



to be a peer:
an introduction to
writing center theory
& practice

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Introduction:

The Responsibilities of a Peer Tutor

Peer tutoring is about working with fellow students. As a fellow student, the peer tutor is in a position of influence that is different from that of instructors. Handled appropriately, peer tutoring has the power to do much good. Handled without reflection or care, it also has the power to damage. This handbook is about guiding tutors to use their position effectively and in a way that is appropriate for working with peers.

For peer tutoring, any method that does not show respect for the writer should not be used. The Writing Center fosters the kind of learning that is both effective and respectful. For us, one indication of success is when a writer returns to the center by his or her own choosing.

Gaining the trust of writers is an ongoing challenge involving the entire Writing Center community. We have learned that many writers do not make a first visit to the Writing Center willingly. Students often perceive that working with a peer might be awkward, embarrassing, or possibly demeaning. Will the tutor talk behind my back to other students? Will I be made to feel stupid? Is this the place for dummies?

When students make their first visit, it is our opportunity to demonstrate that we will not look down upon them. This is a formidable challenge. Evidence shows that only half of the students return after their first visit. Since we have begun to attend to this fact, the rate of students returning has been steadily increasing. We hope to continue developing in this direction so that even if a student comes to a first visit reluctantly, the tutoring experience would show him or her that tutoring is constructive.

Why do students return? For tutors, it is important to distinguish between factors that we do and do not have control over. For example, we cannot control students' schedules outside of class: we know that the greater majority of students need to work at least twenty hours per week and about half continue to live at or close to home with commitments to their families. Nor can we control factors like the experience students have had with academic writing, the practice they have using the dialects of English valued in an academic setting, the kind of economic privileges they have, or the negative or positive affirmation they receive on campus because of their identity.

We do have control over our own response to other students. Anyone working in environments as diverse as UIC soon learns that good intentions do not always achieve desired results. Misunderstanding, bias, and doubt play a role in communication as people of different backgrounds begin to work more closely with each other in settings like the Writing Center. Tutors need to keep in mind that even when tutoring conversations appear to go smoothly from the perspective of the tutor, we are still faced with the fact that too many students do not want to return.

As a community, there is much that we can do to increase the likelihood of students learning to visit us regularly. We can begin by relying on one another to promote the sense that writers are welcome at our Center. A student's view of the Writing Center will be affected not only by the tutoring session itself, but also his or her experience at the desk, the conversations overheard in the lounge and at other tutoring tables, and/or the interaction observed between

tutors and the instructors at the Writing Center. This means tutors must treat all members of UIC's community—whether in person or in absentia—with the highest degree of respect and professionalism at all times. This means no gossiping in writing center space.

It can be, unfortunately, easy for communities like the Writing Center to fall into “us” and “them” thinking, where tutors become a community of insiders that writers visit. Instead, everyone who enters the writing center is an essential member of our community with equal influence. Often, breaking down the barrier between tutors and writers can take as little as saying hi to a writer waiting in the lounge or asking people who are standing around if they have been helped. Keeping “us” and “them” thinking at bay can be more challenging but every bit as necessary when tutoring conversations do not meet our expectations—when, for example, a writer comes last minute, is not sure what to focus on, or resists our suggestions.



This is equally true of instructors. It is true that students and instructors sometimes have difficulty understanding the meaning behind each other's actions. It can be easy to align oneself 'with' students (since you are one) and 'against' instructors.

Tutors have a responsibility to recognize instructors as important members of the writing center community who collaborate with writers and tutors to further the educational goals of all participants. When the tutor supports both the instructor and the student, writers will be more likely to learn how they can put together the perspectives of different audiences.

One of the most powerful means a tutor has in helping writers become members of the Writing Center community is using the idea that both tutor and writer have something to bring to the table. Unlike other educational environments we may be accustomed to, where the educator is positioned as knowing more and the students less, peer tutoring values the contributions of both writer and tutor while acknowledging that those contributions are different. The tutor brings knowledge of writing center theory, the experience of talking to many other writers, interactions with instructors and a wide variety of their assignments, and the collaboration of other tutors and Writing Center instructors when additional resources are needed. The writer, of course, brings the assignment itself, his or her experience with the course materials, a unique perspective on what he or she is learning, the advice he or she has received from other tutors and teachers, and the hope that the tutor will be helpful.

As you can see, peer tutoring is founded on four principles:

- respect for writers;
- the idea that both tutor and writer contribute to a tutoring conversation;
- the tutor's obligation to reflect and analyze tutoring, even when it seems to be going well;
- and the tutor's collaboration with the many people, both in and outside the center, who play different roles in helping students learn to write.

Chapter 1:

Theoretical Foundations for Practical Tutoring: The Responsibilities of a Writing Center

- As a Writing Center, we should encourage students to use original ideas and their own unique style, but students should also be able to use established ideas and subscribe to standard language choices. Writers must be given the freedom to use their own voice (always), provided that they know how to explain, contextualize and cite that voice.
- In our Writing Center, tutors should invite writers to join an open-ended, active dialogue, but also need to pay close attention to time management, writers' responses on conference forms, and any other texts (assigned readings, prompts, an instructor's comments) the writer brings in. Tutors must allow writers to determine the direction of a session, but should also ensure that the session is moving in the right direction.
- The role of Directors or Assistant Directors in a Writing Center is to encourage the work between writers and tutors while at the same time vigilantly discouraging work that is potentially oppressive. It is crucial for Directors to create personal, supportive relationships with tutors while recognizing that it is just as important to establish professional distance through authority.
- The work of Writing Centers is far too important to be compromised by making concessions to the larger academic institution they are part of. Therefore, as a part of a larger institution, Writing Centers must be prepared to make concessions in order to keep doing the important work that they do.

