

# Making Assignment Prompts More Effective: Can Writing Center Tutors Help?

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At the American University of Beirut (AUB), our writing center seeks to support the entire AUB community by inviting all students, faculty, and staff to schedule tutoring appointments for writing support. Though few instructors take us up on that invitation, our tutors spend significant time in sessions helping writers understand assignment prompts, meet prompt expectations, and consider what questions to ask instructors to get clarification on those expectations. That students misunderstand assignment prompts “with astonishing regularity,” according to Muriel Harris, indicates that prompts are not as straightforward a genre to read as instructors might want to believe (39). As such, we wondered whether to offer faculty opportunities to help them refine their prompts, and by doing so, attempt to improve their students’ experiences as writers.

In line with numerous writing center handbooks, websites, and scholarly publications that find value in presenting strategies to help tutors read and comprehend assignment prompts, assignment prompt analysis is a key component of our tutor training. This act of interpretation is needed for any kind of assignment and is central to students’ successful completion of it. Researchers observe three ways students misunderstand assignment prompts: they lack the ability to correctly read them, they interpret directions differently than the instructors intended, or they experience difficulty in interpreting poorly written prompts (Harris; Reid; Kroll and Reid). Whatever the reason, students can feel confused and overwhelmed, unsure of what to do, which can lead to instructors being frustrated by students asking the same questions across course sections or incorrectly completing assignments. In light of this situation we asked, “Could tutors offer feedback to instructors on writing assignment prompts? And if so, how?” Providing feedback on assignment prompts would emphasize our tutors’ abilities to work with writers at all levels. This feedback could offer instructors the perspectives of peer tutors who possess critical reading expertise and are capable of identifying possible

points of misinterpretation or ambiguity within prompts.

## **BACKGROUND**

The American University of Beirut is an English language, liberal arts institution that serves over 9,000 Lebanese and international students. The writing program, housed within the English Department, comprises approximately forty full-time and part-time instructors who teach one or more of five writing courses offered every semester. Instructors are primarily Lebanese, with Arabic, English, and/or French language backgrounds, though several instructors are international, from countries including the United States and Poland. The writing center, founded in 2004, is currently staffed by a director, assistant director, senior tutor, and approximately sixteen undergraduate, graduate, and volunteer tutors, most of whom are multilingual like the writers they serve. The writing center holds approximately ten workshops and 1,700 consultations each year.

Our writing center is not among the first to consider expanding their repertoire to have tutors work with instructors. The University of Wyoming Writing Center tutors, all of whom are faculty members themselves, work with instructors on a variety of writing projects, including assignment prompts (Garner). Other writing centers provide course-specific or course-embedded tutor programs, but such offerings typically focus more on the students' writing in the courses than on supporting the instructors' writing of prompts. An exception is a project at University of Michigan-Flint and Ursinus College where undergraduate writing center tutors and writing fellows meet individually with instructors to review writing prompts. Through these activities, Jacob Blumner, Francis Fritz, and Sarah Wice found that the instructors regarded tutors' feedback as useful for designing and revising curricula and increasing the instructors' use of tutors (7). With these experiences in mind, our research questions comprised the following: Would AUB instructors find student tutors' feedback helpful in revising assignment prompts? Would contexts beyond one-to-one tutoring be effective spaces for this work? And what components of tutor education are needed to provide effective support?

## **OUR PROJECT**

To address these questions, we ran an IRB-approved research project during fall 2018 in which we piloted two opportunities: a two-hour, stand-alone workshop for tutors and instructors and a semester-long, course-specific tutoring collaboration. Because composition instructors are trained to be reflective about written texts using terminologies similar to those of writing center tutors, we invited this group to receive feedback from tutors on their assignment prompts.

## **TUTOR EDUCATION**

Tutors are encouraged to enroll in Tutoring Writing, a course on writing center scholarship and practice, and are required to participate in a three-day training retreat prior to each semester, which prepares tutors to work with all writers on any type of writing. In preparation for working with instructors, we dedicated a portion of the retreat to training tutors on how to provide constructive feedback on prompts: tutors read several handouts on understanding writing assignments that divide the process into theoretical understandings of prompts, practical steps for interacting with instructors, and focused activities with questions targeting instructors and their students. Using those readings and the guidelines created by the directors and senior tutor, the tutors were then provided sample prompts to critique in terms of audience, purpose, tone, completeness of information, and student perspective. Tutors understood that their goal for the upcoming activities would be to explain how students might misinterpret instructions or to point out something unclear about, unnecessary to, or missing from a prompt, thereby helping instructors avoid repetitive student questions or poorly completed student papers.

