

**UR Tutoring:
Handling the Common, Difficult and
Unexpected in the Writing Center**

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Introduction

Tutoring isn't a predictable process that follows a standard formula. During any given session, a tutor could be confronted with an incoherent English paper, an unorganized biology lab, or a muddled first-draft of a CAS essay, just to name a few. And even with a semester of guidance and preparation, armed with a library of knowledge on all things tutoring, after hours of observations, tutors get stumped.

A tutor could find himself bewildered for an infinite number of reasons, but what it boils down to is this: Tutors get stuck because there is no one method of tutoring that suits all occasions. If there were, every tutee and every paper that came in to the Writing Center would be treated successfully the same way. And this, as we know, is impossible.

To assist the baffled tutor, this book includes the most common along with the most difficult and unexpected problems tutors face based on in-class readings as well as a survey of the University's writing tutors.

That being said, it is also important to mention that teaching is given to fads, and the guidance in this book is based only on current popular opinion. I welcome readers to challenge and modify this book as trends in teaching and learning change.

Most importantly, this pocket guide is not a cure-all and should not be used in place of a tutor's best judgment; this book is meant to assist the tutor who is confronted with a paper and is unsure of how to proceed.

How to Begin

This booklet is organized so that you can find the writing scenario based on the two most problematic stages of writing: pre-writing (for when the tutee walks in with the assignment and nothing else) and the rough draft (for when the tutee has a written product in hand). You can then locate the advice offered based on either the tutee's needs and questions or what you find to be most problematic within the paper itself.

Before you start tutoring according to the instructions of this manual, **you need to identify the 'level' of response appropriate for your tutee¹**. Responding to the tutee at the appropriate level is crucial for effective, efficient tutoring; it saves both you and your tutee time by not going over information he already knows or re-explaining information that you thought he knew.

To identify the problem facing the tutee as well as the level of response appropriate, use the following questions suggested by Margot Iris Soven in her book What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know:

- "What works best in your paper?"

¹ For more information on identifying the levels of tutor response, see Margot Iris Soven's What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know pp. 28 - 30.

- "What do you like best or feel most satisfied about?"
- "What works least in your paper?"
- "Which parts did you have trouble writing?"
- "Which parts don't feel right?" (46).

"Talking about the paper with the tutee, before even looking at it, can be the best way to get a sense of how the tutee is feeling about the paper, and what the...main idea is," says Writing Fellow Adrienne Sopinski. While discussing these questions, note how the tutee speaks about his writing and what words he uses to describe the problem. A more experienced writer will likely have the knowledge and vocabulary to clearly articulate his writing process. In this case, be less direct with the guidelines allowing the tutee to find and correct the problems himself. A less experienced writer might not know all of the technical writing terms to describe his paper. If the student is clearly struggling, be more direct in identifying the problems you see in the paper and suggesting how to solve them. In either case, it is up to your best judgment to identify how capable of a writer the student is and to use this guide appropriately.

Many tutors just starting out find the non-directive approach difficult. Writing Consultant Daniel Hutchins found this to be one of the hardest parts of tutoring:

As an inexperienced tutor, it's really easy to fall into the trap of...in essence, writing their assignment for them. When you're just starting out you're less secure...and I think this feeds into sometimes being too directive with your suggestions...As the old adage says, better to feed a hungry man by...teaching him to fish than by giving him some of your catch.

Hutchins brings up an important point about the role of the tutor: the goal is to teach the tutee—not edit their paper. Teaching the tutee how to identify and correct his mistakes rather than doing it for him will help the tutee to avoid making the same mistakes in future papers. It also helps to maintain student ownership of the work and leaves it up to the student to decide what to change in the paper and how to change it.

However, Hutchins also notes exceptions to this rule, saying:

I think there are definitely situations where you can be more directive than others. I have no qualms about suggesting different ways of phrasing something to a tutee who is working on an application for graduate school or for a summer internship. I give them a lot more of my own opinion than I would, say, a CAS student...With students working on essays for classes (CAS or otherwise) offering directive feedback robs them of a valuable learning experience.

Though Hutchins feels that the learning experience is still an important factor with graduate students, they are usually more experienced and confident writers. This critical difference allows the tutor to be more suggestive with wording or phrasing while leaving the ultimate decision for these changes to the tutee.

If the tutee is quiet, it can be hard not to jump in and answer your own questions for him. But remember to give the tutee time to digest

the questions and respond. Writing Consultant April Miller learned this over time:

I now...give the student lots of time to respond. If they still don't seem to have much to say, I'll try rephrasing my questions and make the questions more specific. Usually, turning to a particular sentence or passage in the text or their own writing can elicit more conversation from the tutee.

The previous questions are also meant to help you identify the biggest problem the tutee is having with the paper. Perhaps the tutee will come right out and say, "I don't know what my focus is." In this case, you can simply look under the rough draft section, find "The paper has no specific focus", and go from there. However, less experienced tutees may not know what's wrong with their papers; they only sense that something is not right. In this case, you will have to read the paper yourself to identify what needs solving, then find the portion of this book that is most appropriate.

