

Red Pen Neurosis

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I can be neurotic. I arrange all of my books alphabetically, according to author in four sections: fiction, non-fiction, poetry and crafts. When I clean, I always begin with the kitchen, move to the living room, the bathroom, the bedroom and then I end by vacuuming. There is, of course, no deviation from the routine. It takes 55 minutes for all of my laundry to be washed and dried; it takes me an hour and a half to fold it. I always write on my calendar with the same blue pen. In my refrigerator, I keep the butter, yogurt and eggs on the top shelf, the bread, cheese and leftovers on the second shelf and all of the beverages on the bottom. Fruit is stored in the left drawer, vegetables on the right, and everything is always in its proper place.

I am also a neurotic corrector of grammar. Red pen in hand, I could mark up the world. I am the one who, rather than simply reading the memo handed to her at work, takes the time to correct all of its errors. When I stumble upon grammatical errors in the books I read, I become horribly distracted and can't go on until I've penciled in the proper corrections. I remind friends and family that things went 'well,' not 'good,' during casual conversation. When I overhear others correcting the grammar of the world, I get excited, because it means I'm not the only crazy one. I even edit my own journal.

Naturally, my self-assumed role of the editing queen was the hardest thing for me to come to terms with as I began tutoring. The role of the tutor as we discussed it in class made sense to me. I knew that global concerns were more important than mechanics and that those issues like tone and organization should be the primary concerns in the beginning stages of writing. It wasn't hard to see how indirect tutoring could be more beneficial to most learners, rather than a cut and dry attack of the red pen. I understood the effectiveness of the elusive ideal tutor that we spent so much of our first class sessions discussing, and I wanted to be that tutor.

My first tutoring session was a walk-in and came as a surprise, so unlike many of my fellow tutoring rookies, I didn't have time to be nervous. But I also didn't have time to mentally prepare. I walked in the door, was handed a folder, introduced to my learner, and seconds later I was in the booth. Sitting there, properly arranged with my learner sitting towards the opening so as not to feel trapped, I panicked. I felt trapped.

I did my best to cover up my stunned stupidity by beginning with the basics. After customary greetings, introductions and the usual how-are-yous, we began filling out the personal information for the log sheet and discussed the learner's reason for coming to the TLC. A---- was a foreign exchange student from Japan who had been studying in Stevens Point for almost two years, and this was her final semester at UWSP before she returned home. She was very soft-spoken, and seemed to have a competent handle on the English language, conversing with relative ease, but her confidence in her writing was lacking. She had come to the TLC that day because she was working on a couple of extra credit projects for her English 102 class: one, a review of a presentation about the Vietnam war that she had attended, and the other, a response to an article about the effects of Westernization of Filipino culture.

I read through both of the short essays silently since A---- felt uncomfortable having them read aloud. In retrospect, the review of the presentation was rather vague, and a few of the ideas expressed were confusing or seemed to contradict one another. The article about Filipino culture had struck a chord with A----, and so her response to it was much more passionate than the first piece. It included a personal anecdote which was both humorous and relevant, and the sense of investment and concern for the issues at hand was very powerful. But

there were places within the piece that were begging to be expanded upon, that needed to be further developed in order to give the piece a sense of completeness. As I read, I would like to believe that I recognized all of these strengths and weaknesses on some level, but I couldn't free myself from my most immediate concern in order to fully take in each piece so that I could give meaningful, useful feedback. That most immediate concern, of course, was: *What am I supposed to do now?* In my panicked state, I let both A----- and my own instinct answer my question.

As soon as she could see that I was finished reading, A----- quietly asked, "Is my grammar okay?"

Grammar! I could do grammar. I could handle grammar. I could rope grammar in with one swift throw of the lasso and hogtie it into submission. At the mere mention of the 'G' word, I lost all sight of everything that I had learned in practicum, and I went to it. I corrected each and every grammar error in both pieces, offering a quick, wholly inadequate explanation of what the 'right' way was and why. When all was mechanically well, I sent my seemingly satisfied learner on her way. She had asked; I had answered.