## **ASSIGNMENT REVISION WORKSHOP**

Four weeks into the semester, we invited composition instructors to a workshop to which they brought a writing prompt they were creating or revising in order for them to critique it themselves and receive tutor feedback. To prepare for the workshop, tutors were given guidance on how to conduct assignment reviews with faculty while accounting for their own apprehensions and concerns. In discussion groups, they practiced crafting questions such as “What is the purpose of the assignment?,” “What are the important keywords, and what do they mean?,” “What are the genre, style, and technical details of the assignment, and why are those aspects important?” This group work, with input from the directors, helped build tutors’ confidence and skills for analyzing assignment prompts.

During the event, we partnered eight participating instructors with their own tutor. While the director reviewed best practices for writing assignment prompts with instructors, each tutor separately reviewed their instructor’s prompt. The assistant director supervised the tutors, responding to questions and concerns. After thirty minutes of these independent activities, tutors joined their instructor to provide feedback on the prompt. To collect feedback on the usefulness of this event, we anonymously surveyed the instructors and tutors at the start and end of the workshop to glean their perceptions and preparedness for the session as well as the helpfulness of the tutoring interaction. Seven tutors and all eight

instructors gave consent to participate. At the end of the semester, we sent a follow-up survey to instructors asking whether and how they used the tutors' feedback and if they found the revisions to be helpful or noticed anything about their students' work based on their revised prompt.

### **COURSE-SPECIFIC TUTORING**

Five new instructors were required by the composition program director to partner with a course-specific tutor. They were given a document detailing the guidelines and expectations for the roles a tutor would play with them and their students. During the semester, the tutor and instructor met in person once to review and discuss one or more assignment prompts. Unlike the tutors who participated in the workshop, course-specific tutors also visited each instructor's class to introduce themselves and to encourage students to schedule writing center appointments.

The five assigned course-specific tutors were provided individualized support by the assistant director throughout the semester: she facilitated the tutors' contact with instructors by giving feedback on tutors' introductory emails to the instructors and by building tutors' confidence when interacting with instructors outside the writing center. Tutors used the retreat handouts to evaluate the instructors' prompts and created questions and comments. The assistant director met with each tutor to discuss and approve their review of the prompt and their feedback to make recommendations and ensure it conformed to the goals of providing suggestions on format, presentation, and clarity. The course-specific tutors reported twice after the meeting with the instructor, which served as a chance for the assistant director to manage concerns and suggest alternate approaches. At the end of the semester, instructors received an anonymous qualitative survey with questions that asked them to reflect on their experiences working with the course-specific tutor on their assignment prompt(s), their thoughts on whether and how they found the feedback and revisions to be helpful, and their perceptions of students' work based on those revisions. We also collected the tutors' reports that detailed their points of view on the work. Three instructors and all five tutors participated.

### **WHAT PARTICIPANTS SAID**

By offering two types of assignment prompt tutoring, our goal was to ascertain which tutoring experience more effectively balanced positive outcomes with input of resources. Our results are organized by event in order to best present comparisons.

### **ASSIGNMENT REVISION WORKSHOP**

Seven tutors completed the pre- and post-workshop surveys. Of those, only two felt either very prepared or moderately prepared before they began their work with instructors. They stated that

their nervousness arose from the idea of engaging with experts in writing who occupied a superior position in the institution. Yet their perceptions changed after the workshop: four felt very prepared and three moderately prepared. They described this preparedness as stemming from applying their knowledge of general tutoring frameworks to this session as well as employing tutoring strategies such as reverse outlining, audience examination, and keyword revision. They directly referred to specific aspects of their training, such as active listening, asking questions, and conversational dynamics, in addition to relying on each other in the writing center spirit of community as key elements that prepared them for working in the sessions.

All eight instructors completed pre-and post-workshop surveys, and none of those initially expected the tutors' feedback to be very helpful; yet, after the workshop, seven of them stated that the workshop was very helpful, and all eight claimed to be leaving with clear steps to improve/revise their assignments. They also all described the tutors as having been "very prepared" to work with them on their prompts. By the end of the workshop, four of the eight expressed interest in working with tutors on prompts in the future and five said they would recommend the service to others. Instructors emphasized the tutors' unique perspective on their prompts and that the feedback was constructive, well-framed, and thought-provoking.

In the five responses to the end-of-semester survey, three instructors reported using tutor feedback to revise their prompts. Perhaps more importantly for long-term impact of the workshop, however, when asked how the workshop impacted revisions/improvements to the assignment prompt, two of those three extended their answer to note that the feedback motivated them to be more mindful of clarity and comprehension when designing other assignments throughout the semester.

