

Tutors' Column: "Exploring and Enhancing Writing Tutors' Resource-Seeking Behaviors"

Crystal Conzo
Shippensburg University



CRYSTAL CONZO

When I attended my first few training sessions and education meetings as a writing tutor with the Shippensburg University (Ship) Writing Center, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information. I desperately wanted to retain all of it, but how could I ever? After tutoring with the center for several years as an undergraduate and then a graduate student, I see the better question here is *why would I ever need to?* A lot of the information is located on the bookshelf stacked with resources or could be accessed through one of the links on our website. These resources became increasingly important to me in the years to come, but some additional background is needed to know why.

The Communication/Journalism Department at Ship offers a course called Media Writing that focuses on the study of grammar and mechanics in Associated Press (AP) Style. Years ago, in response to departmental requests for support, the center implemented a specialized tutoring program for the Media Writing class to help students pass a proficiency exam based on grammar and mechanics concepts. Many of the writers who come to our center, then, are seeking Media Writing support. The tutor's role in Media Writing tutoring is to guide the writer through the process of reviewing grammar, mechanics, and AP Style concepts and to practice these concepts in their writing. While our Writing Center endeavors to hire a number of discipline-specific writing tutors, we often have so many writers in the Media Writing tutoring program that we cannot pair every writer with a Media Writing tutor who specializes in Communication/Journalism. Our tutors who don't major in Communication/Journalism don't always have the same familiarity and experience using AP Style. This is where the resources come in—*resources that have been critical in helping me communicate AP Style concepts to writers.*

As I mentioned, I tutored with the Ship Writing Center for several

years. With experience comes responsibility, so as a graduate student, I eventually had a role in assessing the Media Writing tutoring program. While observing tutors over time, I noticed some of them weren't accessing resources in Media Writing. I then realized some weren't accessing resources in their regular MLA and APA writing sessions either. In both Media Writing and regular writing sessions, this lack of resource use led to the dissemination of incorrect information. Further, in some cases where the tutor did use resources, those resources weren't credible (think Google), and, again, the writer was misled. My observations were also affirmed by writers' survey feedback.

Lack of appropriate resource use in particular can be problematic because resources permeate our lives as writing center tutors, and most of the time we use them for the benefit of the writer. The activities within a writing session often lead to a dictionary, a style manual, a website, etc. It's important for tutors to know which resources exist and which ones will be consistently useful. Instead of going to Google with questions, it makes sense to consult the best resources for specific topics, share them, and use them.

I remember the tutors who mentored me had referenced style guides, handouts, and other print and electronic documents regularly. These resources were vetted and approved by our writing center director and graduate assistants. Not only did referencing these documents help those tutors communicate information to writers and increase their own credibility, but it showed the writer where to access the information on their own terms. Why, then, did I see a number of tutors decline to reference resources or rely on those that are unreliable?

To better understand the issue, I decided to hold a focus group among 12 of 13 undergraduate writing tutors from our center. Tutors were not aware of why I was holding the focus group, only that they would be asked questions regarding tutor education meetings, resources, and collaboration. To learn more about my research study, results, and recommendations, please see my chapter in *How We Teach Writing Tutors: A WLN Digital Edited Collection*.

After analyzing the patterns and common responses, I discerned three themes among tutors: *The Role Model*, *The Resource*, and *The Googler*:

The Role Model actively uses resources and selects those recommended by our center. One tutor noted her favorite resources are accessible to writers once they leave the center. A

second tutor prefers print resources with tabs so the information is easy to access during sessions. A third tutor employs both writing center approved resources and materials the writers bring from their class sessions, such as graded assignments and quizzes. Though class materials are not approved by the center, they reflect the learning goals set forth by the professor and are highly appropriate for tutor use.

The Resource tends to rely on their own knowledge rather than accessing or exploring resources to enhance their knowledge and to model smart resource-seeking practices for writers. One tutor actually referred to herself as *the resource* for MLA (hence the title here). Another tutor says he doesn't need to "look up" certain material, he can "just do" it. A third tutor said he looked up material for his writing sessions when he first started tutoring, but he hasn't since. Based on their responses, these tutors may view resources as useful only to novice tutors, not experienced ones, like themselves.

The Googler makes limited use of writing-center approved resources and/or refers to unapproved resources they've found on their own, which may lack reliability and applicability to the writer's work. One tutor noted she uses Google to find answers. Another tutor who fits into the Googler mold mentioned he habitually uses one specific resource offered by the center and turns to Google once he exhausts the material available through this resource. His response suggests he may not be familiar with the other resources offered in the center. While Google offers a great deal of convenience and access to a broad spectrum of information, it's risky in that not every result is reliable and applicable to the course context, and it's difficult for tutors to assess these criteria on the spot. Tutors can use Google outside the session to find new resources they wish to add to the writing center repertoire, but it shouldn't be their first choice when seeking out information in sessions.

Since the focus group discussion, the center has made a greater effort to engage tutors in better use of resources. Based on the focus group discussion combined with my experience and observations, I was able to generate a set of guidelines for tutors when accessing resources. Although guidelines for resource seeking may vary across writing centers, these can serve as a starting point for tutors of all backgrounds:

1. Use center-approved resources during your sessions to ensure validity.
2. If you find a resource you like that isn't on the shelf or the approved website, let the grad assistants or director know

so they can approve it and make it accessible to other tutors.

3. Familiarize yourself with approved resources prior to your tutoring sessions so you know which to use and feel comfortable using them.
4. If you cannot find the information you are seeking, are confused, or need a quick answer, use the directors, grad assistants, or head tutors as a resource.
5. Never use Google in a session, unless as a shortcut to find an approved resource you're familiar with (e.g. you can Google "Purdue OWL APA Style Headings" to find that page). When you use Google, you may come across to writers as unprepared, and you could end up communicating information that contradicts what is outlined in the class.
6. If you think the center should have additional resources available for a specific topic, please let the director or grad assistants know so that they can provide them.

A combination of focus group research and idea-sharing has been effective in helping our writing center target what we believe to be a weak area in our student support offerings. A handful of tutors at the Ship Writing Center may not consistently access resources to find information and validate their claims, use approved and reliable resources, or scan the center's resources to increase familiarity. However, this has prompted us to allot extra time during training to familiarize tutors with resources, observe tutors' resource use more actively, and encourage tutors to expand their knowledge and model best practices for resource use.

That resources are valuable is by no means a new finding; what is new is our understanding that we can benefit from added discussion about good resource seeking. Tutors can continue to explore resources beyond those they use frequently, but we should be careful to get to know the resource first before using it in a tutoring session.



WORKS CITED

Conzo, Crystal. "Exploring and Enhancing Writing Tutors' Resource-Seeking Behaviors." *How We Teach Writing Tutors: A WLN Digital Edited Collection*, edited by Karen Gabrielle Johnson and Ted Roggenbuck, 2019, wlnjournal.org/digitaleditedcollection1/Conzo.html.