

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING TUTORS

As with any tutoring session, always **begin by introducing yourself** to the student and asking him/her to sign in on your contact sheet.

Remember that we're really careful with **keeping records** at the L.E.C., so be sure to get the student's ID number as well as the course number. Make note also of the amount of time that you spent with the student.

Remember that many students are nervous about working with a tutor; they may well be frustrated that they have not had the success that they'd like with writing. Others are anxious to work with you and are relieved to have someone to help with their paper. **Be sensitive** to the messages you get from the student and **be supportive** of their efforts. Take your cue from the student as to how formal you should be.

Now, ask the student how you can help. Let the student describe why he/she has come for help with writing.

Some responses to expect:

I just need help with grammar and punctuation (probably the #1 response)
I just need someone to look over it
I need to be sure it flows
I don't know where to start

Responses that you won't hear, but you probably should:

I'm not sure that I have enough evidence to support my thesis
I'm not sure that my paragraphs are coherent or unified

Responses that you probably won't hear, but you should understand:

I'm nervous about my writing class
I never had this much trouble writing in high school
I feel really frustrated about my work

Regardless of the response that you get, next, **ask the student for the assignment** handout from the instructor. If he/she has it, take a quick look at it, but ask the student to tell you what he/she understands the assignment requires. If the student does not have the assignment, ask him/her to describe the assignment. Let the student take control by allowing him/her to explain what the paper requires.

Let's consider how to respond to those possible requests:

I just need help with grammar and punctuation

This is probably the most common response you'll get to the "How can I help you" question. Chances are that the paper needs more than this, or could well benefit from more, so I'll ask something like, "OK, but if I see something in the organization or evidence that just breaks my heart, can I tell you about it?" (You can use your own form of this. The idea is to **ask the student's permission to offer some comments**. I've rarely had a student say "no"; most are anxious to hear the comments I have, especially if they're potentially heart-breaking issues. 😊 If, however, the student says that this is all he/she wants, then this is all you do. **This is the student's work**. We respect the request.)

Next, **ask when the paper is due**. If it's due the next day (more likely than not), keep in mind that it's just not fair to give the student too much "big issue" commentary when they simply don't have time to work with it. Encourage the student to come earlier for the next paper. Don't be preachy; just make the suggestion almost as an aside. (We're encouraging better Time Management here.)

Skim the paper. You're looking for an overall picture of the paper's content and organization. Don't let the student just sit there for long and watch you read; how annoying would that be? You'll get quicker with practice!

Do a quick **overview of the paper's organization**. Ask where the thesis is. Ask the student to identify the topic sentences in the paragraphs. If you see a problem, explain it to the student. The thesis uses the key term "strength," but your paragraphs don't seem to focus on that."

Now, start looking at the paper for that "grammar and punctuation help." Some tutors find it helpful to **read the paper aloud** to the student. I like this because it by hearing the paper in someone else's voice, the student will catch a number of errors just by listening to the sentences. You'll hear students say "Wait, that doesn't sound right." (I'll bet you've missed errors in your own paper because you read what should be there instead of what actually is there.) Other tutors ask the student to read the paper aloud to them. Hearing the paper, again, is really helpful in catching errors. Take your cue from the student as to which technique might be more appropriate.

When you encounter an error, stop. Try: "There's a problem here." Often the student will recognize the problem and correct it. More often, they'll indicate that they don't see the problem. **DO NOT simply tell the student what to change**. By doing so, you, not the student, are doing the work. Explain the problem.

For instance, “This is a problem with subject verb agreement. Your subject is singular, but your verb is plural. How could you fix this?” (You’re going to remember terminology you haven’t used in a long time!) Give the student the opportunity to figure out how to correct the error. If they’re not able to do so, make a suggestion. I always try to offer more than one suggestion; otherwise, the student may automatically write down what I say instead of making a choice. **The student must make the changes to the text. Use your finger to point at the problem. The student writes on the paper; you do not.**

If you want to write a sample sentence to illustrate a point, do it on a separate piece of paper or on the back of a page of the student’s paper. For instance, I’ll frequently use “CS, fanboy CS.” to explain the “complete sentence, coordinating conjunction complete sentence” pattern.

Here’s another example: “You have two complete sentences here, and you’ve connected them with ‘and.’” You’ve got a comma splice here. Any ideas for how you could correct it?” (Be prepared to explain comma splice and to offer multiple suggestions for how the error could be corrected.) I’ve given you some materials for basic explanations of grammar and punctuation errors; if you encounter a problem you can’t explain, consult the reference books in the Writing Center. If I’m here, ask me; if there’s another writing tutor working ask him or her. We’re a team here! Or, use your laptop to look up an explanation. This can be a great opportunity to show the student how to look up the explanation him/herself.

The **second time** you see the same error, tell the student “OK, we saw this one earlier. Let’s look at how you corrected that.” This process should be interactive.

