



# Tutors' Column: "My Idea of the Writing Center: Through the Eyes of a Client Turned Consultant"

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Three years ago, I walked into the Worcester State University Writing Center with my heart feeling like it was ready to leap out of my chest. I was a timid freshman who, although confident in my choice to study English, was not at all confident in my writing. My professor required a writing center visit before English Comp assignments could be turned in, and to me the requirement only meant one thing: someone else was going to have to read my writing and they were going to tear it apart. Much to my surprise I received some really great advice and the consultant didn't scribble angry notes all over my paper like I had anticipated. In fact, my session went so well that my professor saw something in my writing I clearly did not, and I went from fearing the Writing Center—or rather, my idea of it—to working in the Writing Center. Now, it's my job to help students become better writers and to eliminate, or at least decrease, the misconceptions and fears people have about writing centers in general.

After just a few months of working in the Writing Center, I found that it wasn't uncommon to enter into a session with a peer writer who assumes I'll be the one doing all of the revisions that day. Because of such experiences, I developed a habit of telling new clients that we aren't an editing service—we are simply a place to progress. Student writers need to think for themselves and can't expect other people to tell them what to write, and although I've had some frustrated clients who just want to get the required stamp on the paper, most are open to—and even eager for—our guidance in helping them to better their own writing. Unfortunately, the commonness of the editorial service assumption stems from students' years in secondary school, when our writing mistakes were corrected based on what our instructors believed to be right, and the assumption is even perpetuated by some college professors. Yet Lil Brannon and C.H. Knoblauch suggest that "helping writers achieve their own purposes . . . while insisting on ideas, strategies, or formal constraints" (159) is what is truly important in creating

an “incentive to write” (159). Because of this, I discovered that my duty as a writing consultant is to honor the student’s writing and his or her authority over it; not making decisions for them but simply making suggestions is crucial to a happy client and a successful session.

Although it’s sometimes difficult not to fall into the isolated role of editor, I like to think of the Writing Center as a place for conversation, or “collaborative learning” (93) as Kenneth Bruffee calls it. I quickly found that just getting the writer talking can generate ideas and spark creativity; one of my very first sessions as a consultant began in this way. My client—we’ll call him Paul—came in with just an assignment sheet and a look of complete distress on his face saying that he couldn’t think of a topic and there was no way he would be able to finish by the due date the next day. Together, Paul and I looked over the assignment and after just a few minutes of talking he looked at me and said, “Oh man, what I just said right there was perfect don’t you think? That could be my thesis.” I couldn’t have been happier at that moment, especially as a new consultant; just from talking with me, Paul managed to sort through the chaos of his ideas and craft a perfect thesis statement for his essay. He left the session that day with his entire first page written and a confidence that wasn’t there when he arrived.

Even when I’m seated with a client who is not as successful as Paul was, “writing continues to be an act of conversational exchange” (Bruffee 93) through goal setting. While there are many techniques for helping a peer writer set good goals, I found that asking them outright what they are struggling with the most can best help to determine a goal that is both realistic and productive. Setting goals is so important, not only to conduct the session in a timely manner, but also to ensure that consultants focus on helping the writer with first order concerns—not falling into the editing role. I once sat with a client who confessed that she needed help with *everything*. After looking over what she had already written, I assured her that the overall structure and content of her essay was sound—she simply needed a clearer thesis and a bit more supportive evidence to really strengthen her argument. All at once, she seemed relieved, and we agreed on two goals for her to accomplish after she left that day. One week later, she came back to the Writing Center to tell me that she had earned an A on her paper.

Though we consultants may not realize it, there are so many students who are intimidated by the idea of showing others their work, generally due to lack of confidence or a fear of being judged—I would know, I was one of them. Students spend so many years being told what not to do when we’re writing rather than having

our individual strengths reinforced that we are, consequently, used to focusing on the negatives and many of us feel as if our writing is worth nothing at all. Fortunately, there are many professors in higher education who promote the same core value as the Writing Center: “. . . that writers, and not necessarily their texts, are what get changed by instruction” (North 438). By showing writers that we value *all writing at all stages* it allows them to see that the Writing Center is not at all scary. My hope is that, in coming to the Writing Center, clients not only dispel whatever fears they might have had about the center but also pick up the tools they need to begin improving their writing on their own.

While my goal is to help eliminate any fear or discomfort that peer writers have about the Writing Center, I know it isn't easy. In order to educate students about the Writing Center—or even just to let them know it exists—our center at Worcester State University often makes brief and informative classroom visits. I think that giving students the chance to interact with our consultants outside of a session is a great way to build rapport with peer writers and show that the Writing Center is not at all intimidating. I also firmly believe that acting as an ambassador outside of the center is important as well. By showing my peers that I'm just another student working hard like them, I can help create a level of trust that allows others to see that writing consultants aren't anything more than peers seeking to help peers succeed. By educating others and creating relationships with peers, we can help to eliminate some of the stigmas that surround the Writing Center, in turn making it more comfortable for both consultants and student writers.

In my Writing Center practicum I read opinions of countless scholars who identified what they believed writing center responsibilities are, but I think the Writing Center is many things for many people: a quiet place to hide away between classes, a spot to talk to people with similar interests, but most of all, a support group. It is there to help good writers become better writers and better writers to become great writers. The Writing Center isn't just a place for writing; it's a place for conversation—a place to bounce ideas off one another to turn a decent thesis into a fantastic one. It is there to help writers set goals and build confidence that otherwise may not have been discovered. To me, the Writing Center is a safe haven away from critical professors or friends. It is a place where students can always go to help them make progress in their writing. It is important to me that I ensure student writers never feel any level of discomfort in a session, because for me the Writing Center was a saving grace that opened my eyes to my own writing skills, which I may never have discovered otherwise.



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