

# An Idea of a Writing Center: Moving Toward Antiracism in Asynchronous Sessions

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While writing center scholars such as Nancy Grimm, Laura Greenfield, Anis Bawarshi, Stephanie Pelkowski, and others have highlighted how writing centers participate in the oppression of linguistic difference, and racial difference as an extension, all have framed their discussions within the face-to-face, synchronous model. Yet, as the coronavirus continues to rage and our students continue to seek tutoring in various modalities, we must also grapple with our participation in oppressive systems in an online format. Now is the time to examine our role in racial oppression in something other than the face-to-face mode. If we truly wish to keep students safe during these uncertain times, this also means we must suffuse our centers with antiracist practices and values, no matter the modality.



Online writing center work, in particular, is at risk of being seen as a race-neutral practice because of the apparent neutrality of the medium. In her work on race and technology, Ruha Benjamin discusses what she calls the New Jim Code or “the employment of new technologies that reflect and reproduce existing inequities but that are promoted or perceived as more objective or progressive than the discriminatory systems of a previous era” (5). The difference in mode creates new possibilities for bias and prejudice, unconscious or otherwise, that need to be considered, navigated, and mitigated. However, the difference in mode also creates new opportunities to understand our work and to perform our work ethically and equitably.

Especially at a time when so much of our work now must be done remotely, writing centers should strive to understand more about asynchronous tutoring. Yet, I’m also writing in a moment when so many writing centers are becoming more cognizant of racial inequities, particularly the role of racism in sustaining dominant power structures and the various, violent ways in which this dominance manifests for people of color.

This article begins by providing Ibram Kendi's definition of antiracism and framing antiracism within a writing center context. Next, I draw on Mandy Suhr-Sytsma and Shan-Estelle Brown's heuristic to resist the everyday language of oppression and position it as a potential framework to move toward an antiracist practice in asynchronous consultations. Finally, I offer a potential training strategy for asynchronous writing tutors using Suhr-Sytsma and Brown as a tool of antiracist praxis.

### **ANTIRACISM IN THE WRITING CENTER**

In *How to Be an Antiracist*, Kendi carefully, but broadly, defines antiracism as "a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas" (20). An antiracist policy is "any measure that produces or sustains racial equity between racial groups" (18). An antiracist idea would be one that functions to resist or dismantle racial hierarchies. For Kendi, there is simply no way to be passively antiracist, and there's no such thing as non-racist or race neutral. One is either actively creating policies, procedures, and environments that lead to racial equity, or they are not; if they are not, they are unthinkingly participating in racism or a collection of racist policies that lead to racial inequity and hierarchies.

Writing center scholars regularly grapple with the racist policies and practices of writing centers. For example, in "Unmaking Gringo-Centers," Romeo Garcia posits, "writing centers may not be as equipped to account for how race operates and manifests. To move beyond the limits of a white/black race paradigm, and into a pluriversality of anti-racist agendas, a cultural dialogue of recognition, critique, accountability, and responsibility is needed" (38-39). Grimm attempts to dismantle the language of individualism that pervades the writing center and that creates a system of disadvantage for students from, in particular, non-white backgrounds. Focusing on individual writers shifts our attention away from the wider social dimensions of our work, stops us from interrogating the racist policies we unthinkingly enact, and "hinders our ability to address racism that operates structurally" (79).

Following Kendi's model, Grimm's use of "structurally" is redundant. Kendi contends, "Racism itself is institutional, structural, and systemic" (18). That is, there is no racism that is not also operating structurally. While prejudice might exist on a personal or individual level, racism necessarily functions at the level of the system, constituting and being constituted by racial hierarchies. While any single person is capable of exhibiting prejudice against another person, racism "produces and normalizes racial inequities" (17) and, I

argue, because these inequities are thus normalized in a racist system or racist practices, they become harder to see.

Racism is not always easily identifiable. In writing centers, and in writing studies more broadly, racism manifests most readily in the idea of “standard” English. In “The ‘Standard English’ Fairy Tale: A Rhetorical Analysis of Racist Pedagogies and Commonplace Assumptions about Language Diversity,” Greenfield notes, “It is no coincidence that languages [and dialects] spoken by racially oppressed people are considered to be inferior in every respect to the languages spoken predominantly by those who wield systemic power: namely, middle- and upper-class white people” (36). Yet, because this discrimination is hidden within the discussion of linguistics and language practices, it may go unnoticed, invisible behind a façade of neutrality.

Antiracism can become a lens through which we view students’ writing, critically engaging with our process for writing comments in asynchronous sessions. Antiracism actively resists unthinkingly reinforcing the standards of the dominant discourse, a style of writing privileged in academia, and encourages the creation of antiracist policies and strategies to further break down racial and linguistic hierarchies. Written feedback can and should be a vehicle for the equitable treatment of students, fostering respect for students’ home discourses, and cultivating agency in the students themselves. What writing centers need, then, is a path toward doing this kind of work.