Finally, make sure the tutee is walking away with something in hand (or mind) by the end of the session. Be it a scratch paper covered with brainstorming ideas or an action plan for revision, it is important that the tutee leaves with a solid idea of how to proceed.

Pre-Writing

A tutee walks through the door with an assignment
and nothing else—what do I do?

The tutee does not have the assignment in hand..

Begin by interviewing the tutee: ask the student what questions he has. If you need to know more to address these problems, ask the tutee about the assignment getting as much information as you can. Here are some questions that may help:

- *What class or subject is this for?*
 - If you are familiar with the class, you might also be familiar with the assignment. If you are at least familiar with the subject, you should have a general idea of what a typical paper in this discipline is looking for and some common conventions. (See Disciplinary Workshop Material)
- *Have you written for the teacher before?*
 - If he has, ask him to describe the last writing assignment and how he approached it. How did he do on the assignment (in general) and what did the teacher suggest for improvement?
- *Has the teacher told you about his writing expectations?*
 - If the tutee has not written for the teacher, ask him if he can recall any conventions, guidelines, or examples the teacher talked about in class.
- *What can you remember about the assignment?*
 - Have him explain it to you as best as he can remember. Also, how long does it have to be? Who is the intended audience? Does it have to follow MLA, APA, or any other specified format?

As a tutor, understand you can only do so much. If the tutee cannot recall anything about the assignment there is little you can do to help beyond identifying some possible topics or research questions. Ask the tutee to bring the assignment back so that you or another tutor can go through it with him.

The tutee has the assignment, but does not understand it...

Here it would be helpful to **go through the assignment with the tutee sentence by sentence**, underlining what is most important. Help the tutee identify:

- the question(s) being asked
- what genre she should use to best address the question(s)
- the intended audience of the piece
- the main objectives for writing the piece.

Make sure the tutee completely understands any writing or composition terminology discussed and how the terms relate to her assignment. You do not just want to tell her that the genre is a narrative and send her on her way, unsure of what both 'genre' and 'narrative' mean. To prevent confusion, discuss some possible paper topics with your tutee or have her develop a thesis or create an action plan with you after clarifying the assignment.

The tutee understands the assignment, but has no topic ideas...

"Usually this is a problem of lack of preparation on the writer's part," says Writing Consultant Robert Muhlneckel. "Writers sometimes don't want to do the initial work [of thinking] and want the tutor to help them skip steps."

We have all been there, and what seems to work best is **good old-fashioned brainstorming**. There are many ways to brainstorm. Author Donald M. Murray recommends these for getting started:

- *Take a piece of paper and have the tutee quickly write down whatever occurs to him about the assignment.*
 - Have him write without censoring himself. If the tutee is willing, you can get involved, too, bouncing ideas off of each other. Don't worry about the ideas being silly, dumb, or unconventional: make the tutee feel comfortable sharing his thoughts with you. Now go back over the list and see what ideas surprise the tutee. What ideas connect? These could be the beginnings of a possible paper topic (6-7).
- *Interview the tutee or have the tutee interview himself.*
 - What did he think about today while eating lunch? What irritated him today? What surprised him? The answers to these questions help the tutee discover something he knows that no one else does—something worth sharing. They can also uncover ideas that the tutee wants to explore in more depth (9).

Even more simply, **ask the tutee what interests him about the assignment**. Beneath the obvious "nothing", there is something about the subject that made him choose to take the course. "I ask the student to tell me about the subject and why they chose it or found it interesting," says Writing Consultant Heidi Bollinger. "Then I play devils advocate and pose controversial questions/hypothetical 'what if's' about the topic to the student to get them engaged in arguing about it." Talking it out may help some ideas surface.

The tutee has a topic in mind but needs help fleshing it out...

The tutee has a topic for her paper...sorta. It's a little vague, or maybe a bit too general.

Here, the best option is to **have the student talk it out**. Many tutors find that sessions improve when you say as little as possible during the first ten minutes and just let the tutee talk.

"You might have really insightful, helpful, important things to say, but hold them back. You can always say them later. Make the tutee talk for...as long as they're willing to talk," Hutchins says. Writing Fellow Lindsay Powell agrees, saying "I think a lot of times it's important to sit in awkward silence and let the student think. Sometimes students just need time to think about it and it may look like they're just sitting there waiting for you to tell them the answer."

It is also helpful to **write down what the tutee says for her** to keep track of her thoughts. Bollinger abides by this approach: "I often act as the scribe for the student. They find it easier to brainstorm verbally without having to write it all out." This might be particularly helpful for students with grapho-motor disabilities like dyslexia.

Neither tutor nor tutee understands the assignment...

The tutee doesn't understand the assignment. After careful reading and analyzing each sentence for meaning...neither do you.

Don't panic.

Remember, you are a student just like them. Just because you have the title of 'tutor' doesn't mean you can solve every problem.