The obvious contradictions in the preceding paragraphs are not meant to be parodic (well, not entirely parodic). Rather, each of these sentences represents the dilemma all Writing Centers face in nearly every aspect of their work: how to form and fulfill the mission a Writing Center has set up for itself while at the same time meeting the outside expectations of the institution they are a part of. In many ways, Writing Centers operate in a kind of limbo space, both theoretically and practically: they typically seek to be safe spaces, comfortable spaces, for writers and tutors alike. But – and particularly for Writing Centers that adopt a mission of social justice – their larger goals can be met only through discomfort, by actively challenging ideas that writers, tutors and directors fundamentally believe in. Take, for example, beliefs about racism, about what it is and how it works. For writers, tutors and directors who are appalled by racism, by the very idea of it, and who believe themselves to be practicing anti-racism, it is painful to interrogate systemic racism, to begin thinking of racism as a built-in feature of institutions rather than the viewpoints and actions of some backwards group. It is incredibly tough to hear that you might be a part of something you hate. It is tough to recognize that education is not necessarily a great equalizer. And yet, this is what Writing Centers often ask us to do: to rethink how racism, homophobia, sexism and other forms of discrimination operate more subtly around us, at the level of language, in writing, in the everyday.

Why Theory?

Writing Centers are in persistent limbo because they, like so many other kinds of organizations, disciplines, and groups, are situated within larger institutions – this limbo is not a feature unique to Writing Centers. But Writing Centers are a space in which numerous issues come to the fore, in the conversations between tutors and directors, tutors and other tutors, and of course, between tutors and writers, in one-on-one conversations and in writing – on the page, in black and white.

All of the bulleted binaries listed at the beginning of this section are examples of familiar points of intersection that raise questions about Writing Centers’ “professional obligations”, about what the jobs of Writing Centers are, should be, or even *can* be. And of course, any talk about professional obligations stems from – and branches back into – understandings of Writing Centers’ roles within their larger institutions, understandings about what tutoring means, why we do it, how we do it, and how we maneuver the bigger conflicts that come into focus through the more specific (and maybe more pragmatic) questions that we try to answer.

Theory is how we answer those questions; theory is everyday practice at our writing center. It is a way of understanding action in the world, and in turn a way to take action and make decisions. Every action you take as a tutor should be an effort to improve our community of writers, tutors, instructors and administrators and move all of us—one step at a time—closer to our mission of social justice. Theory is how we organize the experience, knowledge and belief each of us brings to our community into a workable system. This handbook is meant as a way to improve and inform the theory you use as a tutor to take action in your daily work at the writing center.

Anti-Oppressive Pedagogy

Reflect before reading:

What “lens” would allow you to see academic writing from a perspective other than your own? How might your own writing change when viewed through a new lens?

In what ways have you seen “good” or “bad” writing attached to particular gender, class, racial, or other groups? How might students who have experienced bias in this way resist?

How might students who experienced bias view the idea of peer tutoring?

What might be some challenges of anti-oppressive tutoring?

We seek to tutor in a way that is effective, without engendering resentment or a loss of dignity. We do not want people to “hate English” or to feel excluded from the world of writing. At times, oppressive methods can occur unintentionally. Members of the institution who have belonged to communities culturally similar to mainstream institutions can be oblivious to how these practices appear to outsiders.

5 To help us better understand how oppression works today, we use former UIC

Professor Kevin Kumashiro's idea of "Anti-Oppressive Education." For Kumashiro, oppression occurs when we do not question our assumptions about the cultural practices of both mainstream and 'othered' communities. Anti-oppressive theory is a tool for critical reflection and a way to take action as well. For Kumashiro, being anti-oppressive requires thinking about the roots of oppression. He argues that "commonsense and traditional ways of reforming education actually mask the problem," as do other forces in society that make dominant biases appear "normal." To imagine experiences from the perspective of people who have been hurt by these biases, Kumashiro says we need to "decenter" our own identities.

One way of doing this when we talk about writing is to question how we categorize writing as "good" or "bad." Kumashiro would have us ask how much of our judgment is based on writing and how much of it is based on how we view the person writing. To better understand writing, we may need to decenter ourselves and get beyond assumptions about who can write and who cannot.

Feminist Pedagogy

Reflect before reading:

Who tends to be silent in the classroom? Why? What is an example of a coercive use of power in the classroom?

How does silence function among peers, for example in peer group work?

How do students react differently to different genders? How does gender affect tutoring?

What are examples of conversation in which people disagreed but were able to continue talking? What are some strategies of using the language of respect?

Modern Writing Centers, which historically developed at the same time as women's studies programs, borrow much of their critique of power from feminist pedagogy. When we have power, for example as a tutor or educator, feminist theory teaches us to be self-critical and vigilant about contributing to forms of domination that silence other members of our community.

Feminist theory has been especially interested in listening to people who have been institutionally silenced. Feminist theory asks that tutors first recognize that they can indeed be in a position of power and, second, that they use that position to listen—especially to voices that do not always get heard: women, certainly, but also others who have been silenced by other forms of domination.