### **USING SUHR-SYTSMA AND BROWN AS A LENS FOR ASYNCHRONOUS COMMENTS**

As we consider Kendi’s definition of antiracism along with the connection Greenfield makes between linguistic validity and race, how can written comments on a student’s paper help perpetuate racial equity? Conversely, in what ways could a comment reinforce the dominant discourse? In order to enact antiracism in an asynchronous consultation, consultants should thoughtfully consider how and why they’re leaving comments and what students are supposed to do with those comments. Unlike in synchronous sessions, writing consultants in asynchronous sessions have time to be deliberate about the kinds of comments they make. We can move toward identifying their antiracist components by using Suhr-Sytsma and Brown’s heuristic in “Theory In/To Practice: Addressing the Everyday Language of Oppression in the Writing Center.” In using their heuristic as a kind of frame, I will outline how each item can be addressed or translated into an asynchronous modality.

Suhr-Sytsma and Brown are writing from a face-to-face paradigm, but much of their heuristic is productive for asynchronous sessions. In particular, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown bring attention to several approaches to anti-oppression work in writing centers, including one approach that “stresses the systematic not just personal nature of oppression and...pushes for increased reflection about privileged discourses, power dynamics, and forms of oppression at play in tutors’ and writers’ experiences in the writing center itself” (17). They present two heuristics in their work: one for how language can perpetuate oppression and one for how oppression can be challenged through attention to language (22); only the latter, “How Tutors and Writers Can Challenge Oppression through Attention to Language,” will be used here. Suhr-Sytsma and Brown present eight distinct items in their list:

1. Clarify meanings together
2. Express understanding of one another’s meanings
3. Discuss meaning and use of sources
4. Pose counterarguments
5. Maintain a non-combative tone
6. Address language without accusations of intentional oppression
7. Name the “elephant in the room”
8. Learn to better identify and address language that perpetuates oppression. (22)

This list acts as a potential way for writing consultants to actively resist what Suhr-Sytsma and Brown call the everyday language of oppression, which refers to commonly used language that may invisibly reinforce systemic inequalities based on things like race and gender. Insofar as the everyday language of oppression can be used to reinscribe racism or racial hierarchies, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown’s heuristic for challenging that oppression can function in an antiracist way.

In the following sections, I have grouped the eight-item heuristic into three umbrella sections. There may not be a direct way to transfer some of the items specifically because I’m translating them from a synchronous to an asynchronous context. However, there are common themes that run through each item that can be addressed in an asynchronous session. I’ve determined these themes based on how they frame the interaction with the student: clarifying strategies help keep the student in a position of agency; responding strategies can push students to acknowledge oppressive features of their writing; and addressing strategies demonstrate to students what they can do to mitigate oppressive features in their

writing. In the next few sections, I hope to show how Suhr-Sytsma and Brown's heuristic can be adapted to asynchronous tutoring even if each item does not have a direct one-to-one translation.

## **CLARIFYING**

### **Clarify Meanings Together, Express Understanding of One Another's Meanings, Discuss Meaning and Use of Sources**

Suhr-Sytsma and Brown's conception of clarification revolves around open-ended questions such as, "What do you mean?" (35), which would then open up a conversation between the tutor and the writer. In an asynchronous session, though, a question such as "What do you mean?" could itself be easily misread as critical or confusing. In an asynchronous session, a tutor might instead offer a summary of any troubling content, as the tutor understands it, and then ask the student if their (the tutor's) understanding is correct.

Suhr-Sytsma and Brown posit that clarity is usually lost when "writers are unclear or vague about their own or their source's perspectives" (35), which causes the tutor's own comments to be unclear. Clarifying meanings together, then, requires not necessarily a particular question to be asked, but a particular purpose in mind. Even the tutors in Suhr-Sytsma and Brown's study acknowledged that they sometimes needed a more directive way to approach issues of clarity.

The strategy that Suhr-Sytsma and Brown offer of having tutors ask "is that what you meant to say?" is easily adapted to asynchronous sessions and allows the tutor to respond more as a reader, which Suhr-Sytsma and Brown emphasize as important (35). This clarifying question, as opposed to something like "I don't understand you," keeps the writer in a position of agency. This reader positionality is arguably easier to attain when a tutor is working asynchronously, since most readers don't usually read with the writers right in front of them.