If possible, have another tutor read over the assignment. If no one is clear on it's meaning, don't try to guess at it. Telling the tutee that you don't understand is wiser than helping them develop a paper about the wrong topic.

Chances are if tutee and tutor are having a hard time deciphering the assignment, many other students in the class are, too. Suggest that the student set up an appointment with the professor to clarify what is being asked. The problem here is more likely the result of a poorly written assignment than an impossible one, and if many students are having problems the professor might offer clarification in class or perhaps create an entirely new assignment.

In this case, the most helpful action you can take as a tutor is to help reduce anxiety for the tutee. **Talk through what confuses you both about the assignment and brainstorm questions to ask the professor.** Having a written list of questions to bring to the meeting will help the student feel more prepared and can also assure him that all of his inquiries will be addressed.

The Rough Draft

There is some form of written product in hand—how should I handle it?

The tutee has not yet read the piece aloud...

Sharing, or reading aloud, is one of the most popular techniques for both writers and tutors, yet many students are not aware of this technique and have never employed it. For this student, **sharing and responding is a great way to get started**: It can help students catch grammatical or usage errors, assess the flow of the piece, see if the writing is too wordy, or find areas where their thoughts don't seem to make sense.

To get started, ask the tutee if she is comfortable reading her piece aloud. If not, you can read her piece to her. Either way, here are some general guidelines to follow:

- *Note places where the reader pauses.*
 - If you or the tutee gets caught up reading at any point in the paper, make sure to note that section. After reading all the way through, you can go back and see what caused the problem: bad grammar? A confusing or wordy sentence? Or simply a need for a pause? Noting and fixing these problems will help the flow and general understanding of the paper.
- *Interrupt if you have questions.*
 - If the tutee is reading, don't hesitate to interrupt her to ask questions about the piece if you are confused or need clarification. Other readers are likely to have the same questions, and this will help the tutee find places in the paper she needs to work on.
- *Be interrupted.*
 - If you are reading, ask the tutee to interrupt you if she hears anything she wants to change or come back to after reading the rest of the piece.

Before you get into the habit of starting every session with a method such as this, it is important that the method works for you as well as the tutee. I personally have a hard time assessing the issues in a paper when it is read to me; I need to see it and sometimes read things quietly to myself to truly process the information. Reading aloud can certainly be beneficial, but to help the tutee to the best of your ability the chosen method of tutoring must work for the both of you. If you feel that reading aloud is the most helpful step in tutoring a given paper but have a hard time with taking in the paper solely by ear, ask the tutee if you can sit next to her and read along silently while she reads aloud.

The tutee has written the paper, but is unsure of what he wants to say...

You have read through the piece, and it seems as if the student wasn't sure of what he was going to say. The conclusion is much clearer than the introduction, or perhaps what the introduction says and what the paper covers are entirely different.

"I find students frequently have trouble expressing a clear thesis that matches up with the points of analysis in the body of the paper itself," says Miller.

One place to look for the research question and thesis in these sorts of papers is the conclusion. Frequently, students will start writing papers without fully thinking them through. By the time they reach the end of the paper, they have an idea of what they want to say and there the thesis appears.

In this situation, it's most important to **make sure the tutee fully discovers and develops what he wants to say**. A great way of doing this is with questions and **'sayback'**. Sayback utilizes active listening with the tutor "[saying] back" what he hears the tutee "getting at" in an open, questioning fashion that invites the tutee to restate what she means. This allows the writing to continue "to cook, bubble, percolate. It helps the writer think about what [he] hasn't yet said or even thought of" (Elbow and Belanoff 22).

You can try sayback in the following steps:

1. *Put the paper aside and just talk with the tutee about the assignment.*
 - o "I usually approach this problem by asking them to identify the question or research problem they are trying to answer in...writing the paper," says Miller.
2. *Ask the tutee about his answer to the question.*
 - o "Most effective for me is to ask them to...tell me what they are thinking, out loud, ignoring...the paper. Those simple-phrased sentences really get at the heart of the topic," says Writing Fellow Elizabeth Campisi. Ask him what he wants to say, or what he was trying to say in his paper. Why does he feel this way? What evidence does he have to support his opinion? Tell the tutee what you sense his goals are and what strategies you feel he is using to achieve those goals with language (Elbow and Belanoff 22). Communicating these ideas aloud can help clarify the thoughts behind them.
3. *Next, try writing up a quick outline with the tutee.*
 - o With all of his thoughts and intentions clear in his mind, he can organize them on paper. Start with the thesis and find the main pieces of evidence to support it then organize them in a logical fashion: chronologically, from least to most important, etc.
4. *Finally, go through the paper and see how it follows the outline.*
 - o If you have time, go through the paper together and see much of it you can keep and how much is unnecessary or in the wrong place. With an outline in hand, the tutee can also do this on his own.

The tutee wants to know if her idea is being clearly communicated...

A tutee comes in with a paper and a clear idea of what she wants it to express to the reader. Is her point coming through?

The best way to handle this scenario is by using **'summary'**. Summary, like sayback, can help the tutee find the exact words, thoughts, or emphasis she was looking for.

