

## Tutors' Column: "Gestures about Writing: Toward an Art of Gestural Paraphrasing"

Andrew Sweeso  
Saint Louis University

As tutors, we tend to at least be aware that we gesture when we talk, and that our gestures—our ‘body language’—carry some sort of meaning. How I thought about body language and tutoring, though, changed when I worked with a medical student who ‘talked’ as much with his hands as he did with his voice. He was working on a personal statement for a prospective residency position, and he was grappling with how to translate his clinical experiences into something appealing to a more specific professional audience. He used symbolic non-verbal gestures throughout the session, such as making a juggling motion when he talked about struggling with the coherence of his paragraphs. His gestures really clicked for me, though, when we got into the nitty-gritty of revising those paragraphs. The student had separated his learning into categories of “hard” (e.g., medical knowledge) and “soft” (e.g., bedside manner) skills, and he discussed these skills in separate paragraphs. When I questioned this separation, he responded by suggesting his audience would see “hard” skills as more important than “soft” skills, raising his hand in the air when saying “hard” and placing it flat on the table when saying “soft.”



That gesture caught my attention: it seemed not only to represent the conceptual hierarchy of “hard” and “soft” skills, but also to indicate something about his vision for the ‘look’ of his writing. I decided to lean into my toolkit of tutoring practices and paraphrase what I thought his gesture meant. I suggested that his goal was to use his paragraph structure—symbolized by his hands—to represent these skill sets as distinct yet connected areas of practice. To my relief, he confirmed my interpretation. More importantly, this shared understanding gave us a basis for his revisions, as we spent the remaining session focused on his transitions and topic sentences within the structure he proposed.

Of course, gestures do not for writing make. I still needed to describe in spoken words the paragraph structure I thought the student mod-

eled before we could put his proposal into action. This, I argue, is because his gestures were not defective, but *cooperative*. Gestures communicate in partnership with speech, as Isabelle Thompson notes, and they need not be considered subordinate to speech. Moreover, as Jo Mackiewicz writes with Thompson, tutors' paraphrasing—whether of a student's speech, rough draft, or assignment prompt—enables students to “compare their intended meaning to their conveyed meaning” (106). In other words, paraphrasing can give both tutors and students “[an]other language to access the meaning of . . . texts” (154). This is what my student and I achieved through my paraphrasing of his gestures. I attempted to ‘reword’ what I took to be his description, through gesture, of the hierarchy of “hard skills” and “soft skills” he wanted to model in his personal statement. My verbal paraphrasing was simply the other language we used to access and act on what he had not yet put into words.

This was a striking moment for me, especially as it was my first in-person tutoring session since March of 2020. After nearly two years working online, I found it strange to consider the value of body language as a source for productive tutoring rather than a burden on it. Of course, that gestures can play a positive role in tutoring is not a new concept in writing center scholarship. Jeff Brooks' classic “minimalist tutoring” approach treats body language as a means for tutors to motivate students, and Thompson demonstrates that tutors' “hand gestures in writing center conversations act as partners with words or alone without words to convey meanings to listeners and to build rapport” (420). These discussions of tutors' body language can inform our understanding of my student's hand gestures, but it is notable that student writers' gestures are otherwise sparsely discussed. At most, they tend to be described as preverbal, purely emotional acts, or as a sign of “some form of intellectual breakthrough” (Glover 17). For example, they might be the excited hand gestures or brightened face of a student whose thesis just ‘clicked,’ or who just ‘got’ an assignment after a tutor rephrased the professor's prompt. My student did not have such a breakthrough: he instead used gestures to clarify his plan for his personal statement's structure and to *insist* on its effectiveness. With this insistence, the student assured that his vision for his personal statement remained at the center of our session.

