

Tutors' Column: "Speedometers in the Writing Process and Writing Center"

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For many students it is a rite of passage: professors repeatedly urge, “start earlier, so you have time to write a solid draft; finish earlier, so you have time to revise and edit.” Despite such well-intentioned advice, cadets with whom I have consulted as a peer consultant at West Point’s Mounger Writing Center continue to recount anxiety-laden struggles meeting deadlines. Reiterating advice they already get from their teachers on when to start and finish papers is no longer enough; I have found that what often helps them more is breaking down the inherently varied rhythms of the writing process. By helping students internalize the reality that writers can pace their work differently according to the context and stage of their writing process, we can better support their quests to find their own optimal writing speeds.



How can we talk about the different rhythms of the writing process in ways that speak to student writers? In my consulting, I’ve recommended what I call the “speedometer method.” My method uses a familiar object—a speedometer—as an analogy to help students understand what a more alien object—a yet-to-be-written essay—requires in terms of the composition process. A slow start, quick bursts of speed, and deliberate deceleration are elements that sport cars and the writing process share. With consultants helping to gauge effective paces—much like radar speed signs—for writer-drivers at each stage of the process, students can learn to diversify their rhythm in ways that mirror the practices of more experienced writers.

ENGINE WARM-UPS / BRAINSTORMING AND MUSING

Our cars require slow starts so as not to damage their engines; sometimes writers can benefit from informal brainstorming or musing sessions in order to avoid feeling overwhelmed. As writing center consultants, we can help them first mull over their ideas, deliberately form connections, and develop more complex concepts before plunging into drafting. In doing so, we help reassure writers

that a “slow start” is not only a feasible but often an optimal way to begin the writing process.

Accordingly, consultants are wise to exercise restraint in the beginning of a session, especially when writers bring in nothing but a prompt. Enthusiastic tutors may see this as an opportunity to share their ideas with ostensibly empty-handed writers, perpetuating misguided understandings of writing centers as ‘storehouses’—places where ideas flow unidirectionally from consultant to writers, rather than interactively between them (Lunsford 2). Ideally, however, writing centers are sites for dialogue. Especially at the initial stage, we can help set a slower, more reflective pace. During one of my recent consultations, the writer confessed that he expected our writing center to be just as quickly paced as his college lifestyle. Therefore, he almost expected that he could and *would* rapidly, decisively generate the essay’s final outline during our forty-five minute consultation. However, I explained that such haste would not be conducive to quality work; instead of immediately piecing together an outline from the scattered, inchoate notes he brought in, I facilitated a meaningful conversation related to his essay topic. I also shared brainstorming techniques he could use outside of the center. For instance, the doodling he does as he waits for his next class could be transformed into a brainstorming web that could serve as the basis for an outline for his next paper. After proper warm-ups, writers are ready to speed off to the races.

QUICK BURSTS OF SPEED / FAST DRAFTING

Law enforcement officers disapprove of cars flying down the road, but drivers find speed exhilarating. I tell my writers that speedy drafting can thrust them through moments where they lack motivation or the drought periods that frequently follow outlining. Even as planning is essential for academic writing, over-planning may lead to over-thinking and over-inflated concerns; it risks paralysis for the writer. The drafting stage is not the time to scour for more precise language—save that for the revision stage. Writing center consultants can remind peers that generating a draft is supposed to be rough and at times frightening; this stage does not have to be slow and deliberate, lest stagnation occur. Rather, students in the drafting phase can benefit from exercises such as focused freewriting. As Peter Elbow reminds us, “Freewriting exercises are push-ups in withholding judgment as you produce so that afterwards you can judge better” (14).

So, I advise students to write fast: the writing center is just the place to support the need for speed. By encouraging writers to consider drafting quickly, we can help them realize they have more ideas than they give themselves credit for. I once had a writer who hesitated

during the drafting stage. I encouraged her to loosen her judgment and write with momentum, giving her pockets of time between our conversation to simply write (which consultants often do in our writing center). It did the trick. While dialogue predominates in my consultations, I have found that bursts of writing between conversations help writers adjust to the faster tempo of the drafting stage. Although freewriting is often connected to prewriting, during the drafting stage this fast-paced approach can be an efficient way to get important ideas written down.

DELIBERATE DECELERATION / REVISION AND FINAL PROOFREADING

Eventually other factors—whether sirens blaring from behind, deadlines or roadblocks ahead, or simply the driver’s own adrenaline wearing away—lead writer-drivers to decelerate and gradually come to a stop. At this point in the writing process, speed no longer equals success. As Elbow states about the revision stage, “If you haven’t found your main point during the writing process, now you must demand it. This is often a crucial, delicate, frustrating process” (129). Revision requires intensive care. The looser language that we sped through in the drafting stage should be acknowledged here. Writers must spot and deal with such concerns purposefully; although it may seem like a daunting task, this is where consultants can act as the second set of eyes for our writers and provide valuable feedback.

Emphasizing deceleration during the revision stage reminds our writers to allow themselves enough writing time to come in to the center and benefit from our collaboration and pointers. In a recent session of mine, a writer who had just finished his paper admitted that the main reason he shared his paper with me was that he did not want to read over his draft, for fear of disappointing himself. Because he was still thrilled and relieved, in equal measure, at his perceived victory in completing the ‘race’ of drafting, he was especially vulnerable to the frustration Elbow mentions. I have found that easing writers into the deceleration of the revision stage is key to helping them overcome such fears and frustrations. During sessions when my writers are revising drafts that they will soon turn in, I aim to structure discussions on higher order concerns in ways that writers coming to a stop can manage; for example, rather than suggest an entirely new lens through which to view their subject, I might point out a comparatively minor but unacknowledged counterargument. Such tactics at once avoid adding more stress and encourage writers to bring their work methodically to completion. Additionally, by asking clarification questions about their language and mirroring my thought process to them as I read their draft, I

assist them in tightening up their language and focusing their main points for the homestretch. Giving writers some time to shift gears helps them feel more comfortable and empowered to revisit their drafts and to move deliberately across the finish line.

Writing center consultants who work with writers throughout their writing processes can serve as changing radar speed signs or driving coaches, essentially informing students of the various writing speeds they can use. We can alter the posted speed and vary our guidance, depending on conditions. We can help students find the optimal writing speed to attain their key insights, the momentum to complete a draft, and the time to decelerate, revise, and come to a satisfying stop. And we can help assure them that unfamiliar challenges are to be expected: the speedometer method challenges the notion that every stage of the writing process should be travelled at the same pace. Slowing down and speeding up at different junctions of the road can help writers complete papers and experience journeys they never before thought possible.



WORKS CITED

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- Lunsford, Andrea. "Collaboration, Control, and the Idea of a Writing Center." *The Writing Center Journal*, vol.12, no.1, 1991, pp. 3–10.