Summarizing is easy: **tell the tutee in one sentence what you think the paper is saying**. If this is not what the tutee is trying to communicate, it may be because the paper lacks a thesis (pg. 19) or specific focus (pg. 18). If you have simply misunderstood what the tutee is trying to communicate, help the tutee clarify her point by talking the idea out and developing a more effective way to efficiently convey the tutee's thoughts.

The tutee wants to know how the paper works for the tutor...

Writing Consultant Jenny Douglas said this is the most common problem she sees in her tutoring sessions. "Especially with students who haven't been tutored before, they often come into the room, put the paper down in front of me and say, 'Can you, you know, just look this over and see if it flows?'"

If this is the case, Douglas suggests **asking the tutee a lot of questions to identify the specific area of the paper that needs attention**. Here are some she suggests for narrowing down a general request:

- *What is the assignment?*
 - If the tutee can't tell you what he is supposed to be writing about, then you should go through the assignment with him to make sure he understands it. See pg. 7.
- *What are you writing about? Can you summarize your argument, story, or writing purpose?*
 - If the tutee can't answer this question very clearly, it is a classic case of the student who was written the paper but still isn't sure what he wants to say. See pg. 11.
- *What is your thesis?*
 - Writing Fellow Julie Herman finds that this problem generally comes from a lack of a thesis statement:

"Once a good thesis is established, we generally go through paragraph by paragraph and make sure that each piece of evidence relates back to the thesis—sometimes all the evidence points to a totally new thesis, and if that is the case, we adjust the thesis statement. If each paragraph fits the thesis, then the paper is sure to flow."

For more help with thesis problems, see pg. 19.
- *How do you feel about the overall organization right now?*
 - Chances are if the tutee hasn't thought about how he organized the paper, this could be the main source of problems. See pg. 20.

Another potential technique Elbow and Belanoff suggest is **"movie of the tutor's mind"**, where the tutor reads through the piece, either aloud or to himself, pausing to talk about what he is thinking, feeling or questioning as he reads the piece.

The tutee brings the paper in the night before it's due...

Procrastination: the perpetual state of many college students. So how can you help a tutee finish her paper...the night before its due?

The key here is to **"help them with the areas that they indicate"** to be sure you aren't trying to work in too much into one session, which could overwhelm the tutee and take up valuable time (Sopinski).

"But," Sopinski adds, "also **suggest other revisions.**" You might not have time to get to everything in the paper, and the tutee probably won't either, but at least you can point out areas that have problems and suggest improvements. While they might not have time to fix it before its due, these suggestions may be helpful for their next paper.

Since you are under time constraints, **reading just the introduction and conclusion** will help you to identify if the writer has a consistent focus, strong thesis, and evidence to support these ideas.

Besides that, **encourage good writing habits.** Many less experienced writers believe that writing is a gift; that a writer can sit down and have a flawless paper done in 20 minutes. Remind the tutee that this is not true; even the most talented writers have tricks to get their writing done. Here are some tips Murray suggests for producing consistent writing:

- *Make writing a daily habit.*
 - "Productivity is the result of regularity," Murray advises (27). And it doesn't have to be dry, academic discourse: journals are a great alternative.
- *"Establish achievable deadlines" (27).*
 - If you know you are a procrastinator, make a deadline a few days before the due date to allow yourself time to go over the paper and make adjustments. For longer projects, write a given number of pages by each week's end to avoid writing the entire 20-page paper the night before it's due.
- *"Break a writing assignment into small daily tasks" (28).*
 - You will work more efficiently if you break down the assignment into smaller parts. Working on each part for a maximum of an hour and a half and taking breaks in between sections will help you to avoid burn out and allow you to recollect your thoughts before you move on to the next task.
- *"Know tomorrow's task today" (28).*
 - Even if you don't plan on starting your paper right away, at least look over the assignment and figure out what it is asking. That way, even if you put it away for a while, you can ponder the question and prepare yourself to answer it.
- *Have a special place for writing.*
 - As writing becomes more of a habit, the surroundings begin to matter. Many writers have special rooms or areas that they find most conducive for writing. A quiet area that lacks many distractions would be a good bet—perhaps a room without wireless internet?

The tutee does not want to cooperate...

The tutee comes in with a piece and says she needs your help. Unfortunately, she won't listen to a thing you say.

Rather than fight it out, try this:

1. *Begin by asking what the tutee wants help with and address those areas.*
 - o For the resistant tutee, "my strategy is to keep asking questions until I get enough information to be able to help with the assignment," says Writing Consultant Amy Fenstermaker.
2. *Explain your suggestion and how you believe it would improve the paper.*
 - o If the tutee argues with your advice, the best you can do is accept her point of view but also explain where you are coming from. Offering a few different possibilities for improvement might also help the tutee feel like she has more control and thus be less defensive. Also, remind the tutee that you are only offering advice and that she does not have to take it if she does not want to.

