

Some Handy Dandy Tutoring Tips

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The question has been asked, "What makes a good tutor?" Every time I step foot in the booth, I try to find that next building block. I open myself up to the learner, as the learner entrusts a piece of himself or herself to me. Presenting a writing creation takes a great deal of courage, and with this knowledge we must have the utmost care for the learner.

The framework of the building process:

- It is always pleasant to be greeted with a smile. I don't know about you, but if I'm having a "bummer of a day," a nice smile is always welcome.
- One of the most important tools in tutoring is to make the learner feel at ease. Once I introduce myself to the learner, I try to open myself up to the learner by sharing stories, or asking how the week is going. The learner may connect with me on something and feel at ease enough to talk.

The core of the puzzle:

- A good tutor is one who carries out affective listening skills. A basic learning tool is to understand and listen to what the reader wants to improve on. You should always ask basic questions like, "Is there anything you want to work on?" "What did you have trouble with?"
- When reading someone's work, it is always effective to have the writer read his or her work out loud. If the learner is uncomfortable with reading out loud, the tutor should fill the void. Doing this will allow the learner to hear what his or her text sounds like in action. They can stop you if they hear something that is "off," and ask, "Did I really say that?" If you notice something amiss, you can stop the reading process and point out whatever doesn't sound right.
- You should always read the writing carefully. Is the core or heart of the paper captured? What does the writer need to add? Your main focus should always be on the ideas presented in the paper. There should be logic in the way the paper is presented.
- After reading a piece of writing, it is always important to point out the positive points in the paper. Do not just make something up either. Be honest. Point out images or words that are unique and interesting. What pictures seem to stick in your mind?
- A tutor should never just edit the paper. The tutor is there to **give feedback** to another writer. You are present as a reader, resource, and mend, who does not evaluate. Content and ideas are more important than grammar.
- If you catch **grammar** mistakes, don't take pen to paper and slash through with red. Find a grammar problem, point it out, and show the learner several alternatives to the problem. After they understand what they've done wrong, have them find similar mistakes in the paper. This way, they are doing their own correcting.
- You should always **be sincere and honest**. If something catches your eye, and you think that it needs improvement, don't walk around the issue. Be direct, but sincere about what you think needs help.

Those final few missing pieces:

- When you're working with an **ESL student**, find out what kind of a paper they're writing. Ask them where they are from. This can provide a basis for opening up, and add some insight to the paper. Once you've read the paper, preferably out loud, make sure everything is homogenous with the topic. Find areas that need grammar improvements, and back up your suggestions with solid reasons from a handbook. Often times, seeing things in writing will make your suggestions more "believable."
- If you're working with an **English '57 student**, and writer's block seems to be looming overhead, it is often handy to use "in-class" writing prompts to develop some ideas. In one case, the learner and I chose a word and wrote down all the ideas, sounds, and images relating to the word. We then compared what we had written down. This was very helpful in the development of ideas for future poems and essays.
- **Handouts and handbooks** are another great source of ideas. For instance, if you get a learner who uses some very bland adjectives or verbs, there are some "action-centered" word lists in the poetry drawer. A poem of bland flavor can come out "hot and spicy" with just a few changes of words. Some writing handbooks, like Poem Crazy, have helpful writing exercises to get your mind flowing.
- **Log sheets** are a great way to reflect on what you and your learner have done during the session. You should write a brief summary about what happened in the paper. What worked well in the paper? What did you and your learner work on? If you had suggestions as to what could "spruce" the paper up, include these. Logs are good reminders as to what you did, and they provide a brief history for future tutors.
- Not every learner will be willing and ready to take on the world. For those difficult few, you must open yourself up, and have some patience. Try to empathize. These may be students who've never had to ask for help, or they may be there because a professor forced them to go to the TLC. Whatever the case, ask questions and paraphrase. Bring out those handy listening tools.
- Try to ask a learner if you can write on their paper before you dive in. Writing is very personal, and this may be their final draft. You wouldn't want somebody to come in and start drawing on a paper you're about to hand in.
- Be aware of the author's voice in the paper. Writing is not just print on a sheet of paper. Writing can be an emotional outlet. When a learner brings in some writing, maybe this is their first time opening up about a personal experience. Be aware of these feelings, especially in poetry, and treat them as open sores. Don't attack their writing. Make sure the learner feels comfortable. Maybe you can relate to them. If the learner feels at ease they'll open up and talk about their writing.
- The tutoring booth is not a gossip shop. If you've had a bad experience with the same professor a learner has, don't be judgmental. Don't go off on tangents like, "Have I got a story about that jerk." This is the last thing a learner needs. Use your knowledge to help the learner achieve a paper of satisfaction. Tell the learner what kind of writing the professor looks for.
- One-half an hour seems more like five minutes. Try to focus on large specific problems rather than small grammatical mistakes. Often times I feel my perfectionism take control. I want to help the learner with everything, but sometimes this is not possible. If more time is needed, have the learner schedule another appointment with either you or another tutor. Be a careful reader, and don't just "blast" through the piece.

Remember that learning is a continual building process. These thoughts are simply a few "tools of the trade" that I have collected over this semester. Being a tutor requires a certain amount of empathy and patience that can only be gained through experience in the booth. You will not only learn about basic tutoring skills, but you will learn a lot more about yourself as a person. Don't worry; if you've established a solid structure, the building will be stable.