

Tutors' Column: "Ramblings of an Insecure Writer: Viewing Writing Tutorials as Stories"

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Before we become writing tutors, we are first writers. But as a new tutor, I did not realize this truth. Though hesitant to refer to myself as a “writer,” I somehow managed to help students discover their own ideas, voices, and styles. As I witnessed insecure students become confident writers, I began to understand the writing tutorial in an entirely different way: the writing tutorial is its own

unique rhetorical situation in which generating ideas and following grammatical rules coalesce to forever alter writers who meet with tutors. Because writing tutorials contain this immense power of change, they are best told through stories, and I will begin with one of my own.

Those early morning moments at the writing center were my favorite. Before anyone had arrived, I would close my eyes, sigh, and think about how I was a fraud for proclaiming myself a writing tutor. How was I supposed to teach people to write when I had never before thought of myself as a “writer?” I had always excelled in composition classes, so clearly I possessed some writing ability. I just never *considered* myself a writer. Of course, I could never voice this opinion. I couldn’t even convince myself that it was *true*. I probably was a writer. I just didn’t know how to write. I had never thought about the writing process before, and now that I was thinking about it, I was convinced that I could not do it.

I abandoned my contemplative musing and consulted my morning schedule: I would work with Macie, a student requesting help with “transitions and the writing process.” When I met Macie, she mentioned that she was writing a research paper for a graduate seminar. I asked to see what she had written so far, and she pulled out a blank sheet of paper. “I just have no idea where to start!” she exclaimed. I asked her to explain her insecurities about writing, and she responded that she was not a good writer, she could never find the right words, and her ideas were never good enough.

Considering Stephen M. North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," I knew that Macie and I needed to look "beyond [the] particular project" and privilege "the process by which it is produced" (50). Yet I also knew that an abstract composition discussion would not benefit Macie if it were not grounded with concrete artifacts. As such, I asked to see the research with which she was planning to work.

Macie pulled out six journal articles; I asked her to explain each source and identify the ideas she wanted to incorporate into her paper. We made three stacks of papers—one for each main idea she wished to cover. Next, we discussed a tentative outline that helped her to form the crux of her thesis. Finally, she whispered, "Now, I just have to *write* it." I asked about her writing process and she declared that it took her "forever" to finish a paper because she would stop to analyze every word she had written. I then began to talk to her about the process of drafting. I explained Anne Lamott's theory in "Shitty First Drafts" that "almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts" (95). I ended the session by saying, "Just get the first draft down and then we can look at it together."

My tutoring session with Macie was on Friday. Monday morning she came into the writing center with a complete draft—a wonderful, complete draft. She mentioned that my comments about "not stopping to analyze" and "getting a draft down" helped her to keep going when she would have normally stopped. She then added, "You must be a brilliant writer." I smiled slowly and confessed to her, "I struggle every day to follow the same advice that I gave you." That was the moment I knew: I *was* a writer. I was experimenting with my craft and my style, but this did not diminish my ability as a writer. Indeed, I was a writer who could successfully dole out advice that helped other students learn to write.

Rather than serving as the exception, this story about my interaction with Macie models the remainder of my writing tutorials for that academic year. Before this tutorial, I assumed that I would teach students about dangling modifiers, commas, and semicolons. However, I soon found that most student writing contains greater structural and rhetorical issues that tutors must address before they can discuss grammar with students. And the face-to-face discussions that take place in writing tutorials serve as the ideal environment in which to discuss these higher-order concerns. In *Collaborative Learning and Writing*, Kathleen M. Hunzer explains that "talking through her ideas helps a writer focus on

higher-order concerns . . . [all the] while helping her become aware of the ethos problems that surface from lower-level concerns of grammar and clarity” (37). At this point I surmised that my role as a tutor was to help students become confident in their ideas, not their grammar.

Yet it was then that Hannah, a fellow graduate student, broadened my understanding of grammar in her master’s thesis defense that involved a detailed discussion of “rhetorical grammar:” grammar that is not just about polishing a finished product, but also about discussions of invention and composition that help to ignite the critical thinking process. As Hannah posited, the arrangement of students’ words reflect not only their understanding of formal grammar, but also their thought process in general. By the end of her defense, I had pinpointed my role as a writing tutor: teach rhetorical grammar and share formal grammar lessons as needed. Hannah also helped me understand the reason that different tutorials vary so much on a case-to-case basis—rhetoric is situational, and so too is grammar.

Perhaps the teaching of grammar is its own rhetorical situation best told through the stories of our everyday writing tutorials—the story of a writing tutor coming to grips with her own authorship or the story of a student who enters a writing center with a blank sheet of paper. As I reflect upon sharing my own story, I cannot help but go back to Thomas King’s words from *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*: “Take [the] story. . . It’s yours. Do with it what you will. Tell it to your friends. . . Forget it. But don’t say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You’ve heard it now” (29). Maybe each writing tutorial is a story all its own, encased in a unique rhetorical situation in which words, ideas, and grammar do not constitute an argument, but *are* the argument. Maybe these stories that we, as writing tutors, are composing on a daily basis are changing the lives of student writers. And maybe in the process of molding these stories, we too are changing.

Macie’s story changed me. Hannah’s story changed me. If I had never entered the Texas Christian University Center for Writing, I may have lived my academic life differently, doubting myself as a writer and questioning my adequacy as a teacher. But the rhetorical power of the writing tutorial altered my way of thinking. I now believe that all students are writers, that all student writing warrants discussions based primarily on ideas and secondly on rhetorical grammar, and finally that writing center tutorials are

more than meetings—they are stories that have the power to change us. And now that I have heard stories of writing centers and begun to tell my own story of working in a writing center, I will never be the same.



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