It's important to keep in mind Elbow and Belanoff's first paradox of responding: "the reader is always right; yet the writer is always right" (4). This paradox reminds us that, as readers, our reactions to what we are reading are true for us and thus unarguable. However, it is the writer who gets to decide whether or not to use this feedback. It is as senseless for the writer to argue about reader reaction as it is for the reader to try to force change upon the writer.

In the end, don't let the tutee tell you that you are a bad tutor if she does not like your advice. Herman sums it up well:

At first, this student's arguments made me feel bad and inadequate as a tutor. I tried to make my points as gently as possible, while I was internally getting upset. Looking back on it, if the student did not want my help, than they did not have to accept it—I was just doing my job to the best of my ability, which I stand by.

The tutee is an ESL student...

Many students who visit writing centers speak English as a second language and some find the writing process to be extremely difficult. Tutors also find these situations particularly trying and most UR tutors cited this as the most difficult scenario they face in the Writing Center.

"It's just overwhelming when a student comes in, and every sentence needs work," says Douglas. How does she deal with it? "To me, the best way to deal with this feeling is first to **realize that not every problem can be solved in one session**. Encourage the student to make standing appointments or come back on a regular basis."

Besides that, there are many theories on how to best handle the ESL tutee². Below are some techniques that most tutors surveyed agreed upon:

- *A good first step is having the tutee read the paper aloud.*
 - Many ESL students are better English speakers than they are English writers, and saying their words aloud may help them find grammar errors without your help. "...Asking students to read their own work aloud helps—they often figure out ways to rewrite their sentences on their own" (Bollinger).
- *Talk about what worked well in the paper.*
 - "I find it best to make sure to point out strengths of the writer—style, voice, compelling arguments— before getting to the root of the problems," says Campisi. "...It seems much less like...'I know everything and you're a bad writer' to a more friendly, interactive situation." Knowing to use these techniques in the future will also help them gradually improve their writing.
- *Have them talk you through their ideas.*
 - Writing Consultant Ann Marshall suggests: "Take out a sheet of paper and have them talk you through their ideas and write down what they say. As they begin to talk and you write, what usually happens is that their argument does take shape and you can definitely build on that."
- *Concentrate on one aspect of the paper.*
 - Douglas suggests concentrating on one aspect of the paper, such as noun-verb agreement, or going through one paragraph and identifying errors that might be trends throughout the paper. Writing Consultant Rachel Lee agrees: "I generally try to identify an overall pattern (such as article misuse) and then explain the grammatical rule which applies." However, in the end it is most important to address what the student asks for help in, not what the rough draft suggests about proficiency.

Remember to **be directive; tell the tutee the error he is making, show him how to fix it, and then let him try to fix a few on his own.** This allows you to "help ESL students without crossing the 'plagiarism boundary'," a difficult problem that Writing Fellow Allison Goldstein found can come up in ESL tutoring situations.

Soven also recommends the following:

- "Give directions plainly. Watch students' expressions and ask questions to see if they comprehend explanations." Ask the tutee to give an example of what you have just explained to make sure you both understand each other.
- "If a student doesn't understand a comment or explanation, rephrase it."
- "If you have difficulty understanding an ESL student, watch for facial expressions as he speaks."

And also work on these "Tips for Tutors of ESL Students":

² For more information regarding ESL writing and tutoring, try Understanding ESL Writers by Ilona Leki, "The ESL Student and the Revision Process: Some Insights from Schema Theory" by Ann M. Johns, or further reading Soven's What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know (Chapter 6).

- "Brush up on your grammar."
- "Watch for nuances. Sometimes ESL students get words from the dictionary which will have peculiar connotations in their papers."
- "Watch for plagiarism. This doesn't necessarily happen on purpose. In some cultures borrowing from other sources is accepted."
- Be sympathetic and encouraging.
- "Be patient. You will probably need to devote more time to an ESL student" (Soven 108-109).

Douglas's advice sums it up: "Don't expect the student to leave with a fluently written paper," she recommends. In the end, your job is to have the student walk away having learned something, not to edit the paper to perfection.

The paper is writer-based..

One habit that all writers need to adopt is writing in reader-based prose. Reader-based prose is writing intended to be read and understood by an audience besides the writer.

Its opposite is writer-based prose, or writing that neither anticipates a reader nor answers his questions³. Writer-based issues "include imprecise language (especially vague terms in the thesis statement), fragments, run-ons, not enough analysis and/or explanation of evidence, and missing or ineffective connections among the primary points and overall argument (including missing transitions between sentences or paragraphs)" (Lee).

Hutchins says this is the most common problem he faces: "The stock peptalk [sic] that I find myself giving over and over...tries to get [the tutee] to see the needs of an external reader, not to assume that the reader will just know what they mean."

Because writer-based prose is such a vast concept that covers many problems, there is no step by step guide for tutoring in this scenario. However, many writing tutors I surveyed reported writer-based prose as one of the most common problems, and I summarized their methods for handling the issue below.

The reader-reaction response seems to work well in handling "writer-based prose" problems. Lee recommends **explaining your responses to the reader**—your "confusion over an imprecise term, or why the run-on sentence is hard to follow, or the difference between what [you] expect as a reader and what a particular sentence might actually say."

