

The Quiet Worrier's Enchiridion

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Don't Worry!

"Worrying doesn't help anything."

This is my "momtra." My mother told me this years ago, and I have repeated it a thousand times since. It serves as my mantra in times of nervousness, apprehension, and sheer panic. Although it's not in any tutoring handbook I've seen so far, this phrase has been one of the most helpful things for me as a tutor.

Ask Questions!

"If you don't know something, you can always ask somebody."

My mother is also responsible for this strategy. I never asked questions in school until my mother suggested this to me when I was in high school. Since then, I have learned more by asking questions than I have from many books, even college texts. People are amazing resources, and our Tutoring Learning Center has an abundance of amazing resources. Use them.

I guarantee that the less you worry, and the more you ask questions, the more comfortable and productive you will be as a tutor. There is no reason to worry, and there are even fewer reasons not to ask questions. The following are three general lessons that I have learned in my early tutoring sessions when I didn't know the first thing about tutoring. I learned them by breaking my own rules, and I'm offering them in hopes that you may learn these lessons vicariously, and with less discomfort than I did. Really, don't worry. Everything is going to be all right. Ask anybody in the TLC.

One of the first things I learned is that beginning tutors have more to offer learners than they think they do. However, the first time you find yourself in the booth with a learner who has a paper that needs serious structural help, you may not know where to start, and you may not feel like you know what you're doing. This segment is about how I reacted in my first such session, and how I learned my first important lesson: Don't worry about not immediately knowing how to help a learner fix their disorganized paper.

Jamie worries about how to help a learner fix their disorganized paper.

His paper was so scattered I didn't even know where to start. At my suggestion, he read it aloud, and by the time he finished, my head was spinning. The spinning had little to do with the paper's structural problems and everything to do with my worrying about whether I was going to be of any assistance. How was I supposed to help him fix this? Where was I supposed to begin? I broke my own first rule: I panicked. I thought for sure I could not help him. I was petrified.

This was my second tutoring session, and my first session working with someone on an actual paper. Since then, helping someone with a disorganized paper is probably the most common situation I have encountered in the booth, and that's why I'm including it. Over the course of several disorganized papers, I have formed a rough

yet generally effective set of steps to get learners thinking about how to organize their writing. I hope you find these steps useful.

Step One: Don't worry. It won't make anything better.

Step Two: Ask them what their main topic is, and have them write it down. If this is difficult for them, it is likely partiality to blame for the paper's poor arrangement. Remind them that whatever they put in the paper should somehow relate to that main topic.

Step Three: Once you have established their main topic, ask them what their subtopics are. For example, if their topic is wrestling, they may have written about scoring, methods, and uniforms. If you think it will help, have them write down their subtopics under their main topic. Again, this may be difficult for them, so you may need to prompt them a bit. However, do not do their thinking for them. If you can't stand the silence, go to the bathroom while they think about it.

Step Four: This step depends on how confused their writing is. If it is very poor, I would have them go through their paper, and put each sentence under the appropriate subtopic. For example, using the subtopics above, a sentence that reads "A wrestler must pin their opponent for 3 seconds," belongs in the rules subtopic.

Step Five: Work with your learner to arrange the sentences under their individual subtopics in a way that makes sense and is easy to follow. Using the wrestling rules example, the sentence "There are several important rules in wrestling that are the most important" should come before the specific rules. (I have done this step with my own papers by cutting out strips paper with my sentences on them, and taping them in the right order on another sheet of paper. If you feel this might help, try it.)

Step Six: Make some paragraphs with them. This is good practice for your learner to recognize the relationships between their ideas, and why they should be organized a certain way. For some learners, I've found that initially putting topic sentences at the beginning of the paragraphs helps them learn to organize paragraphs. However, you can certainly show them other ways of arranging the paragraphs around their topic sentences to give them more options once organization starts to come more naturally to them

Step Seven: Tell your learner that they've done a good job. For good writers, words will many times just appear on the paper already organized. This is not the case for most people. For many people (including tutors), organizing and reorganizing thoughts once they are down on paper is very hard work. Once it's on paper, some learners won't want to go through these steps because they just want to hand it in and get it over with. If that's the case, respect that. However, when someone goes through the above process, it shows a lot of concern and effort on their part to do well, and they should be commended for that. Since you are their tutor, you get the first chance to pat your learner on the back; don't be afraid to do so.

