what the student says. If you are meeting a student on a weekly basis, **write weekly on the notes sheet** to help you remember what sessions have been about. Even within a session, these quick notes will help you at the end of a session to sum up what the student has covered that day and, importantly, to guide the student in her own review. Asking a student what he plans to work on before he sees you again and also asking how he will accomplish his goals will give you another
way to end the session and a source for more notes. The following are ideal goals for a session (Matthews in The MTU Writing Center Handbook 23).

At the end of a session a student should:

- be aware of what occurred in the session;
- have a sense of what still should be done;
- know how to do this work;
- feel confident about the worth of the work done in the writing center.

For example, a tutor might say to a student, “We accomplished a lot today. Let’s review what we did. Can you tell me what you have learned today?” In fact, actually writing a list of what he learned on paper is useful for the student not just the tutor (who writes the session notes). Before the end of the session, the tutor might also ask the student to explain what he is going to work on next and how exactly he plans to do this work.

**A Tutor’s Responsibilities**

The goal of the writing center is “not to merely improve a writer’s grade (although that’s nice, too!) but to leave each writer with something useful long after the end of the tutoring session (The Penn State Writing Center Handbook 5). A tutor should be working to help each writer:

- Learn to enjoy writing more by gaining confidence
- Learn to appreciate the usefulness of writing
- Learn basic processes for steps of writing (brainstorming, prewriting, organization, drafting, revising, and proofreading)
- Work on issues in a less stressful environment than a classroom
- Foster writer independence through interactive sessions

Each tutor needs to have the following important characteristics

- Strong listening skills (to both tutee and director)
- Patience
- Friendliness
- Respectfulness (appreciate the tutee’s efforts)
- Caring
- Open-mindedness (willingness to entertain new ideas)
- Tactfulness (speak only after thinking of the tutee’s feelings)
- Enthusiasm about tutoring
- Responsibility (to show up and to be on time)
- Supportiveness
- Commitment (to tutor the whole year as well as attend meetings)

A tutor needs to be kind and tolerant in her work knowing that she is responsible only for educating the writer on writing issues and that she is not responsible for the writer’s work. The writer is the one who is responsible for actually writing an assignment.

**The tutor also should not do certain things:**

- Do not predict grades. That’s the teacher’s job.
- Do not write the text for the student (although modeling is good for EFL students). Remember English Dept. guidelines!
- Do not support a tutee’s negative assessment of a teacher (e.g. personality, grading, or teaching)
- Ignore policy as stated by the director or a teacher
**How do I begin?**

Meeting someone new can be daunting, but your own enthusiasm for writing will help you support anyone who visits the Center.

1. **Get to know the person and the writer.** Be polite. Get to know the writer by exchanging first names. You also might talk BRIEFLY about any common interests (e.g. classes or extra-curricular activities). Ask questions about the student’s English class. If you are tutoring the same person each week, this groundwork is particularly important, and you will take notes on a student within the session notes. For required weekly appointments, tell the writer that when she has a draft you will talk about the stage of writing the draft represents, her opinion of the draft, and what needs to be worked on; together you’ll read and discuss the draft. Otherwise, tell her that if she does not have a draft, you will spend the appointment time looking at assignments, discussing class readings, brainstorming, or working on general writing issues.

2. **Be welcoming**—smile, speak clearly, and look the tutee in the eye (although cultural differences may prevent reciprocation). Make the writer feel comfortable. If the student is new to Baylor, show empathy and explain how you felt when you were new.

3. **Explain** what a tutor is (someone who does not give grades or evaluate but someone who supports).

4. **Find out** what the writer is trying to do. Begin by getting a full explanation of the assignment, and then discover where the writer is in this assignment.

5. **Let the writer help establish the agenda** by asking questions like “What part of the assignment would you like to work on today?,” “Do you have any particular problems you’d like to talk about?,” or “What questions do you have about this assignment?”