Feminist theory asks us to understand "our complicity in power structures" as tutors (Jarvis). When a writer sits down for a 50-minute session, you are asked not only to suspend judgment and listen to the writer, but also resist automatic and "safe" reactions and methods. Often it might be easier to fix errors for the writer instead of thinking about how you and the writer can do this together, but feminist pedagogy would have us question if the method is in fact a way of using power ethically. As bell hooks reminds us, "we must relinquish our ties to traditional ways," in our case, to unexamined patterns of our tutoring, "that reinforce domination."

If you engage in a conversation where you listen to the writer and talk to the

writer as a peer—someone who also brings experience and knowledge to the session—then you can begin “a visible acknowledgment of the union of theory and practice... [and] overcome the alienation that has become the norm in the contemporary university” (hooks). Feminist theory insists that power be used to help and not to alienate and intimidate others.

Finally, feminist theory frees us from having to be an all-knowing writing expert. It is important, of course, that you convey to writers that you are prepared and know how to find resources, but if you do not know the answer to a question or problem, there is no reason to try to take the upper hand and pretend that you know. bell hooks explains that “the willingness to be open and honest about what we do not know is a gesture of respect.”

Anti-racist Pedagogy

Reflect before reading:

What are conversations about race that you have participated in or witnessed? What are the different ways that people responded to these conversations?

What are some strategies for keeping discussions on difficult topics productive?

In what ways does society remind people that they have a race? What is the difference between how white and nonwhite students experience color?

Anti-oppressive pedagogy seeks to address all forms of oppression. Though terms like “diversity” and “anti-oppressive” are productive in attending to intersecting forms of oppression, they can also divert attention from particular forms that are more difficult to discuss, such as racism.

Most people would like discussions of race to be over. But there is continued evidence of how new forms of racism, both individual and institutional, can create an uneven playing field for many people of color.

At an institutional level, there continues to be a lack of nonwhite tenure-track faculty at UIC. Anti-racist pedagogy encourages us to consider how a lack of role models and mentorship will affect students’ career choices, motivation, attitudes, and writing.

At the Writing Center, race can become a topic of conversation when students are writing about race for their courses, but also inadvertently when ELL students are categorized by race, or judgments are made about the use of dialect.

Like feminist pedagogy, anti-racist pedagogy seeks to go beyond understanding. It recognizes that racism continues to have real and lived consequences for many of us, and that it calls for a response, not only from people of color, but from all people who want a society less diminished by hatred, injustice, ignorance, and fear.

Grammar and Linguistics

Reflect before reading:

7 *In what ways could emphasis on grammatical correctness negatively affect*



a session with a writer? When might grammatical correctness be a valid focus for a session?

What is the connection between spoken language and the inferences that might be made about a person's written language? How might living with these stereotypes affect a writer's opinion of their work?

What is the difference between Academic English and other dialects spoken by the members of a university? What is the basis for privileging one over others?

Why do language learners so often identify grammar as their number one concern for sessions?

That writing is the focus of Writing Centers does not mean we can ignore student identities—the two are closely aligned. In fact, sociolinguistics—both a qualitative and quantitative science—studies the relationship between language and society, and the ways people express and experience their social identities through language. This may be a surprise to many readers, since some people consider the public conversation around language and identity to be a political controversy, rather than an area of scientific study. What often happens is that the political controversy, based on beliefs and opinions, obscures the scientific revelations and insights all fields of linguistics have to offer. For most sociolinguists it is accepted fact that there is no inferior or superior language or dialect—there is only the reflection of what a certain constructed identity has learned as appropriate behavior in specific situations. How certain individuals and identities label language—appropriate, not appropriate—is more a feature of their class, race, or gender identity, as opposed to any inherent value in the language.

In this way, language is a fascinating object of study, and directly tied to issues of social justice in a society that uses identity markers such as race, class, gender, and citizenship to determine the level of interaction one is granted in social institutions and the amount of power and control one has access to.

To repeat, the language one speaks is not reflective of the abilities of the speaker—it only reflects the communities to which the speaker may belong. The language spoken in communities who have been oppressed historically—such as African-Americans, the newly immigrated, poor people—have come to be stigmatized right along with those groups. When a person reacts to a language feature with sentiments like “I don't know, that just doesn't sound educated” or “He talks like he knows what he's doing” or even “Her grammar is horrible” it is very likely that the person is relying on learned responses to the status of cer-

tain language variations, rather than working to understand a speaker or writer's meaning across linguistic boundaries

The expected language variation for writing in educational institutions poses difficulty for writers who are less familiar with the language practices of upper middle class white America. This is not to say that only upper middle class white Americans practice academic discourse, or that it is impossible for others who do not fit this category to master academic discourse, or learn it as their natural variety. In a country of such diversity, many ethnic and racial communities can be described as upper middle class—and thus have access to the language variation—and many white people who have grown up in poor or rural communities find the discourse practices of universities bewildering. Something sociologists (or people who study how societies function) call 'intersectionality' is at work here. (Intersectionality is also a key feature of Kumashiro's work on anti-oppressive pedagogy.) Intersectionality refers to how all people are many things, and belong to many different groups, at one time. It also refers directly to patterns of oppression in societies—one cannot look simply at all members of an oppressed race and expect to see the same patterns. At any given moment, many different factors of an individual's identity may be influencing how that person experiences oppression. In this manner, one may have access to the language of power because of the amount of money their parents make, but still face oppression due to their race or sexual orientation. In other words, language is power, but not the only power granted by any given society.

When a student's language is criticized and degraded, that student is silenced, and effectively denied access to the language of power. Why? Because language is interaction—acquiring it demands involvement in a dialogue. Learning to use language effectively is a result of interaction with others, whether in the tangible sense of a person sitting next to you, or in the imagined sense that takes place through reading and research. Writing and language are not acquired in isolation.

