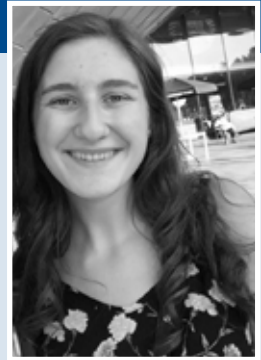


Tutors' Column: Not Yet a Specialist?: Overcoming Genre Phobia in the Writing Center

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Although writing center tutors may be viewed as experts to many genres of writing, tutors are not specialists in every genre. Sometimes students bring in an assignment for a genre of writing that the tutor does not know how to approach. I am currently in a Writing Center Pedagogy course, so I attended a writing center staff meeting at my university. The focus of the meeting was how to assist students who bring in papers in genres the tutor is not comfortable with; the genre of particular focus at the meeting was creative writing. Two staff members—one faculty tutor with an MFA and one graduate tutor in our institution's MFA program—led the meeting. When the meeting leaders asked the tutoring staff how they felt about working with poetry, one tutor immediately shared her discomfort. Another tutor suggested creative writing students work with a tutor more familiar with the genre. Why do unfamiliar genres make tutors so uncomfortable? The collective response was that the tutors did not want to let writers down or waste their time because of the tutor's lack of expertise with the genre. Tutors said they felt they did not know enough about the technical aspects of poetry—such as rhythm, word choice, and structure—to effectively support creative writers. One of the meeting leaders encouraged unsure staff members by saying that tutors already used strategies to help writers working in an unfamiliar genre. By having the writer or tutor read the poem aloud, the tutor will most likely be able to identify questions they have as a reader of the poem. The specialist MFA tutor also said that simply sharing the tutor's reaction to the piece is helpful to creative writers because it can help them clear up a possible issue for another reader of their writing. Tutors, students, and faculty members all have genres that are foreign to them, but all in all, the writing strategies for all genres are similar.

So, how should tutors handle a session involving an unfamiliar genre? The tactics discussed at the writing center staff meeting and in chapter 6 of *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors* overlap. In the *OGWT*, Fitzgerald and Lanetta use the term “generalist tutors” for tutors who do not have the knowledge of the writer’s assignment’s discipline and genre (148). It is important to be honest about genre and subject knowledge of the assignment the client has brought in. Experts suggest that when tutors disclose their lack of familiarity with the topic, they should follow up with the question, “Could you describe [the genre of the assignment] to me?” (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 153). Asking this question allows tutors to get an understanding of the discipline they will be working with during the session. During our staff meeting, one of the takeaways was for tutors to ask writers what they are writing about. Not only does this question provide tutors with the subject of the session, but it is also gives tutors a sneak preview of what they are about to read. As a result of unfamiliarity with the genre and asking one of the questions above, tutors are putting the writer in control of the session. This role reversal is beneficial to writers because by having to teach the tutor about the assignment, such writers might realize they know more than they thought they did about the topic (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 148). Having the writer act as a tutor allows them to guide the session and talk about what they want to achieve. The writer may ask for the tutor’s opinion on grammatical matters, but the tutor’s lack of expertise in the genre allows the writer to take the lead in developing his or her work, thus removing the directive tutoring attitude that may arise when tutors are familiar with a genre. Some other questions tutors may ask clients when they are acting as generalist tutors are what the writer’s own goals for the paper are and where they are in the writing process. Tutors can share their thoughts on the piece, such as what they find is good or what was unclear (Fitzgerald and Lanetta 155). Asking any of these questions will start a conversation and is an informative moment for the tutor and writer. Tutors will feel more at ease with a session after hearing some background information about the writing from the client.

In some cases, the tutor may be an expert in the genre the writer is working in; they are therefore referred to as a specialist tutor. The benefit of working with a specialist tutor is that they will look at the writer’s work and address the overall problem

with the client's piece. With the tutor's advanced knowledge, they can inform the writer about what to look for in their assignments for that genre (Fitzgerald and lanetta 148, 149). Specialist tutors have been viewed as being directive and somewhat restrictive in the assistance they give to their clients; it is suggested that they take the stance of "provisionalism," acting as an audience member. Tutors should phrase advice with a slight uncertainty so that the writer knows there are options beyond a tutor's suggestion (Fitzgerald and lanetta 152). Phrasing a suggestion in this way can begin a conversation that inspires new ideas from writers and makes them active participants in the writing process. In sessions with a specialist tutor, writers become aware of the way they should go about working with an unfamiliar genre. They walk away from the center with a bit more confidence and understanding of the once fearful assignment.

The writing center is about communicating ideas, whether it is the tutor or writer in control of the session. As long as the purpose of the conversation is clear, the writer will most likely move closer to accomplishing his or her goal. Even when tutors are not comfortable or familiar with a genre, their experience as readers, their knowledge of strategies, and their opinions will be helpful to the writer. Both tutors and writers gain some sort of knowledge from writing center sessions. Whether a tutor is considered a generalist or specialist tutor in a session, the tutor's input has more value than he or she may think.



WORKS CITED

lanetta, Melissa, and Lauren Fitzgerald. *The Oxford Guide for Writing Tutors: Practice and Research*. Oxford UP, 2016.