6. **Let the writer be aware of choices.** There usually is more than one way to approach an assignment. If the writer is near a deadline (an all too typical time for a writer to come to the Center), ask if the writer wants you to look for surface errors or for errors in logic/development. If the student opts for only surface errors, gently remind him or her that an earlier appointment would have allowed for more in-depth attention to the text. In fact, considering the hierarchy of writing concerns, you may think it better to focus on improving a thesis rather than fixing commas.

7. **Encourage the writer** by giving positive comments on any strengths in the text.

8. **Ask, don’t tell** *(The Penn State Writing Center Handbook)*. By questioning the tutee, the tutor avoids becoming a teacher and avoids having the tutee become overdependent on writing center help.

**What should the writer bring?**

Please help the tutee understand that she must bring whatever it takes to provide you with adequate information for the session. The necessities include:

- the assignment
- knowledge of reading materials (and the materials themselves)
- questions to ask you
- a current draft (and past drafts), outline, notes
- past graded papers with teacher comments

Remember if a student forgets to bring a needed text, you should tell the Director who will give the tutee a mr for lack of preparation (this gesture quickly solves the dilemma of a student repeatedly “forgetting”). If a student repeatedly fails to bring an agenda, as asked for in “How to Get the Most out of Your Weekly Appointment,” please remind her of this necessity and inform the Director of the ongoing issue. (Remember that sending an e-mail of inquiry to a teacher about assignments or asking how to specifically help a particular weekly student is always appropriate.)
What do we talk about?

You can begin a session by gathering information about the student’s class and assignment. This process requires more than seeing the actual assignment sheet because a teacher will often add to the understanding of the assignment by talking about it. Class discussion also adds to the dimensions of the assignment. Therefore, the tutee needs to explain to you not just the assignment but also what has happened in class. A tutor can help writers more effectively by understanding the teacher’s expectations. In fact, as the tutee explains an assignment, she comes to understand the assignment more.

Furthermore, conversations with writers can also help them to understand choices they are making in response to assignments. A student may decide to go against the grain and approach an assignment in a way you think is at odds with the actual expectations of the assignment. Through talk you can make the student aware of the effects and the consequences of his choice, such as risking his grade. While the student has a right to make such choices, you have a responsibility to note the consequences, not necessarily in an effort to get the student to change his mind but to help him clearly understand his reasoning and also to encourage him to share that reasoning with his teacher. You may even directly ask the student which consequences he prefers—the higher grade or the opportunity to write about an issue in his own particular way.

Let the writer help set the agenda. Many times the tutee will know exactly what his goals are. However, sometimes the student will arrive with an interest in a lower level concern, but you quickly see he should really work on a higher level one to make more effective changes in his paper. For example, if a student wants to work on grammar, but you see his organization is problematic, try to steer him into talking about organizational concerns (e.g. topic/thesis sentence). Set priorities by talking with the writer (Caposella 11-13). Above all, try to relax and remember you cannot always do everything in just one session. However, the writer should always meet the obligation to come in with ideas for work; a tutee repeatedly saying there is nothing to work on is not being responsible and should be referred to the Director for a conversation.

What if there’s nothing to do?

Sometimes a student will come to the Writing Center for a weekly appointment (or even occasionally for a required one-time session) saying she has “nothing” to do. Many students with required appointments will talk this way, hoping to leave, but with required appointments leaving is not a possibility. Thus, the tutor needs to be ready to consistently engage the student in meaningful work. These appointments with no specific goals are times to work on a weekly student’s lingering writing issues (refer to the goals section of the student notes). These days are also times to talk about the student’s general survival strategies by asking her what she thinks she needs to know to succeed at Baylor. Such an exchange is a way to learn about another’s approach to education. If the tutee comes from a different culture, such talk can be especially enlightening. Remember there also are specific exercises available to ESL students in these situations (e.g. Lane and Lange). As well, there are abundant handouts (even some prepared by fellow tutors) giving ideas for such days.

