



Tutors' Column: “The First Step: Students’ Initial Encounters with the Writing Center”

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Sitting in the writing center with my carefully crafted speech in hand, I dreaded my appointment. Three weeks earlier, my oral communications professor announced to the class that every single person would have to have their speech reviewed by the center if we wanted to make a grade above a zero—no exceptions. “This is so stupid,” I thought to myself, nervously tapping my foot. I had always been told that I was a good writer and had always made good grades; regardless, I had been forced to come to the place where people wouldn’t recognize that. In my mind, the writing center was remedial—the place where “the bad students” get sent by disappointed professors, the place where the less-than-qualified frantically seek help from all-knowing tutors. My thoughts were interrupted by a smiling tutor who asked if I was ready. Reluctantly, I stood and followed him to the speech lab, a separate room in the University of Central Arkansas writing center designed for oral communications students to practice their speeches in private with their tutors.

When I had finished delivering my speech, we collaborated to find ways to fix my weaknesses, and I left the session quite surprised. The quality of my speech vastly improved and so did my attitude. I saw the good that could come from having a peer review your work—no matter if you are a great writer or if you’re not so great. I knew at that moment that I wanted to be a part of the writing center and later applied for a position. Not only would I be aiding others on the path to self-discovery, but I, myself, would also benefit. I wanted to learn more about writing and become a better writer; through my session, I saw that one of the best ways to learn was through reading other people’s work and discussing ways to improve it. Seeing different styles of writing and hearing others’ opinions were essential to my

growth as a serious academic student. I wouldn't be tutoring and writing this article today if some professor hadn't forced me to go to the writing center. When handled well, mandatory visits *can* be a good thing.

An all too common writing center policy stigmatizes required sessions and dictates that writing centers are most effective when students come in of their own accord so that they are actively engaged with their sessions. But what about the students like me? Would I have ever gone to the writing center and eventually become a tutor had my professor had not required it? Probably not. There has even been evidence since the 1980s that required visits can be a good thing; for example, Irene Clark notes that many students are unlikely to visit the center without teacher requirements (33). However, steering clear from mandatory sessions is the norm for most of the contemporary writing center community for numerous valid reasons. Students who are indifferent about their papers and especially those with little knowledge about the center could see the requirement as a sort of "detention" (North 79). This view creates feelings of resentment causing writers to shut down. This resistance can lead to unproductive, one-sided collaboration and can cause the students to end up leaving with the same misconceptions they had held before. Barbara Bell and Robert Stutts also note that the tutors leave these sessions feeling frustrated and downcast (6).

Nonetheless, the benefits of mandatory sessions could outweigh the cons. Requiring students to go to the writing center might help their papers and writing abilities and educate them about writing centers: what they are, how they work, and who they can help. Prior to my own appointment, I had a slew of misconceptions about the center, and I know that many others still hold the same misconceptions. Sitting through a session, collaborating on, and improving their own work would teach students more about the center than any handout or tutor-turned-representative-speaker in a classroom could. It could turn many skeptics into believers, hesitant strangers into comfortable regulars, and ill-informed rumors into positive testimonies.

For as many horror stories as can be gleaned from mandatory sessions, just as many can be positive. The kind smile of a tutor can break down students' feelings of resentment. The committed synergic workings between both the tutor and the writer can allow writers to leave with a better sense of how others perceive their writing, a clearer direction to take with their present

piece, and techniques to keep in mind for future writing endeavors. In Stutts' research on requiring students to go to the writing center (as reported in an article written with Barbara Bell), he found that when students were asked at the end of the semester about their opinion of the center, many said they would go back on their own for other writing assignments (7). More recently, Barbara Gordan found that after their first initial mandatory visit at the writing center, students felt the center had helped them to improve their skills and make better grades (156-157). Gordan also recommends that centers avoid discouraging mandatory sessions (158). Cynthia Cochran also notes that a number of students who attended required sessions are, as she describes them, "frequent flyers" to the center. An appreciation for writing centers can clearly derive from these introductory required encounters.

On the other hand, students may fall into the resentful category if they are made to go to the writing center without understanding how it can help them. If students are initially unwilling or reluctant to participate in the sessions, a good way to get them to open up is to ask questions about what they have written. Having them explain their work in their own words can help them be more receptive and willing to partake in a collaborative writing experience. Another way to help those who are apprehensive about the center is to incorporate warranted praise into the session; hearing praise was one of the most surprising aspects of my first encounter. Most students may fear that their paper is going to be criticized. A tutor's genuine interest in the student's work can be another vital component of turning skeptics into believers. When students see that the tutor is involved with their topic, they are likely to feel pride in what they have done and be more inclined to contribute to the session.

Nevertheless, even if the students are on board, another obstacle stands in the way of this method of writing center education—the instructors. In order for students to be introduced to the idea of visiting the center, their instructors have to avoid any misconceptions of their own. They have to truly understand and support writing center philosophy or run the risk of perpetuating negative myths about the writing center. Instead of solely mentioning the center as a bolded side note on grading rubrics, instructors should explain how the center works and the benefits that can be drawn from peer review. Taking the students to an orientation at the center or having a tutor from the center

come in and talk about sessions can also break down the misconceptions. If my professor would have done these things for me, instead of throwing me in the dark, I would have felt less apprehensive about the center.

As we all know, educating the university population is a challenge that writing centers everywhere face. With enthusiastic, well-meaning professors requiring their students to schedule a tutoring session, the fog of delusion surrounding the writing center may finally be lifted. Like a baby bird being pushed from the nest in order to learn how to fly, some students need that first nudge to make leaps and bounds in understanding the center and improving their writing. Sometimes students will never truly learn the good that can come from writing center sessions until they experience a tutorial first-hand. Once students actually work side-by-side with a peer, many will realize the beauty of the writing center and become avid supporters, much like I did. All it can take is that first step, that first nudge, into the unknown to discover something wonderful.



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