Student interaction with the institution most often takes place through writing. And in no aspect of writing is the power differential more sensational than grammar. Many writers are sent or select to come to the WC to work on their grammar. But grammar can refer to many different things. In its most basic sense, grammar refers only to the predictable patterns of language found within any particular language variation. The grammar of Mandarin contrasts sharply with Spanish grammar, as one would expect. But the grammar (not just the pronunciation) of American English also contrasts with the grammar of British English, which one may not expect. For example, in the United States, collective nouns are treated singular, as in this sentence, "The committee makes the final decision." In Britain, however, "The committee make the final decision" would be expected. Neither is an example of bad grammar. They are both examples of a different grammar. Imagine the confusion of an international or immigrant student studied in British English—as most students from India and parts of Africa are—when told by a tutor or teacher that they are using incorrect English grammar when in the case of verb agreement with collective nouns.

This is one reason why we caution tutors to be careful when determining ‘correct’ from ‘incorrect’ grammar. This is not to say that your own, possibly vast, knowledge about what is expected grammatically in academic discourse creates oppressive tutoring. Being able to see mistakes that writers miss can be a very helpful quality in a writing tutor. Instead, consider how a tutor’s reaction to error may be oppressive, silencing, or even racist. Labeling a writer and their writing inferior, or creating an environment where writers come to view their own abilities and texts inferior, is oppressive tutoring. It is impossible for tutors to know all the syntactical variations of English accepted by all the world’s English speaking communities. Instead, it is important to remind yourself when tutoring to never use the language of a student as a means to make assumptions about a writer’s intelligence, fluency, or understanding of the content of a text (their own or others). Too often, student voices that have not yet acquired the standards of Academic English are spoken of disparagingly. Presuming writers’ needs and abilities from their spoken language can lead to the alienation of writers and unproductive tutoring.

Remember to talk about language use as a set of expectations for talking to a particular audience, and do not shy away from conversations that name and describe that audience explicitly, either in terms of your own understanding of an academic audience, or the understanding of the writer you are working with.

Cultural discomfort and linguistic difficulties can lead to tutors abandoning peer methodologies and turning to prescriptive grammar editing. Sentiments of “but how do I talk about content if I can’t even understand the sentence! I have to correct the grammar before I even know what it means!” are sometimes loud and prevalent among tutors and instructors alike. An important question here is if you do not know what the sentence means, how can you correct the grammar? The grammar is contingent upon the intended meaning. As a result, we feel tutors should never take a text away from a writer to fix it. Proofreading and editing someone else’s text without actively involving them in the process is an oppressive practice; however, tutors ***should not interpret the policy against such methods as resisting grammar work.***

Writers unfamiliar with the grammar controlling Academic English will have questions, and we should always answer these questions to the best of our ability. The role of grammar instruction in our center does not follow the prescriptive method of error identification and correction. Reciting grammar rules or pointing out every grammar error on a student’s paper is a misuse of power and an act of questionable educational value. Instead, tutors are asked to think of grammar as a rhetorical tool that is not just meant to be memorized, but understood. Correctness is relative to purpose and situation. The higher priority is creating meaning with purpose that communicates effectively to a specific audience. Focusing exclusively on correctness and isolating it from content and communicativeness is not only oppressive to a writer attempting to understand the discourse structures of the university, but perhaps a waste of time: what good is a grammatically correct sentence if it answers the wrong question?

Writers who are actively engaged in learning English often ask difficult to an-

swer grammar questions: grammar reference books, other tutors, and Assistant Directors can all assist if the topic exceeds a tutor's explicit knowledge. If you are not sure who to ask for help, or what reference is the right one, the front desk person is there to assist both writers and tutors with those issues. However, a tutor should not assume that tutoring a language learner necessarily includes explicit grammar instruction.

A strategy for tutors is to become versed in what Martha Kolln terms rhetorical grammar: "Understanding rhetorical grammar. . . means understanding the grammatical choices available. . . and the rhetorical effects those choices will have on [a] reader" (3). Rhetorical grammar is about understanding how language works, and how to communicate these workings to writers. In these cases, relying on references to communicate prescriptive rules can be a tutor's best option. First and foremost, it can help prevent you from miscommunicating a prescriptive grammar rule or from communicating one of the many grammar myths. But tutors are also trained to focus on language choices that are of long term pedagogical value to the improved writing of a writer. This means that a discussion of subordination is accompanied by a discussion of what the focus of a paragraph is, which leads to other topics than comma placement. This can lead to increased student engagement with a text, with a class, and with writing.

Whether you are a native or non-native English speaker, it is probable that as a tutor you have achieved a high level of fluency in academic discourse, and your understanding of the language will be intuitive on many levels. This means you do not know all the rules. Always seek the assistance of reference texts, other tutors, and the administrative staff when you don't know the answer to a question.

Chapter 2: ***Practical Tutoring***

What good would it be for a writer to leave a tutoring session with changes in his or her writing, but without an understanding of how those changes are made? What use to have one better paper, but no strategies for becoming a better writer?

While helping writers improve the assignment at hand, tutors look for opportunities to expand the conversation so that



the writer can apply topics discussed to future writing tasks. Working the conversation this way can help the writer with the assignment as well as with his or her overall development as a writer.

Dialogue

Reflect before reading:

Dialogue can occur in classroom settings. How do dialogues between teacher and student, and tutor and writer differ?

What expectations would you have for a tutor if you were visiting the Writing Center? How have those expectations been changing as you think about tutoring?