The tutor must try to come up with ideas for the tutee on such days so the Center remains useful throughout the year not just on assignment days. The tutor should create work based on the grade level of the tutee. A freshman a couple of months away from the competency test might, for example, work on the structure or content of a short essay. Or a previously consulted teacher also can offer suggestions for a variety of general exercises so the tutor can save them for this type of “rainy day.” The tutor should take the initiative to e-mail or talk to the teacher about work to put in reserve for slow sessions. One caveat: How can the tutor be sure that the student really has no work? The answer may require some sleuthing and contacting a teacher.

In other words, the tutor needs to calculate how to keep a tutee in an appointment for at least twenty minutes. If the student cannot come up with work, you as tutor need to be inventive. For example, if you make it a habit to
have the student do some free writing about thoughts on an issue of interest or write summaries of sections of current readings, the student will become accustomed to being active in the Center. In the long run, such writing will help a student become a better writer and may also come in handy for a future assignment. It is a good idea to date these writings and keep some of them in the student’s folder. At the end of the semester or the year, you then can pull these old writings out and ask the student to reflect on what kind of progress she has made over time and as a result of coming to the Center.

What exactly should we do during the session?

The basic rules of tutoring are (1) give the tutee a chance to set the agenda and (2) give current assignments priority. Many students will know exactly what their goals are. They will want to work on brainstorming or work on the organization of a draft. Let students talk about their writing and ideas. Work together to create a session agenda. However, not all students are astute about what they really should do, and they put lower-level concerns above higher-level ones. Many students will come in saying they want to work on their grammar when in fact they should instead be working on what is called a higher-level concern (such as refining a thesis or providing adequate support for ideas) rather than a lower level concern (such as punctuation). In such a case, the tutor needs to guide the tutee and steer her to a more appropriate session focus. (Remember that while the tutee has an obligation to help set the agenda, the tutor has the obligation to be so familiar with the writing center resources that she can call on them for a variety of situations.)

In deciding what is most appropriate for a particular session use the following hierarchy of writing concerns to get started. As you read, remember that first two stages should be tackled first. However, remember that if there is a need to change the focus of the session, you owe the tutee an explanation for the change. And, of course, the tutee should be able to ask questions as she pursues a new discussion.

Reading Drafts Using a Hierarchy of Writing Concerns/Setting Priorities

I. Early draft: Discuss content (what the writer is trying to say)
   Help the student consider:
   • Meeting needs of the assignment
   • Using thesis as a control to focus and organize the essay
   • Using a topic sentence as a control to focus and organize a paragraph
   • Meeting audience needs

II. Intermediate draft: Discuss development, the organization and support of content. Help the student consider:
   • If the ideas are developed completely and clearly
   • If the ideas are concretely supported and illustrated (adequate details, examples, quotations)
   • If there is an introduction and conclusion
   • If the text meets the audience’s needs
   • If each paragraph has one main idea related to thesis (shown in a topic sentence)
   • If the organization and order of information is appropriate

III. Close to Final Draft: Consider style and correctness. (For a thorough overview, see “Editing, Proofreading, Preparing a Polished Draft,” Caposella 62-71.) Help the student consider:
   • Using adequate transitions between paragraphs/sentences
   • Correcting wordiness and awkwardness
   • Eliminating mechanical errors
   • Checking for correct documentation forms (e.g. parenthetical references)
How do I end a session?

1. Review the session by asking “What did you learn today?” and getting the student to list what she learned. Also having the student actually write a list to take away is very useful. (Remember to check for any omissions by using the notes you have been writing down throughout the session.)

2. Mention what the student might work on the following week.

Finally, show that you have listened to everything the writer has said by giving a review at the very end of the session. This review may take the form of comparing your list of notes to the writer’s. Be sure to note anything the tutee has overlooked.

A SAMPLE TUTORING SESSION

A. A Rough Draft

- Establish a friendly relationship. Let the writer talk.
- After having the writer explain the assignment fully (so that the tutor understands its intent), ask the writer how and why she feels she has written to the assignment. Use her explanation to determine where to begin. Also ask the writer what she feels she needs to work on at this point.
- Using the hierarchy, begin work on the more important concerns first. For example, it is more important to have the writer work on formulating a clear thesis appropriate to the assignment than tidying up punctuation.
- Provide explanations when necessary. Rather than simply going over what can be done, also give explanations of why certain work is necessary. For example, if a thesis statement or topic sentence is missing, explain how each works to hold the text together giving it focus and organization.
- Model ways to find answers using the following tools: dictionary, thesaurus, MLA handbook, etc. (Be sure to learn where these are located in the Center.)