If you see the same sentence pattern, and the student has punctuated it correctly or avoided the same grammar mistake, point out the sentence. **Acknowledge the student’s success:** “Good job, here.” Or “See, this is that same type of sentence, and you have it correct here.” You’ll want to take the time to point out sentences that work particularly well: “That word choice is really powerful” or “You did a good job of using parallel structure here.” Remember to support the student’s work.

You can explain each new error and **depend on the student** more and more to notice the ones that you’ve already seen. (If the student I’m working with doesn’t catch an error that we’ve seen a few times, I’ll just stop reading. The student usually takes a closer look at the sentence we’ve just completed.)

If the paper is long (more than 4 pages or so) or if you have other students waiting, tell the student that it’s time for him/her to look over it alone for a bit. Occasionally, you’ll have a student who brings in a 10-12 page paper and expects you to go through the whole paper. Even if you don’t have another student waiting, this is probably not a good idea. Work with the student for a few pages; then sit back and supervise him/her while he/she continues the work. If the student asks if a sentence is correct, you can verify that they’ve made the right changes. You are not

a proofreader; you show the student how to spot the errors and explain how to correct them. You do not do it for them.

I just need someone to look over it

Probably second only to the grammar and punctuation request, this request suggests to me that the student's instructor may have recommended that he/she come for help or that the student's earlier papers have been returned with many marks indicating errors or with a grade that the student finds frustrating. The request isn't quite as specific as the grammar and punctuation request, but much of your work is the same.

Do all of the above, but as you're looking at the paper, **pay more attention to the paragraphs**. First, be sure that the paragraphs are coherent. Do they stick to a single topic? If not, point it out to the student. Try: "You seem to be drifting here." Or "I feel like you're losing track of your topic sentence." **Encourage the student to make a note in the margin of the paper** to work with this issue.

Also, pay attention to the evidence that the student uses to support a point. One of the most frequent problems that you'll see is a paragraph that is almost all summary instead of explanation or analysis. Try: "Hmm...you seem to be just telling me what happens in the text. But you're not telling me why these details are important." Again, encourage the student to make a note in the margin.

If the student is interested (some aren't), and if time permits, **let the student choose on of the paragraphs to work on more closely**.

I need to be sure it flows

I always ask students with this request to explain to me what they mean by "flow." I've received a wide range of answers including word choice, style, grammar and punctuation (again) and the occasional "oh, you know."). These lead me to follow the same pattern as above with special **attention to transitions and coherence**.

Point out, for example, a sentence that begins with no reference to the previous sentence or an example that it not introduced as an example. If the student can't suggest a change, be prepared to offer several yourself. For instance, don't just suggest "Moreover." **A single suggestion can be more of a prescription**. Give a few: "moreover, in addition, also, . . ." Remember that the student may not choose the transition that you would use; **it's not your paper**. Unless the student is choosing a term that doesn't make logical sense (however instead of moreover, for instance), just comment, "That works."

I don't know where to start

This is usually a more relaxed session, as students don't tend to come in with this request if the paper is due the next day. **Ask the student if he/she has had a conference with the instructor.** Encourage this by explaining that you're happy to help the student do some brainstorming, but the instructor is the expert.

Look at the assignment. Ask the student to tell you what's been discussed in class about the assignment. Do a lot of listening; encourage the student to do a lot of talking. Listen carefully so that you'll be able to repeat the student's description.

If the assignment involves a text, ask the student to tell you about the text. Chances are you will not be familiar with the text. You can't be expected to be; there are a wide variety of texts in writing classes. If the student has not read the text involved, the tutoring session ends. Try "I'm so sorry, but I can't help you yet. Come back when you've finished the reading." If you know the text, but the student has not read it, the result is the same. **The student must do the reading.**

If the student has read the text, again, do lots of listening. And, start to ask some questions (see the section in the Tutor Manual on Strategic Questioning). Try: "so, would that fit with the assignment?" Or, "does that sound like the point you told me about earlier?" Your goal is to repeat the details so that the student can be more confident in seeing how much he/she does know.

As you're discussing, encourage the student to start writing down the ideas. **(Remember that the student always does the writing.)** We know that putting things in writing helps to capture and clarify ideas. The student will feel that he/she is making progress once something is on paper.

If there is another student waiting for your help, this is a good time to allow the first student to work independently for a while. Tell him/her that you're going to work with the next student, but that you'll be at the next table (or wherever you'll be) when he/she has put together more ideas.

If there's not another student waiting, but you feel that the work has stalled, let the student do some thinking and note-taking on his/her own. Explain that you'll be ready to start working again as soon as the student has put together a few ideas.

You can also be helpful by sharing some of the techniques you use to develop ideas. Here's an opportunity to talk with students about how to use the notes they've taken in class or how to read the text for more than just content.