Power plays a role in conversations, even among peers. What classroom or campus situations have you witnessed in which students were being oppressive to other students?

Are there times when dialogue might be oppressive? When?

Dialogue continues to make peer tutoring a way for writers to participate actively in their learning, especially on large campuses like ours, where opportunities to have individual needs addressed can be rare.

In part, tutoring styles are characterized by the different ways tutors draw writers into conversation. Open-ended questions about the assignment can help get conversations started: how was this assignment talked about in class? If a writer is ready to talk, a tutor should listen. Active, careful listening requires alertness, thoughtfulness, and brief responses that acknowledge that you are listening and interested. A writer's sense of priorities can change in the middle of a tutoring session and the tutor will need to adapt. One impediment to dialogue is for a tutor to insist on his or her own agenda. To keep the dialogue open, the tutor will acknowledge and respond to the writer's concerns, even if the tutor feels there might be more important things to work on.

Nothing energizes your dialogue more than genuine interest in the writer. A common setback is to frame tutoring with the question, "what's wrong with this paper?" True, tutors help students with shortcomings. But limiting tutoring to "what's wrong" makes sessions brief and potentially oppressive.

Approaching tutoring as a conversation allows us to work with writers who we perceive are better than us. If there is nothing apparently "wrong" with an assignment, we do not say "everything looks OK" and send the writer off. A conversation about how the writer discovered his or her ideas or the steps that were taken to articulate them will generate additional topics. The best writers know that being clear, efficient, and engaging is an ongoing challenge.

Your First Session

Think of your tutoring hour as having three parts:

1. An introduction, where you welcome the writer, listen to him or her, and learn about his or her writing task.
2. A middle, where you and the writer work together.

3. And a conclusion, where you review and welcome the writer to return.

Introduction

Welcome the writer to get the session on the right track. Keep in mind that not all people view handshaking, humor, or physical proximity in the same way. It is better to be reserved.

Introduce yourself by name. Conversations go better if you learn and use the writer's name throughout the session. You will have the writer's name on the conference form to refer to.

Once you have greeted the writer, learn about the assignment and its purpose. If the writer has an assignment sheet, ask to see it. But in keeping with our philosophy, learn about the assignment through conversation. Ask the writer to explain the assignment's purpose and requirements. You may need to help get a conversation started by using questions, like what seems new about this assignment, or what were the writer's initial thoughts when the assignment was being explained in class.

Middle

Possibly, the writer will have some writing on hand. Rather than begin with details or line-by-line reading, continue to use conversation to get a sense of the whole. If the writer has not begun writing, use dialogue to help brainstorm or outline.

Focusing on sections of the writing will require you to get familiar with the content. An unfortunate tradition of writing center pedagogy has been to make reading the writing aloud by the writer a requirement. For some writers, reading aloud early in the session is intimidating. Offer reading aloud as an option, but not a requirement. It gives writers opportunities to see their writing afresh, to edit while they read, and to stop to comment; however, it is time-consuming, and is not appropriate in all sessions.

If the writer is uncomfortable reading aloud, you can offer to do so. Place the paper on the table between you and the writer so that the writer still has access to the paper, and can mark where they hear things they want to return to. Ask the writer if he or she wants a turn. Often writers will be willing to read aloud after they can trust that your attitude is respectful and positive.

Be a listener. Let your responses be informed by what you hear the writer say (even more than by what the writer writes.) Our feminist and anti-oppressive goals can guide us. Listening carefully and deeply helps avoid hasty judgment. Listening is an attempt to see the writer's efforts through his or her "lens" rather than your own.

If you and the writer feel there are different priorities for working on the paper, you should acknowledge the writer's priorities first and then respectfully suggest things that you think might also be important. Insisting on your agenda is counterproductive. Writers who are respected will return to the Writing Center.

Tutoring does not have to proceed in the order of the paper. You and the writer may decide to look at a conclusion or bibliography before discussing the

introduction. Here are other possibilities for activities you and the writer can engage in:

- generating notes that the writer can use later,
- discussing the choices for revising,
- giving the writer a few minutes to rewrite,
- making an outline,
- discussing an academic convention,
- looking things up in a handbook or on the Internet;
- considering counterarguments to the writer's claim;
- offering examples from your own writing experience.

Conclusion

When there are ten minutes left, let the writer know that the session is drawing to a close and review what you have done together. Ask the writer if you can provide anything to help them work on the paper after the session is over (a handout, a web address). You can offer to go to the front desk to help the writer make another appointment.

After the session, the writer fills out a feedback form and drops it into a box on the way out. You fill out the conference form and leave it at the front desk before you leave. The conference forms go into our database and are a record of the conference, in case a student needs proof. No other proof or signature is needed.

Group Work

It is common for First Year Writing instructors to schedule their classes for small group work. The purpose of group work is for students to have a discussion with each other and the tutor about developing or revising a draft.

We offer two types of group work activities, "Beginning a Task," and "Developing a Thesis with Consequence."

In the activity we call "Beginning a Task," instructors begin by teaching while the tutors audit. The instructor introduces a new writing assignment. Tutors then join a group to help students analyze the assignment and begin to "brainstorm."

First, tutors should begin by introducing themselves by name and then asking everyone in their group to do the same. Tutors can then ask an open-ended question about the assignment. Questions that invite multiple perspectives are more likely to involve more students.