B. Tutoring a Final Draft

Students who visit the Center well in advance of an assignment’s due date will have more opportunities for revision. However, some students will visit at the last minute. If the student has a night left before the due date, there are more opportunities for revision than if the assignment is due the same day. In the case of ample revision time, the tutor can follow the following standard steps: ascertaining the assignment scope, having the writer read the text aloud, and asking what the writer would like to do in the writing center.

If the tutor feels that there is too little time left for extensive work, she should clearly explain the limitations of the situation to the tutee. Be sure to note the possibilities of what could have been done in a more generous time frame. The tutee should realize that any compromise in the quality of the paper is a result of the tutee’s lack of planning and preparation rather than any inability of a tutor to help. Afterwards the tutor should introduce/review the proofreading skills:

1. Read slowly. Look for small errors in this effort rather than looking for ideas.
2. Use a blank sheet of paper to cover all of paper except for the line being read.
3. Read aloud. Hearing rather than seeing errors can be productive.
4. Read for specific errors. Using the student’s list of frequent errors (make one if it is lacking), the student should look for each error separately—for example, run-on sentences throughout the text, then look for subject-verb agreement, etc.
5. Read each line or sentence backwards for spelling errors or typos.
6. Break up the proofreading into short periods of time.
Walk-in Appointments: A Special Case

Some students choose to drop in the Center without an appointment. Working during walk-in hours can be exciting. Working at this time can be enjoyable for those who enjoy meeting new people and who like challenges. (Personally, they were my favorite part of university writing center work. I even found the topic for my dissertation in an unexpected meeting.) However, these walk-in sessions can be intense because the writer has a focused concern. In other words, the bonus of such tutoring is that you never have to look for something to do.

PARTICULAR CONSIDERATIONS

Building Relationships

A trusting relationship is at the heart of writing center work. Writers need to be able to trust their tutors will treat them with respect and concern. In fact, this trust is an important reason for tutees to make commitments to work for the whole entire academic year. Seeing the growth of a tutee over several months is rewarding. As you tutor you may meet students who are different from you in some way (religion, political beliefs, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.). You may sometimes even read papers that you personally will not agree with. You may meet students you do not particularly like. However, you need to keep your opinions to yourself and treat each student with respect. Nevertheless, if a writer makes you uncomfortable (for example, by writing a paper you earnestly regard as hateful, harassing or intimidating), please talk to the Director.

In the beginning tutors may even feel that the Director’s need to give tutees misconduct reports or report them absent hinders this trust. However, these consequences are necessary for the running of the Center. Without these penalties, the Director has learned (through hard experience) that students simply would not show up for appointments or would fail to bring work with them.

WORKING WITH NONSTANDARD DIALECT SPEAKERS

Some Baylor students speak so-called “nonstandard dialects” of English. The term nonstandard is misleading. One dialect is called “standard” simply because more people speak it, but no one dialect is superior to another. Mastering Standard English certainly will allow students more success in school, and Baylor is typical in believing that such mastery will allow its students more success both in high school and college. However, tutors need to remember that students often trade this mastery for distance from their home cultures. Therefore, when tutoring nonstandard dialect speakers, please remember to discuss errors objectively noting how they can derive from differences between dialects. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, please do further reading (Caposella 96-7).

Writers may come from “blue collar,” working-class homes where relaxed oral speaking styles encourage “errors” in writing such as fragments, run on sentences, lack of agreement, and person/tense shifts. They may speak BEV or Black English Vernacular, an English dialect with complex rules. For example, one BEV tense refers to habitual action (“She be cooking”) while another tense refers to action in the present moment (“She cook”). Please be sensitive as you tutor these students, and always recognize the importance of their home language use. Your job is not to eliminate this language but merely to improve codeswitching for school purposes and make the students more comfortable with the formal English of the academy.
WORKING WITH ESL/EFL STUDENTS
(Elizabeth Mills write this section in March 2004.) Note: Asking Mr. Anderson-Barrera for advice is useful.

