

What Do I Do During a Tutoring Session?

Ben Wetherbee, Sept. 2019

First, a few philosophical principles about the job of the writing tutor (inspired largely by Stephen M. North's "The Idea of the Writing Center"):

1. Your obligation is to the writer, not to any particular professor (especially Wetherbee!) or any particular class. In the context of a tutoring session, a professor's assignment prompt and expectations are a crucial part of the *rhetorical situation*, but you are not a surrogate for or representative of the professor. (Ergo, it's not actually appropriate for professors to send their students to the SSC so you'll "fix" their work.)
2. To quote North, "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). Or, phrased a little less provocatively: We can only help so much with individual assignments. In the long term, though, we can help *a lot* toward producing better, more reflective and conscientious writers who are aware, for example, of the "hierarchy" of concerns that span tier-1 invention and tier-4 grammatical correctness.
3. You aren't an arbitrator between the writer and the professor, either. Whatever your feelings about a particular professor, assignment, or class, it's not your job take sides or second-guess the assignment. (I know, this is hard sometimes.) Again, a professor's expectations are a fact of the rhetorical situation, but nothing more.
4. Our practice in the SSC should validate the fact that writing is the writer's intellectual property. As much as possible, prompt clients to take charge in discussing their work.

With these principles in mind, here is a possible timeline for a 30-minute tutoring session designed to emphasize, first, the goals and concerns of the writer and, second, information and context that might help the writer cultivate good intellectual habits in the future. This is merely a *suggested* timeline, so improvise and do things differently when there's obvious reason to do so.

First 3-5 minutes

- Build rapport. If possible, sit next to the writer so that you can look at their work together. Have resources (notebook, computer, reference books, utensils, etc.) handy. Introduce yourself if this is your first time working with the writer. Make a little small talk if you'd like.
- Ask about the assignment and the writing process. Ask about the writer's main concerns and take light notes on your own paper/device. Based on the author's concerns, come up with a list of 1-3 issues to focus on during the tutoring session.
- Clarify upfront how much of the client's writing you can reasonably cover. For example, you might estimate that you can only cover the first half of an 10-to-12-page essay in detail. You might also ask the author which part(s) they're most concerned about.

Middle part of the session (15-20 minutes)

- A prefatory remark: The bulk of the tutoring session will necessarily be fluid and improvisational. Use your own judgement about priorities and time management. Continually check back in with the writer to affirm you're dealing with their main concerns. Ask, "Does this make sense?"

- Jump right into the writer’s concerns, working through your list as methodically as possible. Let the writer dictate what to discuss first.
- Read the writer’s work, noting pertinent details in the text. Always ask permission to write on their paper. Also, consider writing in pencil, which is less obtrusive than pen. (Avoid red pen!) As you go, jot down your own list of thoughts, concerns, and recommendations.
- When appropriate, ask the writer to read aloud from their work. “Hearing” stylistic issues and grammatical mistakes will often help them self-diagnose.
- If the writer has little or no actual writing on paper, write down important ideas and strategies for the writer to pursue when they draft more of the work. It’s important to have some sort of concrete record of actions the writer can take.
- As you progress, note to yourself any important issues the writer has missed. Bring these up later in the session if need be:

Penultimate 5-10 minutes (if necessary)

- Bring up important issues the writer may have overlooked. Often, these will constitute tier 1 or 2 (invention and organization) issues, when the writer is concerned only with tier 3 and 4 (style and grammar) issues.
- If need be, invoke an outside authority (like me) to express these ideas so it doesn’t sound like you’re chastising the writer. For example: “Here’s another thing to consider. When Wetherbee works with us, he talks about looking at ‘big picture’ issues in writing, not just style and grammar. In this essay, you might be able to focus your thesis a little if you did this and this ...” Feel free to use the “tiers” vocabulary if it’s useful. You might keep that handout in your stack of resources.

Last 3-5 minutes

- Together, review any notes you have made. Allow the writer to read these silently at their own pace if need be. Emphasize key actions they can take with their writing, and praise what’s going well.
- If appropriate, ask about setting up a follow-up appointment. This is especially important if you couldn’t cover the whole paper or if you noticed significant concerns the writer wasn’t aware of.

Further reading

North, Stephen M. “The Idea of the Writing Center,” *College English*, vol. 46, no. 5, 1984, pp. 433-46.

Reardon, Kristina. “Adopting Writing Center Practices in Teaching.” *The MLA Style Center*, 16 Apr. 2019, style.mla.org/adopting-writing-center-practices/.