- What are the different expectations about this assignment? Which seem more important to you?
- What is the genre? Is it similar to other genres you know? How might the genre affect how we write the draft?
- What are some examples of details from the reading or class discussion that could be useful for thinking about this assignment? In general, why are details important to academic writing?
- What are some of the issues you are writing about? What are the different

perspectives on the issues?

It is common for a group to be reluctant in the beginning. That is OK. Students have many reasons to be cautious when talking in front of their classmates or someone new, like you, and we should not judge that or try to force anyone to speak. Rather, tutors can be ready with several alternative strategies to help students warm up.

One way to get things started is to ask a question that doesn't require a verbal answer, but that is likely to get "a show of hands." For example, "Who has done an assignment like this before?" You can then venture to follow up and ask one of the members that seem more willing to be involved to talk briefly about their previous writing experience.

Another way is to ask a question that requires simple answers, answers that students are more likely to risk saying aloud. For example, you might ask the students to underline and then name key words in the assignment. You can follow up by asking why a particular word seems important.

You can also simply acknowledge the silence and try to make it more comfortable for the students. Let them know that it is OK to take a few minutes to think about the questions. You can also say that in the meanwhile, you will also take a second look at the assignment sheet and take some notes. Welcome others to take a few notes as well. Some students are more comfortable speaking when they had a chance to organize their thoughts.

If students denigrate the assignment, do not join in. Acknowledge that new assignments can be a challenge, but then offer a productive turn. Suggest that challenges can be met by breaking them down into smaller steps. You can also offer to help formulate the kinds of questions about assignments that are productive for class discussion and office hours.

During group work, the instructors are likely to walk around and join each group briefly. Instructors may ask about the discussion and if there are questions. Instructors that do not join in are, nevertheless, available and should be sought out if you need support making the discussion more productive.

In the second activity, "Developing a Thesis with Consequence," the goal is for students to share and discuss their working thesis. But again, expect that some of the students will need to warm up to you and each other before they are willing to have their thesis responded to, or, possibly, criticized. You can warm up by asking some questions about what they have learned in the past about thesis statements or what seems new or challenging about formulating arguments in this class.

Tutors should also prepare for this second activity by reviewing the chapter on thesis in the English 161 required text, *From Inquiry to Academic Writing*. (If you did not take 161 here, please let us know; we will get you these materials.)

After group work, you will need to fill out a conference form that is especially for group work.

Group work has its own set of challenges and rewards. But, as you can see from the description above, the general principles this handbook sets out for

being helpful, while respecting both students and instructors, remain similar.

Plagiarism

Often, students plagiarize because of carelessness or confusion about citation rules. Even if students are plagiarizing by mistake, they need to be informed that the consequences may be severe, from an F on the assignment to dismissal from the university. With citation, it is better to be safe than sorry. The following site by a UIC professor has FAQs about plagiarism: http://tigger.uic.edu/~edelberg/crediting_others/index.htm

If the plagiarism is severe – if the student is working on someone else’s paper, or deliberately trying to pass off someone else’s work as his or her own, please talk to one of the directors.



The First-Year-Writing-Program (FYWP)

Tutors have the opportunity to work with students from different academic disciplines on many kinds of assignments. Students bring in anthropology papers, lab reports, resumes, or personal statements. However, a majority of students come to the Writing Center to work on an assignment for a course in the First Year Writing Program (FYWP): English 060, 070, 071, 160, and 161.

- **ESL 060** concentrates on English acquisition for students whose English knowledge makes participation in academic courses arduous; attention is paid to English syntax and basic sentence structures, paragraph development, vocabulary acquisition, and reading skills.
- **English 070** focuses on building sentence-to-paragraph writing skills for non-native English speakers. Students focus on argument and write in several different genres.
- **English 071** also concentrates on sentence and paragraph writing skills, but is for native English speaking students. Students focus on argument and write in several different genres.
- **English 160** requires that students learn specific rhetorical concepts to develop their analytical and argumentative skills. In addition to writing argumentative essays, students work with different genres, (such as an advice column, a manifesto, or an obituary), in order to understand how to negotiate audiences and the different purposes of writing.
- **English 161** centers on a specific topic (globalization, the arts in Chicago, food production, immigration, urban renewal) and requires that students complete an 8-10 page research paper. Students do other projects in preparation for research writing, such as summary, analysis, and synthesis.

Many of the students who do not bring FYWP assignments to their sessions have still taken these required classes at UIC. Many of the theoretical mainstays of the FYWP can be useful for tutors to frame the session dialogue. Just as tutors and writers are asked to enter a dialogue from the moment a session begins, students in the FYWP are asked to approach writing as a conversation. The program is rooted in the idea that writing always responds to something in the world and that it has the power to effect consequences—writing is reaction and action, a way of both understanding and engaging with important political, social, and cultural discourses.

For tutors, this means that in addition to talking to writers about arguments, sentence structure, quotations, and grammar, it is important to introduce larger questions about the writers' project as a whole.

Writing for a reason

Students should consider the situation or context to which their writing responds. Situation can relate a course's reading, the writer's own experience, class discussion, or the instructor's purpose for giving the assignment.

- What is the purpose of the assignment? What are some important reasons for the writing?
- What might be the larger contexts of politics, race, language, religion, gender, or culture that this project responds to?
- What kinds of questions can this project answer? What kinds of questions can this project raise? What impact might this assignment have?

Writing as a form

In many FYWP courses, students are asked to recognize and write in different genres. Because genres hold separate sets of requirements and expectations, it can be useful to have a conversation with a writer about what their particular genre calls for.

