

Tutors' Column: "I Will Not Edit Your Paper. (Will I?): Tutoring and/or Editing in the Writing Center"

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I am a writer, with an MFA and a bunch of things I've written for companies and a few minor creative publications. I am also an editor. I work for publishers and individuals, applying industry standards to manuscripts to prepare them for publication. I love how texts work and come into being, and I love being part of making texts happen. I am also a writing center tutor. What does that position mean, compared to the other roles I play? We writing center people talk about supporting our clients' writing, about focusing on process over product, on helping writers, not just cleaning up the texts themselves.¹ Probably in part because I teach "the rhetorical situation" over and over to my composition students, that's the place I end up in trying to make sense of my tutorial responsibilities and boundaries: that ubiquitous-to-some-of-us triangle of reader-author-text that tries to show how, in the midst of those points, we communicate or generate meaning.²

As a writer, I know exactly where I belong in the triangle. I am the author. When I'm reading, I know where I belong. On those occasions when I'm being studied—when my students are close reading my appearance and body language on the first days of class, or when a potential client is evaluating me to see if they want to work with me or not—I'm even the text. But as an editor? As a tutor? Where do I belong when I'm not the author, but I'm still involved with the creation of the text?

There are different kinds of editors, but two seem especially relevant here: the substantive editor (hereafter, sub-editor) and the copy editor. The sub-editor often performs developmental editing, helping authors generate and shape their ideas early in the drafting process. Once a manuscript draft is complete, the sub-editor works with the text holistically: rearranging chapters, making any needed cuts, recommending additional material. The copy editor, in contrast, works with a manuscript much later in

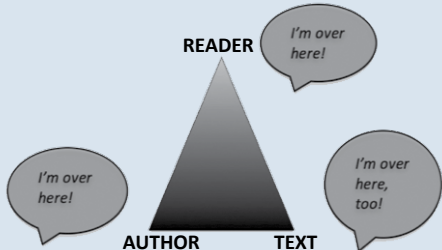
the process, once the overall shape of the work is completed. The copy editor makes revisions at the paragraph-and-sentence levels to ensure accuracy and stylistic consistency.

SUBSTANTIVE EDITING

As a sub-editor, part of my job is to navigate between reader and author. I am not the author, but I can stand beside the author, helping that person think through authorial decisions.

But part of the advantage of my presence is that the author can sort of move me around the triangle—I can stand in as a vicarious audience member (reader), putting myself (as best I can) in the place of various potential readers; I can get close to the text by close reading drafts and giving feedback on shifting meanings; I can come back to the author's corner and try to help with just getting the words out. Between the two of us, we can create a series of dialectic tensions and work through to a draft the author finds satisfying enough.

WHERE'S THE EDITOR?

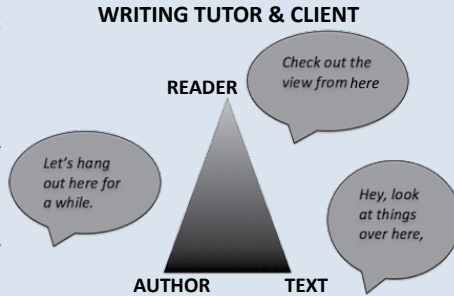


COPY EDITING

When I am the copy editor, working to revise sentence-level issues (often without directly communicating with the author), I am located more alongside the text, serving to tighten and refine words and phrases, to help the text mean on its own as effectively as it can. In straightforward sub-editing or copy editing, though, I have a more hands-on role than I do in tutoring—I have contractual rights and obligations (primarily to the publisher who's hired me) to intervene in the text, to make changes directly, sometimes even to overrule the author's preferences. After all, editing is very product-based. Whether I'm the writer or the sub-editor or the copy editor, I'm part of a team that is working to produce a specific text for a specific purpose—a novel to reach an author's readership, a book proposal to convince a publisher to sign a manuscript in the first place, or a company policy to establish group protocol. Tutoring, though, is part of a trickier situation.

Anyone involved in writing center work knows that students frequently *want* copy editing. They bring in a paper and want it "cleaned up" for their instructors. But their instructors aren't

supposed to be grading *us* and what *we* can do; they're supposed to be grading what the *students* can do. Our job as tutors is not to clean up the paper, but to be a resource for the students to use in completing their *own* work. We are teachers, not editors. So where does that put tutors in the rhetorical situation?

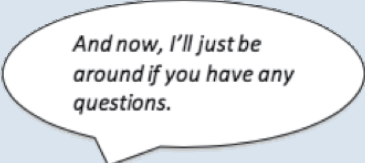


I think we're in the same positions as the sub-editor—that is, ALL the positions—but we perform different functions. Visualizing the tutoring role in connection with my editorial roles helps me do my tutoring job more effectively because it helps me to recognize the overlaps and distinctions among these positions. I can see, in part, why I'm feeling so "editorial" in tutoring sessions, even though I know my job is not truly to edit, either as a sub-editor or a copy editor. Where the sub-editor's job is to move around to all those positions and provide explicit, directive input (which authors are then responsible for and either accept or push back against), the tutor's job is to help the writer come along for the trip, to see the work from different angles, and to equip the author to create the text they want as best they can. Student authors are often not yet able to push back in the ways that professional writers can, and so part of my tutoring job is to teach by modeling multiple options and ways of critiquing the possibilities each delivers. Such instruction serves to help student authors become their own advocates, and ideally, their own editors. Equipping student writers means helping them anticipate reader responses and of course, helping them with the big and small mechanics of textual crafting. Considering tutoring alongside editing helps me to see that when I work with writing center clients, I need to help them learn at least a little bit of how to do what I do, so they can improve both whatever paper they've brought in and future writing projects.

I can also see that my job involves balancing the teaching role with the resource role. Most clients come in expecting some sort of editing, but at least in part, they want the editing because they don't know what else to do. As a tutor, I can be directive enough to help writers ask better questions of themselves and their work, to show them options and strategies for proceeding.

I believe this pedagogical dimension is a crucial part of fulfilling my responsibilities as a tutor. But then I also need to learn to step back and be the resource, to let writers take ownership of their own work and ask what they need to ask, without my over-directing them.

As writing center tutors, we move around the triangle, every one of us, but our positions aren't always neatly located at the corners. By recognizing the mobility of our tutorial roles, we can begin to explore more productive ways to empower our client writers not by editing their work, but by teaching them our editorial approaches.



And now, I'll just be around if you have any questions.

NOTES

1. I am thinking here of the directive/nondirective tutoring style debate, represented nicely in *The St. Martin's Sourcebook for Writing Tutors* in articles by Andrea Lunsford, Jeff Brooks, and Steven J. Corbett.

2. This reader-author-text triangle comes from Lloyd Bitzer's 1968 article, which highlighted the social and dynamic nature of communication.



WORKS CITED

- Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1968, pp. 1–14.
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