Follow up these questions by **asking the tutee to clarify what he was trying to say**. "I take notes on what he says and 99% of the time, the writer is able to provide the solution to the 'problem' themselves," says Lee.

Writing Fellow Kumiko Tanaka sums up her technique well:

³ For more information exploring the topics of writer-based prose and reader-based prose, see Linda Flower's "Writer-Based Prose".

I tend to "play the dumb tutor" and point out any sentences that are confusing due to lack of support in evidence or lack of connection to the thesis. Most students are much better at speaking their argument than writing it out; my role as a tutor is to help bridge the speech (writer-based) and writing (reader-based).

The paper has several different problems...

"When a paper is so overwhelmingly in need of help and you don't know where to begin, **remember to ask the student 'What brings you here?' and get them to focus on one or two things,**" recommends Campisi. "You get a lot more accomplished than thinking about the entire paper."

Powell has a similar approach: "I deal with it by only looking at content and organization in the first reading and pointing out a few grammar issues." After helping the student with the biggest issues (content and organization), Powell helps the tutee with a few grammar errors, encouraging her to try a few on her own and to come back if she needs more help.

In essence, the best way to handle this situation is by **focusing on the big picture rather than trying to fix everything.** Even in the case of grammar, "it can be better to go over a short passage more slowly rather than trying to go over the whole paper" (Bollinger).

The paper has no specific focus...

Focus holds the theme of your piece—its point and goal. It is essential that all writers, including your tutee, understand how to find and maintain focus.

For the paper with no focus:

- *Set the paper aside and just talk to the tutee.*
 - Ask him about the assignment, what he talked about in his paper, and what he wants to say. Help the tutee discover the dominant meaning of the draft and then build on it together.

For the paper with many foci:

1. *Begin by making a list.*
 - Go through the paper and have the tutee find all of the potential foci.
2. *Organize the evidence.*
 - Go back though and take each piece of evidence and assign it with whatever focus it supports. Perhaps one focus will come up as dominant—or maybe evaluating the paper will help him discover a single, even stronger focus that wasn't in the original paper.

Work with the tutee using these three skills that Murray believes are essential to focus:

- *Selection*
 - The writer must **select what is significant** and leave behind all that doesn't contribute to its greater meaning.
- *Emphasis*
 - The writer's job is to **"make sure that what is most important is clear to the reader"** (46).
- *Clarity*
 - Clarity **brings the selection and emphasis into focus and communicates it to the reader** by "anticipating and answering the reader's questions, defining and documenting, developing and clarifying word by word" (46).

At the end of the session, the tutee should be able to state his focus in a single sentence. With the focus in mind, the tutee can develop a thesis and create a coherent, meaningful paper.

The paper does not have a thesis...

"The most common problem I find is that students often do not phrase their thesis clearly enough," says Goldstein. "They don't make clear what it is their paper is arguing because the argument is not clear enough in their minds. Therefore, they include evidence in their paper that does not necessarily apply to their argument and often fail to present the evidence they do have effectively."

The thesis is the backbone of most papers, so making sure the student gets this part down is essential. **Here are some steps to developing or uncovering a strong thesis:**

1. *Begin by reading the assignment.*
 - Find out what the assignment asks the student to do by underlining the key words. Next, have the student describe the assignment in her own words to make sure you are both on the same page. "Talk about how the introductory paragraph needs to say something about all of these topics" (Soven 73). Be aware that some writing, like narratives, may not require a thesis.
2. *Ask the tutee what her thesis is.*
 - "Often, [tutee's] theses are lurking amongst their introduction paragraphs and are not incredibly clear," says Writing Fellow Meghan Gilligan. "I like to start by...asking the student to tell me...what the main point of their paper is." Now is a good time to "have a general conversation in which you help the student clarify his ideas about the topic" (Soven 73).
3. *Make the thesis specific and clear.*
 - Once the student has told you what her thesis is, have her find it in her paper. Compare the written and spoken theses and revise them until there is one solid thesis (Goldstein). "If I think they have a weak thesis, I ask the 'so what' question. What does your thesis imply for X? Are there positive outcomes, negative outcomes? What would your opposition say?" says Writing Consultant Shirley Ricker. A strong thesis should be very specific, not only stating your opinion but also why it matters.

4. *Support the thesis with evidence.*

- o A strong thesis needs solid ground to stand on. "Ask the student to...go through body paragraphs, seeing if the thesis is or is not supported," says Sopinski. If it's not, have the student tell you why she believes her thesis is true and then find evidence to back it up.

In the end, "be sure that [the tutee] has rewritten the introduction or at least has some notes when the conference ends" (Soven 73).

The paper is disordered or lacks structure...

The structure of the paper can be as important to reader understanding as the content itself. Because it is so critical, there are a few different ways to analyze the structure, some more appropriate for certain genres than others.