I've found that these steps can be a good starting point for unorganized writers because it gives them clear steps to follow to make sense of the clump of ideas that is their paper. Most people know when their papers aren't organized well (as one of my learners once said, "I know-it jumps around"); they just don't know how to fix it. If you don't have time to do all this in one session, send them home with these ideas. This homework-type approach keeps them thinking about their assignment, and will make sure they understand the concepts.

There are certain practices that are good to use in all tutoring sessions. I learned one of these in my first

session. Actually, I didn't learn for it a few days after the session. The lesson was this: don't take a learner's rejection too personally.

Jamie takes a learner's rejection way too personally.

My first English '57 learner was also my very first tutoring session. She had brought in a short story that was based on her and her friends' actual experiences. Again, I broke my cardinal rule, and panicked. I have never written fiction, I don't currently write fiction, and I don't see myself writing fiction anytime in the near future, so how could I possibly help this learner with her story? What made things worse is that when she asked me about stories I had written, I admitted my fiction deficit to her. She asked if my deficit was going to be a problem. I assured her it would not be, and we moved on.

It turns out that I surprised myself. I gave some pretty good suggestions based on what she told me she wanted her story to be like and fiction devices that I had learned about. I was proud. I was brilliant. I felt great. I had simultaneously conquered my worries and helped a learner. Life was good.

She dumped me. Right before our next session, she requested another tutor. I tried hard to figure out why. Did she think I was unqualified? Did she hate me? Did she think I was weird? I thought about this much longer than I should have, and every reason I came up with involved me being wrong, bad, stupid, mean, or generally unattractive.

The conclusion I eventually came to was this: It didn't matter why she wanted another tutor. For that half an hour, I tried my best to help her develop her writing. I listened carefully, was not forceful, and complemented her writing. I gave some good suggestions, kept her intentions a priority, and was genuinely interested in the development of her project. This is what being a tutor is all about. Perhaps I wasn't so bad after all.

Learners may reject you, your suggestions, and your opinions. My belief is that if you are caring, interested, and as helpful as you can be in the booth, you are probably a good tutor; the rest is up to the learner.

Jamie asks questions.

The final item I want to address involves my rule of asking questions. I have learned so many things by knocking on the doors of the senior staff members I could write a small book. Instead, I've decided to include a non-exhaustive list of items that I have learned from the TLC staff, so that you may reserve your questions for other matters.

1. No, you cannot use the copier if it's not for TLC-related material.
2. Yes, you may help a learner on a take-home exam, but beware of changing a lot of content. Ask someone if you think you may be crossing the line.
3. Yes, you can use the microwave.
4. Yes, you may go over your half-hour scheduled session time, but remember to write the date down twice in the log.
5. No, writing from other classes does not count toward your English '57 learner's writing requirement, but...
6. Yes, you can help them with other materials in addition to whatever they bring in for their '57 requirement.
7. No, you may not use the stove.
8. No, we do not report plagiarism to a learner's professor; rather, we advise them not to plagiarize.

9. No, you cannot check out the books from the TLC, but you can only use them while you're there.
10. No, you do not re-file your learner's folders after you're done. You put them in the left "folder holder" at tutor central.

I hope these tidbits of mine are helpful to you. I have learned an incredible amount in an incredibly small period of time in the TLC. In fact, every time I walk in, someone enlightens me whether I ask for it or not.

I know there are many topics I haven't touched on, and you likely have questions left unanswered. Don't worry. Everything is going to be all right. You can ask anyone in the TLC.