- What are possible conventions of the genre?
- What common elements do you expect to find in certain genres? Do you expect, for example, that a movie review will look different than a memoir? How and why might they be different?
- What happens when a piece of writing breaks genre conventions? Why does this rule-breaking seem a point of strength in some pieces of writing and a weakness in others?

Writing for an audience

Part of writing in genres involves making careful language choices and considering the audiences. Language encompasses not only the specific words that the writer uses, but also involves the way a text is set up and organized.

Writers often think their language must be overly "academic" and formal. Students often sacrifice their voice and clarity to speak the language they think the teacher is looking for. It is always tough to navigate language choices, but in UIC's FYWP, the attention to context and genre often helps students to see that they

are not always stuck writing in one way.

- Who is the immediate audience for the paper? What does the audience need to know? What do they already know? What kind of language can be used to appeal to this audience?
- What assumptions—positive or negative—is the writer making about their audience?

Writing as results

“Consequence” refers to the impact that writing can have in the world. Students often see their writing as an abstract, obligatory exercise where the only meaningful value is a grade. But keeping larger consequences in mind can help students see their writing as a concrete and dynamic way to participate in conversations that have public consequences. In the FYWP, the attention to the real-world consequences of writing shows students that writing is meaningful because it engages with the world outside of the classroom.

- What is at stake in the paper? What problem does the paper bring to light?
- What consequences have already occurred as a result of this problem? What consequences might result from the claim your paper makes?
- What claims have others made in response to this problem?

Chapter 3: Professional Practices at the Writing Center

Reflective Practice

If you read some of the writing center theory and texts out there, you might get the impression that writing centers focus on tutors more than the writers – it becomes “our second home,” but “our” does not seem to include the writers. This kind of “theory” seems to slip into “us and them” thinking. At our center we work. We work hard. Like many of our UIC students, we are commuters who “do” school and work. And we take this “work” mentality to everything we do. Even when we ask you to reflect.

In English 222 and in English 482, we ask that you reflect on your tutoring and writing, sometimes, submitting these to Blackboard. As staff tutors and volunteer tutors, we ask that you continue this practice. We realize the word “reflection” might conjure up all types of writing, especially when associated with writing center practice(s). It is important that we establish what we mean by reflection. Reflection is not the same as writing a poem or expressing a “stifled” voice (we are not asking you to stifle your voice). We are not asking that you keep private journals (although, feel free to do so). Reflection is not a time to “vent” or to tell stories about tutoring experiences.

Rather, reflection is work. It is a time to take a critical view of your tutoring practices. We do not want you, the tutors, to see your tutoring experiences as only bound to your experiences as you might position it and as you might label it. This, we know, would erase the writer. Instead, think of the larger systems that operate as you meet with writers to discuss writing: our pedagogy is informed by

contact with those larger systems of oppression.

In 222 and 482 you do theory. On the tutoring floor you do practice. When reflecting, we ask that you do praxis: how did theory meet practice, if at all? Reflection is a pedagogical tool for you to think about and negotiate your practice in anti-oppressive, anti-racist and feminist pedagogy.

Reflecting is an opportunity to consider your theoretical reasons for your tutoring practice as situated at UIC. A reflective practice considers choices made in a session with a writer, how you worked as a tutor and how the session worked as tutoring. Reflective practice is often uncomfortable, as it asks the practitioner to investigate their unspoken and possibly unconscious motivations to heighten ones awareness of a situation, and their actions within it. The important thing to remember is that reflection is a time to (re)consider what you did or did not do in a session.

In *Good Intentions*, Nancy Grimm writes, “writing center workers need to pay much more attention to the ways institutional habits, practices, assumptions, and perspectives inadvertently oppress some students and to hold themselves responsible ‘from here on out’ for submitting these habits to critical reflection” (107). Feminist Pedagogy really informs how we use reflection. We especially borrow from bell hooks, asking you to think of your positions of power and of authority as you engage with writers about their writing. Further, it is feminist pedagogy that informs us that listening is an active practice in a conversation when entering in dialogue. For us, reflection is an opportunity to enter or start dialogue; therefore, it is important that when you post on Blackboard or submit to us that you do not think of those posts as mere deposits where nothing happens.

Whether we ask you to submit your reflections or your discourse analysis essays on Blackboard or to us, these documents are public documents with a specific purpose and with a specific audience (the directive team). It is a pedagogical tool where you enter into conversation with your instructor and/or with the rest of the writing center. There are several things you need to consider as you write reflectively. Consider your language choices, not only in terms of sentence structure, grammar and mechanics, but also in the negotiation and in the creation of the meaning of the session. Investigate and analyze the patterns of interaction that seem common to your sessions. When we respond, we often take the opportunity to engage in a conversation about your negotiation of language and the poten-



tial consequences, whether intended or not. Specifically, we are looking for the ways you have constructed the writer.

Here is an example of a Reflection Post on Blackboard: “Upon sitting down with her, I introduced myself. She glanced at me and turned to dig through her bag that was chock full of loose papers. While I tried to remain optimistic and nonjudgmental, it was becoming clear that this might be a challenging session.”

What is there to notice about this reflection? The tutor is focusing on how “disheveled” the writer seems, already labeling the session as “challenging” even before seeing the writing itself. The tutor is already judging the writer despite intentions to remain “nonjudgmental.”

To the tutor who wrote the above post, we asked the tutor to consider how by labeling the session as “challenging” from the beginning, the tutor does place judgment on the writer, possibly creating a wall of resistance, using the tutor’s position of power to judge.