Many tutors, such as Miller, find that **using a reverse outline is effective** "to help students develop stronger logical movement between ideas and a clearer sense of the purpose of each paragraph." This technique works best with most traditional academic papers seen in college: a paper with a thesis supported by a series of claims.

To create a reverse outline, follow Miller's steps:

1. *Identify the thesis.*
2. *Identify claims that prove the thesis.*
 - o "I will usually write on the white board and get them to identify three-five claims that they think are essential to proving their overall thesis," says Miller.
3. *Try to find these claims in the paper.*
 - o Once the claims are identified, look through the paper with the tutee to see if the claims are evident and well supported.
4. *Make each claim the "thesis" of the paragraph.*
 - o "I also encourage them to think about most paragraphs as having their own 'mini-thesis' or arguable claim," says Miller. "This notion of claim-based paragraphs usually helps them discern the focus for the paragraph and encourages them to provide more thorough explanation of the evidence to support that claim-based topic."

In analyzing the argument of a persuasive piece, Crucius and Channel offer a simplified version of the Toulmin Method of argument analysis:

1. *Analyze the claim.*
 - o First, **identify the claim** by asking 'What statement is the author defending?' It should be both specific and detailed.
 - o Next, **look for qualifiers** by asking 'How is the claim qualified?' "Careful arguers are generally wary of making absolute claims...Qualifying words or phrases are often used to restrict a claim and improve its defensibility" (32).
 - o Now **find the exceptions** to the claim by asking 'In what cases or circumstances would the writer not press his claim?'

2. *Analyze the reasons.*
 - o Begin by **listing the reasons** the author gives in support of the thesis. Ask yourself 'Why is the writer advancing this claim?' Reasons can also have qualifiers.
 - o **Examine the reasons** by simply asking yourself 'Are they really good reasons? Is the reason relevant to the thesis?' "No other step is as important in assessing the logic of an argument," say Crusius and Channel (33).
3. *Analyze the evidence.*
 - o **List the evidence**, asking 'What kinds of evidence are offered as support for each reason?' Keep in mind that not all reasons, such as moral codes or principles, require substantial evidence to be effective.
 - o Finally, **examine the evidence**, asking 'Is the evidence good?' and 'Is it relevant to the reason it supports?'
4. *Note refutations.*
 - o Not all papers include refutations, but if the author chooses to include them then consider the following questions. One, 'What refutations does the writer offer?' Then, 'How does the writer attack each objection?'

In papers where a thesis and supportive claims may not be necessary, as in a narrative, Joseph M. Williams lays out basic guidelines for creating a cohesive paper inside the back cover of Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace:

- "In your introduction, motivate readers with a problem they care about."
- "Make your point clearly, usually at the end of that introduction."
- "In that point, introduce the important concepts in what follows."
- "Make everything that follows relevant to your point."
- "Make it clear where each part/section begins and ends."
- "Open each part/section with a short introductory segment."
- "Put the point of each part/section at the end of that opening segment."
- "Order parts in a way that makes clear and visible sense to your readers."
- "Begin sentences constituting a passage with consistent topic/subjects."
- "Create cohesive old-new links between sentences."

Murray also lays out some steps for outlining after writing:

- *Outline After Writing*
 - o "Write out the questions asked by each section, and then look to see if they are answered in the sections that follow" (126).
 - o "Write down the major section headings to see the line—the logical order—that is the skeleton of the draft" (126).
- *Adapt the Structure*
 - o "Once you see the structure of the draft, you can often imagine the structure the reader needs," Murray says (126). He advises moving paragraphs around, writing and taking away paragraphs to create a clearer structure.
- *Redesign the Structure*

- o If the structure needs an overhaul, Murray suggests working backward. "Write down at the bottom of a page what you want the reader to think and feel after reading the draft. Pick a starting point in the material that is as close to the end as possible while including all the information the reader needs to arrive at the conclusion you have written. Note the three to five pieces of information the reader needs, in sequence, to arrive at your ending" (126-127).

The paper has poor sentence structure/stylistic problems...

The tutee hands you her paper and the sentences are jumbled, wordy or unclear.

First of all, "be sure that you clear up confusion about the meaning of [style]. Style involves the choice of words you use to talk about a subject." Words and phrases like formal, informal, academic, and too wordy apply to style. "Explain that what distinguishes stylistic concerns from grammar errors is that grammar errors are violations of the structural conventions of standard English" (Soven 77).

Powell finds that what works best is "to show them examples the first few times and then see if they can pick up on their own errors." If she can't always identify these aspects of a sentence, have her set up another appointment and fix what she can in the mean time.

Here are a few tips for constructing a clear sentence, again as suggested by Williams inside the front cover of Style:

- *"Use subjects to name the characters" in your sentences.*
- *"Use verbs to name their important actions."*
- *"Open your sentences with familiar...information."*
- *"Begin sentences constituting a passage with consistent topic/subjects."*
- *"Get to the main verb quickly:*
 - o Avoid long introductory phrases and clauses.
 - o Avoid long abstract subjects.
 - o Avoid interrupting the subject-verb connection."
- *"Push new, complex...information to the end of the sentence."*

Remember, these are just general guidelines, not rules. If the sentence in question does not follow these guidelines but is still understood and enhances the meaning of the paper, then do not change it to better fit a certain formula.