ESL/EFL students are students with English as their second language. Baylor has the privilege of having numerous international students. They bring to Baylor the ability to teach the community about other languages and cultures. Just as we tutors are able to learn about their cultures from them, they are able to learn from us about our culture. Please keep in mind that although EFL students now live in the U.S., they may not be accustomed to all of our practices. In order to assist better assist these students in their writing, writing tutors must try to understand these students’ cultures so that we may understand their actions.

What to expect and how to react:

1) EFL students may be afraid to ask questions. Therefore, tutors should explain concepts fully and repeatedly ask the student if he/she has a question. Also, if the student looks confused, be sure to explain without asking.

2) EFL students often are not accustomed to discussing religious and political views. Try to avoid discussing these matters because they might find the conversation offensive or embarrassing.

3) EFL students highly respect the tutor because she is a teaching authority. Therefore, the writing center relationship between a tutor and an EFL tutee might be more formal than with other students.

4) Direct eye contact is not a normal practice for some EFL students because it is believed to be rude. Avoiding looking into the tutor’s eyes does not mean that the tutee is not listening or does not wish to be at the appointment.

5) Education is extremely important and highly valued in most EFL students’ countries. EFL students, therefore, are often highly motivated and are hard workers. (However, there may be exceptions to this general rule as the students become Americanized.)

6) EFL students may nod their heads as a sign of respect even if they do not understand what is being said. Tutors, therefore, must make sure their tutee understands completely before moving on. For example, asking pointed questions, such as “What did you learn today?,” is a useful tactic to confirm understanding.

7) In Korean culture writing a person’s name in red ink is believed to mean that the person’s mother will die. Therefore with Koreans, if any other color pen is available, the tutor should use it instead.

8) EFL tutees may automatically be ashamed of grades less than an A. Therefore, if the tutor needs to discuss a grade with the tutee, the tutor should do so in a way that other students will not know what the grade is otherwise the tutee might be ashamed. (Korean students often prefer to whisper their grades.)

9) If the EFL student does not seem to act in these ways and acts the opposite, the student has become Americanized and might have learned American practices without comprehending when these actions are acceptable and when not. Thus, “odd” or “rude” behavior may result from unseen cultural differences. Therefore, if the EFL student seems to be acting rudely, please let Dr. Penti know. In the past, it has been helpful for her to arrange a conversation between the tutee and the dean (and/or adviser) to clarify certain expectations.
WORKING WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCE (LD) STUDENTS

Never ask a student directly, “Are you ld?”! The first rule of working with a student with learning differences is to remember that if you suspect a student has learning differences, you should share your observations with the Director, not the student. She will investigate the situation and give you guidelines for tutoring. If you keep working with an “ld student,” you will need to inform yourself by reading about the subject (see, for example, “Working with Learning-Disabled Writers” and you should change your tutoring approach (The MTU Writing Center Handbook 97-99).

You will discover that several Baylor students have what are known as “learning differences” (or in older, less enlightened terminology learning “disabilities”). Many of these students have superior intelligence; others are average; but all must learn strategies to cope with their differences because they must work with more effort to adjust their differences to school requirements. To get an appreciation of the challenges ld students face, turn to Caposella’s discussion (97-99) and look at the visual representation of how a text might appear to a dyslexic reader.

How can you recognize such a student? Some students may outright tell you that they are ADD (or ADHD, meaning attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) or dyslexic. Others have a secretive attitude and may pretend they have no learning differences. Still others may not even understand they have learning differences. The writings of these students often have the classic characteristics of odd spellings or omissions of words and word parts (e.g. endings). Often these students leave out whole sentences and make huge leaps in logic leaving gaps of reasoning. Despite their hard work, at times these students’ seem to “throw together” papers. At other times, their differences leave the students so frustrated that their papers truly are thrown together.