### **COURSE-SPECIFIC TUTORING**

All five of the course-specific tutors generally reported positive interaction with the instructors and that they perceived their training to be of great assistance. They felt the instructors positively received their feedback as coming from a student whose perspective was enhanced by training and found the instructors willing to modify their prompts based on feedback. However, tutors found it difficult to complete full reviews of the assignment prompts because the instructors often redirected attention away from the prompts and onto concerns about students' writing abilities. The tutors also noted that they sought out direct support from the assistant director, senior tutor, and other tutors.

All three of the instructors who responded to the end-of-

semester survey found their course-specific tutors to be helpful and cooperative. Instructors specifically found value in discussing writing pedagogy with a tutor, and all said they would recommend the service to other instructors. However, though all tutors believed the instructors willing to apply feedback, two of them did not revise their prompts and were uncertain they would request a course-specific tutor for help with future assignments. The instructors appeared inclined to consider the tutor a resource for their students rather than for themselves, which made us question the impact of the tutors' work with them, and by extension made us recognize the need to offer the instructors mentoring on how to work with tutors.

### **A FEASIBLE OPPORTUNITY**

Comments about the success of tutors' feedback on assignment prompts differed based on the type of support given. Seven of the eight instructors who participated in the workshop and all three of those with course-specific tutors found the tutors to be helpful; meanwhile, in the end-of-semester surveys three of the five instructors from the workshop made revisions to their prompts based on tutor feedback, and only one of the three instructors who had course-specific tutors did so. We observed that the differences in the meeting contexts, instructors' views of the tutor's audience, and the amount of guidance provided to tutors and instructors impacted the success of the two projects.

For our purposes, the workshop yielded some more positive results relative to the amount of time and energy spent by the directors and tutors. First, the controlled workshop environment helped tutors feel more confident than the course-specific tutors because the writing center directors were present to give clear instructions and guidance on instructor-tutor interactions during the workshop. The tutors were on their own in course-specific tutoring meetings, with only written guidelines to inform instructors on procedures and expectations. Second, the course-specific tutoring was mandatory for the five new instructors, possibly causing them to be less invested than those who opted to join the workshop. Third, the instructors accepted/understood their role as the tutors' intended audience in the workshop; whereas, marketing course-specific tutoring as support for both instructors and their students led instructors to focus on how tutors could primarily help their students and not them.

We believe the workshop to be a feasible opportunity for our writing center to continue to offer to instructors, but because the course-specific tutoring requires more time from the directors, we find it is currently not worthwhile for our center. The key features that made the workshop successful were explicit training of tutors

to work with instructors on prompts, clarifying instructors' and tutors' roles during the session, allowing the tutors to review the prompts under the supervision of the assistant director, and asking the instructors to first review their prompts to ensure they include the most important elements of strong writing prompts. We would recommend others considering such an activity to include the same components. Additionally, in the future we would ensure that instructors bring in a prompt they have not yet given to students; two of the workshop participants did not revise their prompts, which had already been distributed to their classes.

Meanwhile, for our writing center to encourage instructors to see the value in course-specific tutors' feedback on prompts, the directors would need to meet with instructors multiple times to clarify goals and maintain procedures. However, for writing centers with existing writing fellow or other course-specific tutoring programs, short tutor training exercises on comprehending assignment prompts, frequent meetings with tutors and instructors, tutor reflections, and consistent reporting and feedback cycles, in addition to working with strong writers, could prepare tutors to give feedback on writing prompts.

It should be noted that our research has several limitations. Our survey methods do not yield highly specific responses as to the relationship between feedback and improvement, but the responses do demonstrate participants' positive attitudes about the workshop events and their perceptions of increased awareness when crafting assignment prompts. We also only worked with composition instructors who are already trained to value writing processes and feedback but who each have diverse experiences with and views of our writing center. However, as the goal of our project was to determine the efficacy of tutors working with instructors on assignment prompts, we believe that the survey responses do give us a baseline assessment to continue to adapt our tutor training and support offerings.

One unexpected benefit that resulted from this project was that we, as writing center administrators and writing instructors, became more conscious about prompts as real genres of writing through hosting these events. More importantly, we found that after the workshop our tutors recognized that the training they received prepared them to work in seemingly difficult contexts with individuals they perceived as being strong writers and as having more power: they were surprised and invigorated by being able to provide useful feedback to an instructor and welcomed the opportunity to be challenged again in such a way. Even those tutors who mentioned struggling to give feedback to instructors on assignment prompts recognized that they do have the ability to contribute to instructors' composing of clear and meaningful

assignment prompts. In this light, we consider it our duty as administrators to continue encouraging and supporting such interactions while researching best methods to do so.



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