

Tutors' Column: "I Don't Grok You: When Unfamiliar Subjects Can't Be Translated"

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As a writing center consultant who primarily works with healthcare students, I read a lot of papers I don't understand. But the word "understand" is a tricky one. While I might not understand the way mathematical models lead to the results of a research project, I do understand that the project is about implanting radioactive seeds in a patient as a cancer treatment. Because I can conceptualize the overall study, and I know the general format for such a research paper, I can offer feedback about organization, transitions, clarity, and cohesion.

With one graduate student, this simply wasn't the case. She came in with a cryptanalyst paper meant for a professional conference, and hoped I could help with the standard requests of organization and grammar. After a few questions and reading just the first paragraph, I knew that responding to the student's request wouldn't be that easy. There were lots of words, like "attack" and "box," that I knew were being used with definitions specific to her field. With some words, I struggled to tell what was a noun and what was a verb. When I asked the writer the goal of her study, thinking some context might help me, she dove right into complex language I couldn't understand. I asked her to back up and give me a layman's view, but her answer was just as opaque.

After a couple of paragraphs, I confessed to her, "I have no idea what's going on here."

The writer nodded and explained, "Okay, but I feel like someone could read this and grok what I'm trying to say."

For those puzzling over the word "grok," don't worry; you're not alone. "Grok" was invented by author Robert A. Heinlein for his classic novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*, which is about a human raised on Mars who travels to Earth and teaches Martian customs. To grok someone is to understand them on an emotional, com-

munal level without necessarily being able to describe what it is you understand. I've always compared "grok" to those words you might know how to use, but can't give a definition for. Grok represents an intuitive, contextual understanding rather than a descriptive one. Of the many words created in *Stranger in a Strange Land*, grok made the strongest impression on modern English. It's a surprisingly useful word that continues to pop up in sci-fi, as well as other genres and media. It is not, however, a commonly known word, and I had to smile at the writer's casual use of the word, as if I would of course know what it meant. But this casual use also revealed the attitude that made the writer's paper so difficult to read: she assumed everyone spoke her language. And while I do speak the language of the sci-fi geek, I do not speak ciphertext algorithms.

What the writer said is generally true; I usually can grok what a writer means, even if I don't understand the content. Unfortunately, this writer's paper was so full of terms specific to her field that I could not grok it. I had trouble even identifying sentence structure. She might as well have been talking to me in Martian (which in a way she was). In order to even grok the paper, I would need dozens of terms described. I did not, however, feel that working through a paper in this way would be a good use of the writer's time. Though we are often encouraged, as consultants, to push writers towards imagining an educated layperson reader, going that route could have been a hindrance to the writer's conference goals, not a benefit.

Since I work with medical students and graduate students, I am used to crossing the discipline gap. I commonly ask many of the questions Catherine Savini suggested in her *WLN* article, such as what may be "common knowledge" in the writer's community, or if an advisor has already given feedback (4). I am quite used to "not being invited to the party" by the writer, and have used Savini's suggestions to help find my way. Unfortunately, these questions did not bring me back to Earth. I kept asking the writer what her professor had said. Was this sentence how something was written in her field? The questions either baffled or annoyed her. Even when I suggested she have someone in her field look at her paper, she assured me that, at this point, such review was unnecessary. I became suspicious that a professional in her field would find the paper unacceptable, even though I had no understanding of what I was reading. After reflecting on the situation, I realized my suspicion surfaced because I felt so lost in the paper. Ultimately, I was making the same mistake the writer had made.

I was expecting everyone to speak my language, including the writer's advisor. When I asked the writer what her advisor would say about my questions, the writer probably couldn't grok me, either. Why talk to her advisor? She'd already done that dozens of times.

I have failed to understand a piece of writing many times before, but this consultation was the first time I couldn't even grok it. In earlier situations, there were avenues for me to follow that led to some benefits for the writer I was assisting. In this situation... I simply felt lost. As has been pointed out before, the generalist tutor has limits. Heather Blain Vorhies suggests graduate writing tutors have experience in the discipline of the writers they help. While ideal, such arrangements are impractical for many disciplines. A cryptanalyst consultant is likely just not worth the cost to a writing center. The kind of consultation I encountered can take an emotional toll on a consultant. The frustration of not understanding the paper can lead to frustration with the writer for not being able to explain, and frustration with one's self for not knowing how to better address the situation.

In my frustration, I had forgotten the most basic training a consultant receives: let the writer set the agenda. If I could not grok the content of the paper, I could at least go back to the writer's original goal stated at the beginning of the session. In other words, I could grok her desires as a writer. My need to understand the text ran contrary to the grammar and organization agenda this writer had set at the beginning. If the writer just wanted to read through the paper with me because she needed another person as a way to help her see through a reader's eyes, then I could do that. What I could not do was grok her paper in the way she expected. When we as tutors run into a proverbial brick wall in the content, the first step is to accept we will likely not grok the paper. So we must rewind to the beginning of the session and do our best to accomplish what the writer wants. If necessary, tell the writer your predicament and ask again for the writer's agenda. In my case, I ran the rest of the session with the writer's original agenda in mind. I continued reading the paper aloud, occasionally asking her if she found this approach helpful. Oh yes, she said, her enthusiasm palpable. So we kept going. We noticed three minor issues of grammar and phrasing, all of which she found through my reading aloud. The writer, for her part, felt that the session was a great success. She planned on going home, making a few changes and turning the paper in.

Whenever we as consultants find something we can't grok, we have to be able to find the thing we can grok, whether it be the writer's motives, the writer's feelings, or the piece of writing itself. My mistake in this situation was to focus so fully on the puzzle of the paper that I missed my other obligations as a consultant. The writer's vocal expectation that a reader should be able to grok the paper only further narrowed my focus, at exactly the time I should have been stepping back and reassessing how to approach the session. But each individual decides how he or she groks. While I could not grok the writer's paper, I could grok her desires as a writer. It was this realization that led to a satisfying session for her, and her satisfaction became my own. I think that's a feeling we can all grok.



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