This successful tutoring session led me to work toward a more sustainable praxis for what I call *gestural paraphrasing*: an art of translating into spoken and written word what students convey through gestures. With the support of my writing center, I developed a training guide for interpreting students' gestures in tutoring settings, which includes a rubric for categorizing gestures. I developed this rubric from a framework designed by Justine Cassell, who built hers

from foundational work on gesture by linguists Adam Kendon and David McNeely. My rubric divides body language into “non-gestural” and “gestural” categories, and then frames categories for gestures articulated by Cassell (and Kendon and McNeely) in relation to possible student writing goals. For example, my rubric identifies a student moving their hand down the length of their printed-out paper as an “iconic” gesture that models their desire to discuss the whole draft, not just a few parts. My writing-oriented rubric, however, may still be limited in capturing some of the nuances of gestures about writing. This is especially the case in culturally diverse tutoring settings: some students, for example, may use “hybrid” gestures that blend non-verbal idioms from multiple cultures (Matsumoto and Hwang 711-12). Students might also use gestures to model writing goals or structures that are more common outside of American academic settings (Blalock 83-85). However, as Mackiewicz and Thompson note, paraphrasing is not meant to get it right every time; it is meant to compare conveyed and intended meanings. Gestural paraphrasing is a tool for tutors and students to establish collaboratively what the student wants for their writing and to put those goals into action.

In practice, this training produces some mixed results: while trainees have engaged in productive ways with student gestures, they are often just as focused, if not more so, on their fellow tutors’ body language. In the first iteration of this training, I used a video from Purdue University’s writing center intended to illustrate a tutoring session with a nervous student, which featured plenty of gestures to analyze. The majority of the trainees’ comments focused on the tutor’s gestures, but they were also able to connect the student’s hand gestures to his overall writing goals. One trainee even noted a “power struggle” between the tutor and student, suggesting that both used gestures to try to assert control over the student’s writing. This emphasized a crucial element of students’ gestures that is missing from the existing literature: as was evident in my student’s insistence on the structure of his writing, students use gestures to insist on their more active role in the tutoring process. Future iterations of this training will put even more emphasis on student gestures—trainers may offer more directive analysis prompts, for example—but this training already demonstrates the crucial roles students’ gestures play in tutoring settings.<sup>1</sup>

Gestural paraphrasing still has plenty of room to grow, especially with respect to culturally diverse approaches to both gesture and composition. This, however, does not mean we should limit our use of gestural paraphrasing. Given its ability to affirm students’ intended meanings, center students’ goals at the center, and welcome students’ insistence on their role in the writing process, we tutors ought to hone gestural paraphrasing through more frequent practice.

## NOTES

1. Many thanks to Dr. Alex Ocasio, Savannah Warners, Caitie Wisniewski, and many other staff members of Saint Louis University's University Writing Services for their participation and input in this training.

## WORKS CITED

- Blalock, Susan. "Negotiating Authority through One-to-One Collaboration in the Multicultural Writing Center." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, edited by Carol Severino et al., The Modern Language Association of America, 1997, pp. 79-93.
- Brooks, Jeff. "Minimalist Tutoring: Making the Student Do All the Work." *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*, edited by Robert W. Barnett and Jacob S. Blumner, Allyn and Bacon, 2001, pp. 219-24.
- Cassell, Justine. "A Framework for Gesture Generation and Interpretation." *Computer Vision in Human-Machine Interaction*, edited by Roberto Cipolla and Alex Pentland, Cambridge UP, 1998, pp. 191-215. MIT Media Lab, [https://www.media.mit.edu/gnl/publications/gesture\\_wkshop.pdf](https://www.media.mit.edu/gnl/publications/gesture_wkshop.pdf).
- Glover, Carl. "Kairos and the Writing Center: Modern Perspectives on an Ancient Idea." *The Writing Center Director's Resource Book*, edited by Christina Murphy and Byron Stay, Routledge, 2006, pp. 13-20.
- Mackiewicz, Jo, and Isabelle Thompson. *Talk about Writing: The Tutoring Strategies of Experienced Writing Center Tutors*. Routledge, 2015.
- Matsumoto, David, and Hysung C. Hwang. "Culture and Nonverbal Communication." *Nonverbal Communication*, edited by Judith A. Hall and Mark L. Knapp, De Gruyter Mouton, 2013, pp. 697-727.
- Thompson, Isabelle. "Scaffolding in the Writing Center: A Microanalysis of an Experienced Tutor's Verbal and Nonverbal Tutoring Strategies." *Written Communication*, vol. 26, no. 4, Oct. 2009, pp. 417-53.