## **RESPONDING**

### **Pose Counterarguments, Maintain a Non-Combative Tone**

There are multiple ways that a tutor can respond to writing, but posing counterarguments can be an effective strategy for pushing writers to think through or see other perspectives. Suhr-Sytsma and Brown contend, "posing counterarguments, in the spirit of a peer reader, [is] an effective strategy and, in some cases, the best strategy for addressing the everyday language of oppression" (38). This specific strategy is easily translatable to the asynchronous session. If a writer is making an argument based on racial stereotypes,

for instance, the asynchronous tutor can provide web links to sources that disprove or counter those stereotypes. An asynchronous session may actually be more effective in this case because it would give the tutor time to find the appropriate sources and to craft an effective counterargument, rather than trying to come up with one in the moment.

Tone takes on a vital dimension in asynchronous sessions, especially when posing counterarguments. A comment made lightly in a face-to-face consultation may be misread as rude in an asynchronous one. Courtney Werner and Diane Lin Awad Scrocco posit that “netspeak” may be one strategy for generating a friendly ethos in a digital environment. In their study, “Tutor Talk, Netspeak, and Student Speak: Enhancing Online Consultations,” they argue, “These digitally specific communication patterns allow tutors and writers to establish common linguistic ground in a digital environment where many students feel quite comfortable, allowing for ample opportunities for rapport building between tutors and writers” (58). That is, when a tutor writes less formally, this can make the act of reading through feedback less threatening for the student. Werner and Awad Scrocco note, “Netspeak is characterized by fewer full stops (punctuation), sentence-initial capitalization, and capitalized proper nouns” (53). However, they also point out that this more informal writing can potentially harm a tutor’s ethos for students who might expect a tutor to only write in Edited Academic Discourse. As Suhr-Sytsma and Brown note, “it’s important to maintain a positive, collaborative tone” (38), and deploying netspeak may be one way to do that even while pushing back against problematic language.

## **ADDRESSING**

### **Address Language without Accusations of Intentional Oppression, Name the “Elephant in the Room,” Learn to Better Identify and Address Language That Perpetuates Oppression**

A key component of Suhr-Sytsma and Brown’s article is being able to address the everyday language of oppression. Yet, in alignment with maintaining a non-combative tone, a tutor has to be judicious in how they approach students—especially in an asynchronous environment. Suhr-Sytsma and Brown highlight the importance of rapport: “creating a non-judgmental atmosphere of trust...is especially key in fostering productive conversations about oppressive language” (39). How can tutors create this atmosphere of trust in an asynchronous session?

One potential strategy is providing more to the student than just comments in the margins of the paper. Depending on the platform

being used the tutor might write an introductory email with the document attached or write up a separate document to also be shared with the student. For instance, Dan Gallagher and Aimee Maxfield note the University of Maryland University College's use of standalone advice letters. They write, "Our rationale is that creating a personalized, persuasive, logically organized advice letter allows the tutor to both model effective writing and establish a connection with the student within the boundaries of a written text." In this letter, the tutor could note their intention to ask hard questions and state their goal of helping the writer communicate in a more inclusive way. While this can also be done in marginal comments, having some context might make naming "the elephant in the room" (Suhr-Sytsma and Brown 39) less threatening to the student.

Finally, Suhr-Sytsma and Brown emphasize the importance of continuously working to better perceive the everyday language of oppression and to implement strategies to address it. They acknowledge their work as a "springboard" (40) for writing centers, but these strategies can also add value to asynchronous sessions.

## **CONCLUSION**

While a true theoretical framework for enacting antiracism in asynchronous sessions is beyond the scope of this article, focusing on how to resist the everyday language of oppression as it might arise in asynchronous sessions is an important step forward. An effective next move for this kind of research might be to apply Suhr-Sytsma and Brown's heuristic more definitively to asynchronous sessions, perhaps developing a more comprehensive heuristic that other institutions who provide asynchronous sessions could use and modify for themselves. There's so much that's different when communicating asynchronously compared to communicating synchronously, including the ways in which we have to adjust our approaches when working with students in this modality.

The practice of asynchronous tutoring now finds itself at the confluence of two worldwide events: the spread of the coronavirus and a great reckoning with racial oppression and violence. To mitigate the spread of the virus, universities and other institutions of learning are turning to increasingly digital offerings, both for classes and academic support, which results in greater pressure on writing centers to provide synchronous and asynchronous online tutoring. As of this article's writing, the virus continues to cause COVID-19 infections across the country. While many institutions may be preparing to welcome more students in person, mitigation efforts continue—and so does our electronic work. Even if we're ever able to

move into a truly post-pandemic phase, I suspect that digital synchronous and asynchronous work is here to stay. This increase in electronically-mediated tutoring also means that writing centers must, as they've done with face-to-face sessions, grapple with the racism and oppression endemic to academic sites if left unchecked. Antiracism is active, ongoing work no matter the modality.

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