The paper has grammatical or punctuation errors...

Before you address grammar, punctuation, and spelling, make sure that the rest of the paper is pretty solid. It would be a waste of time to fix all those grammatical mistakes if the tutee is just going to cut most of them out while fixing the larger issues in the paper.

Ignoring grammar hard for you? Goldstein sympathizes, but she found a good way to focus on the task at hand: "In order for me not to see these mistakes, I may have the student read the paper aloud to me while I take notes on its contents. This way, I can listen for content without being hindered by misplaced punctuation."

If **grammar or usage errors** are the biggest problems, first **take care of what you can by having the student read aloud**. Below are the most common grammatical errors, and reading aloud helps weed these out:

- Error in agreement between subject and verb
 - Ex: "The advantages for women as equals, except in the case of equal pay for equal work is very few."
- Error in agreement between subject and pronoun
 - Ex: "Have the tutee read their paper aloud."

"Punctuation errors, unlike errors in agreement, may not be solved by asking the student to read problematic sentence aloud" (Soven 79). Her suggestion? "Review the rules of punctuation and study the 'common error' list." **Know the rules, teach the rules to the tutee, and then have him fix his own mistakes⁴.**

Unfortunately, not all grammatical or punctuation rules are as clear cut as we might like them to be. In this case, use your best judgment and use punctuation meaningfully. Though perhaps the usage is 'incorrect' according to the given rules, using punctuation in such a way will focus on enhancing the effectiveness of the writing and conveying the greater meaning of the piece.

Gilligan uses a similar approach: "I often ask students why they chose the punctuation they did in the first place, and then talk about ways we could change it (and the effect of such changes)." Try to stay away from too many technical phrases, though: "I notice that if I get too technical in my grammar explanation (i.e. mention independent or dependent clauses) many students clam up and say they don't know grammar." Easing the tutee into it by using a few examples may help.

The paper needs to be enriched, developed, or lengthened..

A tutee comes in with a great five-page paper...but it needs to be seven pages.

In situations like this, Elbow and Belanoff suggest two techniques: '**center of gravity**' and '**what is almost said/what do you want to hear more about**'. Both techniques will help the writer to enrich areas of the paper to help develop and lengthen the piece, but center of gravity might be more appropriate for earlier drafts.

To use center of gravity:

1. *Begin by reading the piece aloud.*

⁴ Dr. Cornelia Paraskevas, Professor of Linguistics at Western Oregon University, has a punctuation website linked from <http://www.wou.edu/las/humanities/english/paraskevas.htm>.

- o This will not only introduce you to the text but also help the tutee hear the piece differently; this may lead to thoughts and questions he hadn't previously considered.
- 2. *Go through, picking out "rich and interesting parts of [the] piece that [he] might have neglected, but which might be worth exploring and developing"* (Elbow and Belanoff 7).
 - o The tutee may be interested in something he wrote but didn't build upon, or perhaps there was something he wrote that made him think, but he didn't bother following through.
- 3. *Discuss these areas.*
 - o Talk with the tutee about this area and how it can be explored and more deeply connected to the topic. Hopefully, this technique will help the tutee see the piece in a different light and bring up suggestions for major revisions

For 'what is almost said', the process is similar:

1. *Begin by reading the piece aloud.*
 - o Again, this will hopefully help the tutee hear the piece differently.
2. *Go through the paper with the tutee and discuss areas of the paper that left you asking questions, or perhaps alluded to something that wasn't explicitly written.*
 - o For example, a character is mentioned in passing that doesn't seem to connect to the rest of the paper; perhaps the paper puts together all the evidence, but doesn't come out and state their conclusion.
3. *Write down his responses for him.*
 - o As the tutee answers these questions and talks through these ideas, write down his responses so he can continue his train of thought, uninterrupted. He can later look back at what he said and build upon these ideas in his paper.

The paper is outside of your discipline...

A tutee comes in with a science paper...and you are a film major. Being confronted with a paper outside of your discipline can be intimidating, but you don't have to be a rocket scientist to help them out.

First, try **to remember what you know about the conventions of the discipline** from our class workshops and see if the student abides by these conventions. If you can't remember any conventions, ask the tutee about the teacher's expectations for the paper.

Besides the conventions, **all papers should clearly communicate their ideas to the reader** no matter the discipline. A well-written science paper can be understood by those who don't study science. In this way, treat the paper like any other paper, making sure you can **identify the main point of the paper and can follow the reasoning behind it**⁵.

Finally, don't feel bad when you just can't answer the question.

⁵ For more help with clarity in science writing, see "The Science of Scientific Writing" by Gopen and Swan and "Science and Technology" from William Zinsser's On Writing Well.

"Sometimes I still feel stumped when a student has specific questions about where content should be placed," admits Douglas, "but I can always refer the student back to the TA or the instructor."

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