But left alone in the booth, faced with an empty log sheet that needed to be filled out, preferably with the details of a productive interaction between an attentive, globally concerned tutor and a receptive, cooperative learner, I realized that I had fallen horribly short of glory. I had, in fact, fallen right on my face.

"I totally screwed up," I told my mom that weekend when I ventured home in search of some much needed comfort food. "I did exactly what I am *not* supposed to do. Anybody could have corrected her grammar. She was cheated."

I wanted to be a good tutor, and after my first session I felt that I was unarguably the opposite. I was nothing more than an annoyingly neurotic grammar priss. I was embarrassed about the way that my first session had gone, and my only consolation was that it was a walk-in learner, and I probably wouldn't have to worry about showing my shamed face to A----- again or wasting more of her time with my useless editing addiction.

Of course, I was wrong. The following week, I found A's name on my tutoring schedule once more, but this time as a 157 student. Not only would I be working with A----- again, but I would be working with her on a weekly basis for the rest of the semester. I took a deep breath, and resolved to compensate. Going into my second session with A-----, I was collected and focused on the task at hand. I was determined to make her 157 experience worth her while.

The writing that A----- did to meet her 157 requirements was always on the same, deeply personal level as the response that she brought in to our first session. Not only was A----- engaged in her work, but I was as well. I looked past grammar, and began to focus on what she was saying in her writing, and the more we worked together, the easier this became for me. By the middle of the semester, when A----- asked about grammar, I would actually have to read the piece through a second time in order to zero in on errors. And when I did find errors, I didn't simply correct them, but also looked the respective convention up in the handbook in order to offer A----- a more thorough explanation.

It was doubly interesting to fight the editorial urge while working with A-----, because as a foreign exchange student who wasn't particularly confident in her ability to write in English, grammar was a primary concern for A----- as well. During any given session, she would ask me to check her grammar in a piece multiple times. For the most part, A-----'s grammar was fine, and as the semester progressed and she was

writing more and more, it began to present as much as a problem in her writing as it would for the average, native English speaker. Grammar was not something that she needed to be particularly concerned about. So as I tried to steer myself away from the grammar itch, I made an effort to bring her along with me. When she would ask about the grammar on a rough draft, I would simply tell her that it wasn't really an issue and that it was something we could focus more on with her revised drafts. I asked plenty of questions about organization, tone and the clarity of ideas in order to draw A-----'s attention to those issues.

During our most recent session, A----- brought in a fun series of poems that she had decided to write about her work-study job as a custodian. A-----'s enthusiasm about the project that she was undertaking was invigorating, and she came to the booth armed with a series of questions concerning voice, structure and redundancy. It was a dynamic half-hour. We experimented with moving different parts of the poems around, looked at different ways to reword some of the awkward lines and brainstormed for ideas and images to include in the final poem of the series that she hadn't started on yet. For the first time in the ten weeks that we had been working together, neither one of us mentioned, or probably even thought of, correcting grammar. The session marked a small, but significant, victory for both of us.

A few weeks ago, a friend asked me to look over a scholarship essay that he had been working on before he sent his application in. I more than willingly agreed to do so, and I went all out, pinpointing all of the little grammar errors and minute, sentence-level structure issues. Being the neurotic dork that I am, I felt a little rush of exhilaration as I marked up the paper. I had fun, and I didn't experience any of the guilt that I had felt during my first tutoring session, because what I was doing was appropriate to the situation. I was acting as a friend, looking over a draft by a good writer who had already put a lot of work into the draft. It was okay to edit. However, when acting as a tutor, my role is different, and it is a role that I am slowly but surely getting better at playing. Fortunately, as I learned that grammar was really only a small part of the picture, I was able to help another writer see the same. But rest assured all of you who insist on spelling 'all right' as if it were a single word- my inner grammar nerd hasn't gone anywhere. She just knows when to keep quiet.