A good way to work with these students is for the tutors to read their papers aloud and ask lots of questions about the missing parts. For example, if a sentence does not make sense, you can ask the writer what her thinking was at that point. These students often are fluent talkers although their writings are not. Therefore, you might write down what they say word for word on the board and suggest the use of the completed sentence in the paper. Pam Wehr, formerly an expert on learning differences at Michigan Tech, describes working with these students:

Coach these students is both challenging and fun—kind of like playing a game of “Clue” where you and your students, together, work to discover what methods of learning and writing work best for them and then attempt to use those methods with their current assignments. What’s fun about it is that in the process of helping your students discover what type of learning style works best for them, you will discover new methods of approaching writing and studying to try yourself and to pass on to other students you coach. It’s important to remember that the methods we use with students who have a learning difference are very useful for all students (The MTU Writing Center Handbook 55-6).

While many “ld” students will want to concentrate on the task at hand (such as a particular assignment), they should be encouraged to examine long-term solutions to use in their school work. They should consider what methods of learning work best for them.

The Michigan Tech handout (available in the files) “Strategic Learning and Remembering” is a good way to begin. Using it, help the students consider what their strengths are and help them pick out (or invent) a strategy to try during the coming week. During the next session ask how the strategy worked or didn’t work. Such evaluation helps a student move beyond the immediate task at hand to think metacognitively. In other words, the student learns to monitor his successes and failures by thinking about how he thinks. This collaborative work with a ld student can be exciting. You may not immediately find a solution, but together the tutor and writer should come up with some useful strategies. Sometimes you will even discover something as simple as a colored transparency placed over a paper will help a ld student read more easily. If you feel unsure about your approach, contact the Director who will be happy to try to find alternative strategies and information.
Advocacy

Students with learning differences can gain accommodations if needed. Some students already are aware of their rights to have these accommodations. Others may not know about their rights or may be unwilling to make public their learning differences. Certainly students should choose their own approaches, but you can them become aware that an ability to work from their strengths will provide them with confidence and increased success. (At Baylor students must take tests with a psychologist (a costly process) to be certified as needing accommodations before the accommodations are allowed.) These students also benefit from learning to talk to their teachers about their differences rather than simply trying to hide them. Please always refer advocacy issues to the Director.

Characteristics of the Writing of Learning Difference Students (Wehr in The MTU Writing Center Handbook 57-62)

Brevity

Students with learning differences tend to write short papers. While they have ideas, they have difficulty expressing them. A short paper alone is not enough to identify a learning difference; it is accompanied by other characteristics.

Leaps in content/logic

Students with learning differences usually have larger gaps in their papers. Jumps in their thinking are apparent. Sentences, words, and quotations can seem to come out of nowhere. Sometimes such a writer will find it difficult to explain to a tutor what is missing. You can ask questions, as you read line by line, to indicate where there is something missing, and you may need to ask more questions than ordinarily to make the student aware of the sources of confusion.

Poor organization

Students with learning differences typically have difficulty recognizing what ideas are more important and what are less important. A more random order of presentation may result in a lack of focus. Each sentence seems to bring a new idea, or paragraphs could seem unconnected. A tutor can help by working with the writer on a concrete outline (less formal than a standard outline) or by using colored highlighters to link similar sentences. You could model such a technique for one paragraph and then let the writer go through the next scrambled paragraph. Another concrete exercise is to brainstorm a list of key words for a thesis. With these word tools the writer can then better deal with the ideas behind them.

Inconsistent proofreading

Missing letters, added letters, missing words, extra words, wrong words, misspellings are typical for students with learning differences. Their existence does not necessarily mean that these students have not worked hard on a text or that they haven’t proofread. They just cannot see the errors because of visual perception problems. In such cases having the student read the paper aloud will not work because they will simply fill in the missing words and letters. You need to read the paper to them exactly as you find it because they should be able to hear the errors and then be able to correct them. Some of these students can eventually learn to read their own papers and catch the errors, but many will never be able to do this. Encourage these students to word process all their drafts, to use the spellchecker consistently, and use visual revision methods such as color coding.
Emotional Issues

Many students with learning differences are uncomfortable about acknowledging their “differences,” and they may exhibit atypical behavior during appointments. They may have spent years feeling badly about how inadequate their academic performance is in comparison to others. As a result, they may be embarrassed about their learning differences. In fact, you may find that it takes such a student a longer than average time to get used to settling down and working in the Center (even just learning to sit still). Therefore, you may need to meet in a quieter spot if at all possible.