As we respond to your writing, we think of ways to enter into dialogue with you and with other students who might be also responding to your writing in class. Feminist Pedagogy encourages us to question and debate without dominating. And as writing instructors, as the directive team, we look at your language choices and its potential consequences, whether intended or not. In turn, we ask that you read responses and continue the conversation with the directive team and your colleagues. Writing about your tutoring can be an opportunity for you to engage with material presented to you in tutoring courses, connecting, adding, challenging, problematizing the theories as you practice, and to continue evaluating your position of power and authority, entering in dialogue with your colleagues and the directive team.

At our writing center, the practice of conversation via reflective and analytical writing is a continued practice of peerness. Some of our experienced tutors have noted that peerness is not a given, but something a tutor cultivates. Reflection helps the tutor continue an examination of the negotiation that happens when tutor (position of authority) meets with writer. On the tutoring floor, you work at becoming the writer’s peer. When the session is over, peerness does not end. Just because the writer is not present or not going to read your writing or listen to your contributions to class discussion does not mean you no longer work at being a peer to your fellow students.

Timeliness and Attendance

Timeliness and attendance are essential to our service. Tutors late more than twice or absent without notification will be suspended. Tutors who cannot attend because of an emergency need to contact both the front desk by phone (312-413-2206) and the director by email. Tutors who have more than two emergency absences will need to withdraw from tutoring. For non-emergency absences, tutors need to notify the director and the group work coordinator (Kim O’Neil: oneil.kim@gmail.com) 3 weeks in advance. If a tutor absolutely needs to miss a session, he or she needs to find another tutor as a substitute.

Full Use of Paid Hours

The most important way to use the funding we are given for tutoring is to conduct tutoring that is helpful, generous, and trustworthy. Tutors are expected to use the full 50-minutes for most sessions. Tutors are proactive about helping all writers return (including “required” and group work writers). If in a rare case a session is short, tutors should be prepared to work with another writer. Do not leave the center until your scheduled time is over. Tutors who do not have a writer participate in professional development. This activity needs to be documented on the pay sheet. Priorities for professional development are cross tutoring with a new tutor, preparing for a staff meeting, or researching writing and tutoring topics that can help improve your practice. Tutors may be asked to help with office tasks.

Length of Tutoring Session

Tutors are expected to provide writers with full 50-minute sessions. When a desk person announces that a writer has arrived, tutors are expected to go to their session immediately. Tutors should never rush through a session. (Of course, writers who need to go should not be held up deliberately.) Based on our theory of tutoring, tutors do not limit a conversation about writing to “checking a paper” or “fixing” what is wrong.

Front Desk

When tutors come for their appointments, they should let the person at the front desk know they have arrived. Do not ask the front desk “Do I have a session?” and require them to take extra steps during the busy, busy periods at the top of each tutoring hour. It is even more important that you do not look disappointed or bothered if the front desk informs you that you *do* have a session. When you are scheduled for the center, it is inappropriate to anticipate doing anything other than tutoring or tutoring-related work. Additionally, please remember that the reception area and the office area behind it are official work spaces. Please keep these areas free so that the people working there can do their work. It can be very intimidating for a first-time writer to walk in and see several people standing around the front desk, laughing and talking as if they are old friends, blocking the entrance. Please refrain from holding personal conversations at the front desk out of respect to those who may already feel uncertain or vulnerable entering the center.

Building Trust with Instructors

A goal of the Writing Center is to model conversations that create respect for faculty, students, and tutors alike. Tutors respect faculty by not estimating grades, passing judgment on assignments, or joining conversations that disparage teachers.

Tutors should not speak negatively about instructors. The place for critical thinking about assignments and teaching are in class meetings – not in the lounge. If a writer’s concern is serious, for example about harassment or another

infringement of rights, the tutor should talk to an Assistant Director immediately.

Tutors should not write on assignments that will be handed in. Writing is, of course, a part of tutoring. Instead of commenting directly on an assignment, tutors should use a piece of scrap paper.

Resources for Student Concerns:

The Counseling Center, 2010 SSB, (312) 996-3490.

The Student Ombudsperson. 3030, SSB, (312) 996-4857 An Ombudsperson investigates student complaints and helps find settlements in Grade Disputes, Student/Faculty Conflicts, Financial Aid, Housing, Sexual Assault, Stalking, or Disability Issues.

Student Mediation and Resource Center, 3030 SSB (312) 996-4857 Assists students in resolving issues with roommates, partners, and classmates. Mediation includes student peer-mediators.

Office of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Concerns, 1180 BSB. 413-8619 Consultation about personal issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

Office of Women's Affairs, 802 UH, (312) 413-1025 The office hosts the Campus Advocacy Network (CAN), which provides advocacy for victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, stalking, and hate crimes.

UIC Disability Resource, 1190 SSB, 413-2183 Voice, 413-0123 TTY Facilitates access for students through consultation with faculty and campus departments, and the provision of accommodation.

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OUR WRITING CENTER PRAXIS

To help students at UIC write with clarity and confidence.

To create a collaborative space that empowers all university students and joint learning experiences that benefit both writers and tutors.

To let go of knowledge-making that impedes social justice.

To examine the ways tutoring can be oppressive.

To understand how valuing correctness at the exclusion of content is oppressive to a writer attempting to understand the discourse of the university.

To acknowledge that oppression can be individual, unintentional, and institutional.

To learn to negotiate an interpersonal conversation across differences in gender, race, economic privilege, sexual orientation and religious belief.

To acknowledge that learning to talk about and across oppression is challenging.

To recognize complexity as an opportunity to reflect critically.

To move productively towards action and change.

