

## Tutors' Column: "Exposing the Draft Addiction: Prioritizing Prewriting in the Writing Center"

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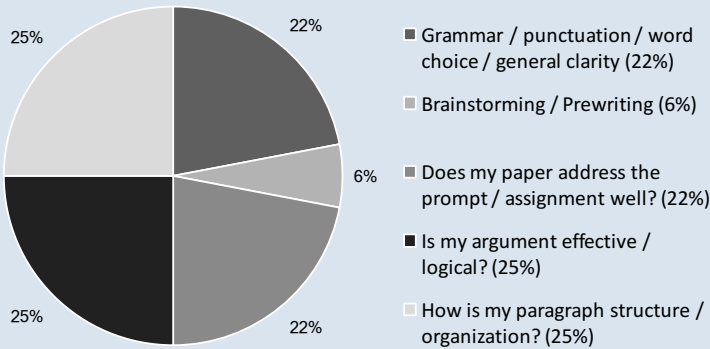
Before I became a tutor at Dickinson College's Norman M. Eberly Writing Center, I did not understand the Center's purpose, nor did I fully understand the different stages of the writing process. I knew only that I was supposed to leave the Center with a better version of the draft I had brought with me. To my very first tutor, I explained that my professor required my class to schedule appointments, and I wanted the tutor to check for grammar mistakes and help me with the clarity of my language. I thought that the writing center was a place designed to improve drafts. Only after I became a tutor myself and took a course on writing center methodology did I learn that centers are not simply draft workshops; instead, they can assist with any writing process stage. However, even though many students used Dickinson's Writing Center much more productively than I did during my first visit, I found most continue to focus on what they have already written and ignore what is arguably the most important stage of the writing process: the prewriting and brainstorming stage.

While my tutor training course taught me the importance of each writing process stage, I saw that many non-tutors did not exhibit a similar understanding. Most of the students I worked with expressed concern over specific draft elements, and few wanted to brainstorm or prewrite. Writing centers, however, have already presented their goal of helping with all stages of the writing process. Growing curious about the disparity between our Center's mission and its actual use, I analyzed a random sample of our session logs and found that only 6% of our students requested a prewriting or brainstorming session. One explanation could be that our students lacked the incentive to schedule an appointment early in the writing process, but another could be that they misunderstood the Center's purpose as I had. Either way, my findings lead me to argue that although our Writing Center, like many writ-

ing centers, tries to be explicit about its mission, tutors and faculty could better advocate its brainstorming-conducive environment and its ability to assist with any part of the writing process.

My random sample of 250 session logs represents approximately 15% of logs available during the 2014 spring semester. For each log, I identified the student's goal and placed it into one of five categories as seen in Fig. 1 below. Of students in my sample, 22% wished to correct lower order concerns, including grammar mistakes, punctuation, word choice, and the clarity of their writing; 25% wanted to discuss paragraph structure and organization; another 25% wanted to review their argument's logic and cohesion; and another 22% wanted to ensure that they effectively addressed their essay's prompt. Overall, 94% of students focused on drafts, while the remainder, a mere 6%, focused on prewriting. Although representing a small sample of my center's total logs, the chart below helps us visualize students' tendency to not take advantage of the center's prewriting assistance.

FIGURE 1: Student Goals in Tutoring Sessions



Composition scholarship justifies the writing center in advocating prewriting. D. Gordon Rohman identifies prewriting as a way of thinking and explains that it “brings forth and develops ideas, plans, designs,” instead of simply acting as an “entrance of an idea into one’s mind” (106). He asserts that “without good thinking, good writing is impossible,” and that quality work relies on a period of reflection and planning before serious drafting occurs. Similarly, for Vivian Zamel, prewriting is “the process of exploring one’s thoughts and learning from the act of writing itself what these thoughts are,” a reiteration of E.M. Forster’s famous question: “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” (Zamel 197). In our Writing Center, and perhaps in most, tutors act as sounding boards for students’ thoughts, and through conversa-

tion tutors can promote the deepening and expansion of ideas. Such conversation may impact a student's eventual argument or analysis because it would occur early in the writing process. Without an opportunity to flesh out thoughts, writers can be hard-pressed to elicit successful work.

After examining prewriting's poor representation among students' session goals, I wonder if the gap between a tutor's and a student's understanding of the writing process is too vast. I do not mean to imply that our Writing Center is opaque about its purpose; Dickinson's website states that the writing center is designed to: "engage students in conversation about their writing at any point in the writing process" (Dickinson College Writing Program). However, my data do not reflect popular acknowledgment that the writing center is a place to explore multiple areas of one's writing process. To help improve overall perception, tutoring staffs could better inform students of their center's capabilities. Tutors could find opportunities to engage students in conversation about their ideas instead of devoting entire sessions to drafts' mechanics. In "Invention," Irene Clark affirms that the prewriting stage is heavily influenced by discussion, and she underlines the value of sharing thoughts with others before or in between moments of drafting (74). Tutors might use such discussion as an opportunity to discuss their center's ability to assist with any aspect of writing and recommend that a student schedule a brainstorming session in the future. Tutors might also host writing workshops on prewriting skills and assign brainstorming charts or free-writing prompts. Workshops would be great opportunities to advertise prewriting, to invite students to the Center who might not normally visit, and to alert them of its purpose.

Tutors and writing center administrators might also change their writing center's name. For a tutor and administrator, the word "Writing" in "Writing Center" encompasses all stages of the writing process and includes prewriting. But for a student, "Writing" might simply describe the paper that she brings to her next appointment. In fact, this was my exact frame of mind when I first visited our Writing Center. To ensure students are properly informed of their center's purpose, writing center staff might work with faculty to invent a name that encapsulates the writing process. Possibilities include "The Writing and Idea Center," or the "The Brainstorming and Composition Center," both of which dissuade students from viewing the center simply as a fix-it shop. Florida State University aptly titles its center "The Reading-Writing Center," which emphasizes that writing entails reading and discus-

sion in addition to drafting (FSU Department of English). Although names might vary for each center, a more process-encompassing name may let students view writing centers as places to develop ideas in addition to drafts.

While prewriting and brainstorming are essential aspects of the writing process, many students may find them difficult to engage in because they require substantial conversation. Writing is a gateway into one's thoughts, and having those thoughts on display can be intimidating, even discouraging. The writing center's goal should therefore not be to force students to practice prewriting, but to ensure that they know that they can. Figure 1 shows many students are willing to discuss diverse aspects of their drafts and focus on higher order concerns, but more importantly it demonstrates that they are not using our center to its full potential. Students will always express goals that fall out of line with the writing center's advantages, as I did when I first visited, but our responsibility as tutors is to help students understand the extent to which they can take advantage of what we offer. Doing so would strengthen students' individual writing abilities and fulfill the writing center's larger goal of developing a more literate citizenry.



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