Never accuse a student of having learning differences. Be sure to talk about the student with the Director as soon as you suspect a learning difference situation. Remember to act professionally and discreetly in all situations as some Baylor parents and students do not wish to have learning differences publicized or even known.

Characteristics of Learning Differences

The following list is drawn from Wehr in the 1996 Michigan Tech Writing Center handbook (61-2). It is not complete, but knowing these characteristics will help you consider whether a student might have learning differences and, thus, how you might approach working with him more effectively. Of course, everyone exhibits these symptoms occasionally; their combination and frequency is what suggest a true learning difference.

- reversed letters, missing syllables, bizarre misspellings of common words
- trouble listening to a lecture and taking notes at the same time
- overly forgetful, chronically late, unaware of details
- trouble with sequencing
- illegible or childish handwriting
- omitted or added words when writing or reading aloud
- difficulty “reading” social cues, such as when it is appropriate to interrupt or when it is time to leave
- easily distracted
- left and right confusion
- unusual creativity
- unusual talent in one area such as math, and great difficulty in another, such as English

Suggestions for Working with Learning Differences

Wehr encourages you to “keep in mind” these suggestions (62-63):

- Instill confidence by making them [students with learning differences] aware of different learning styles/multiple intelligences] and by helping them discover their strengths so they can work around their weaknesses. (A student who has a learning difference may have difficulty with sequential thought patterns but be especially talented at thinking metaphorically. [Italics mine.])

- Teach alternative methods of learning
  - Auditory (e.g., reading aloud, tape recording)
  - Visual (e.g. color coding; creating maps, charts, graphs instead of sentences and paragraphs)
  - Kinesthetic (e.g., writing, notes on moveable cards)
  - Mechanical aids (e.g., word-processing packages, spell checkers) [Italics mine. For another presentation of learning styles, see Caposella 98-9.]

• Help them get organized:
  ❖ Encourage them to use assignment notebooks
  ❖ Break down assignments into more manageable tasks
  ❖ Set up study schedules, create long-term calendars.

• Teach them about metacognition.
• Encourage them to take responsibility (e.g., to speak with instructors, to work out acceptable alternatives for troublesome working conditions—oral exams, taped responses, untimed tests, private testing places).
• Remember that our [the writing tutors’] purpose is to empower students with learning differences by helping them learn to compensate for their weaknesses by using their strengths. Our purpose is not to rescue them.

PostScript

Reading this manual for the first time may make tutoring seem daunting. However, once you begin tutoring you will quickly learn that being a tutor can actually be fun. You also will gain satisfaction from helping other students and learning new perspectives on writing and students. Yet in the first few months (and even occasionally after you have become experienced), you may feel uncomfortable and wonder whether you are tutoring in the “right” way. Please always remember that there is never just one right way to tutor. Simply follow the general “golden rules” of tutoring and the writing center philosophy, and you will discover that you will create your own style of tutoring based on your personality and your instincts as a writer. Be sure to remember that good advice is always readily available. There is a community of writing tutors—experienced tutors, fellow novice tutors, and the Director—to whom you always can and should turn to with questions.

Tutoring, quite simply, will enrich your life. For example, I still keep in touch with two of my former tutees at Michigan Tech: a Costa Rican and a Finn. As I was tutoring them on their thesis work, they married. Over a decade later, they have a son and, living in Atlanta, can visit. They are just some of the wonderful people I have come to know through writing center work. Your experiences, I know, will be similarly enriching as your tutoring becomes an enduring part of your life.

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Works Cited


