

## “Don’t Forget to Tell Me That I’m Really Brilliant!”: Working with Creative Writing and Writers

Emma Catherine Perry  
University of Idaho

As a writing center tutor in my first year of college, I was happy to have a campus job that encouraged me to do one of my favorite things: talk about writing. As a novice creative writer, I felt similarly about creative writing workshops. Because both creative writing programs and writing centers are situated in colleges and universities, if I was enrolled in a creative writing class, I was usually picking up a few shifts a week in the writing center, as well. In all the writing centers where I have worked, I have met people whose interests in writing and talking about writing align with mine. However, there is little empirical research into the experiences of the creative writers who gravitate to writing center work. I am conducting an IRB-approved research study to address this dearth. Through this research, I am finding that, though creative writing has long been neglected in the constellation of writing center practice, the self-sponsored and affective aspects of many creative writing center sessions invite writing center practitioners of all backgrounds to consider strategies for truly writer-centered consultations in any genre.

This article addresses the value of non-specific positive feedback through the context of creative writing center appointments. The creative writers and tutors I interviewed for this project were largely in agreement: when working with creative writing in a writing center appointment, positive feedback from a tutor is essential for building and maintaining writerly efficacy. While this appears to conform with traditional tutoring approaches, the interviews underpinning this research invite writing center tutors and leaders to consider positive feedback anew: this type of motivational scaffolding (Mackiewicz and Thompson) may be more important for writerly efficacy and deserving of more attention in tutor development than it receives. Rather than trying to leverage positive feedback to establish rapport or to facilitate writer uptake of more direct instruction, these creative writing center practitioners emphasize the importance of communicating to a writer that their efforts to connect with readers are seen and celebrated.

In conducting this study, I join other scholars who are contributing empirical research to our knowledge of the ways creative writing works (or does not work) in writing center appointments. Lizzie Hutton has analyzed bids for support in appointment forms to explore the motivations of creative writers who bring their work into the writing center. Havva Zorluel Ozer used surveys to capture tutor attitudes toward working with creative writing. Like mine, Hutton’s and Ozer’s work emerges from the fact that, historically, creative writing has been considered an outlier with respect to traditional writing center practice. While creative writing techniques may be successfully implemented in writing center sessions (Masiello; Neff), creative writing center practitioners like Hans Ostrom and Kenneth Pobo have long noted that tutors can struggle to ask fruitful questions in the absence of formal assignments or rigid genre conventions. However, the presence of creative writers in writing centers offers an alternative perspective on these difficulties and offers a way forward: far from being strange or atypical, creative writing center sessions can exemplify valued writing center practices.

## CHALLENGES IN TUTORING CREATIVE WRITING

There is a persistent wariness around working with creative writers and writing in writing centers (Cassorla; Hutton; Ostrom; Ozer; Pobo). One strand of this conversation has focused on a perceived difficulty in giving feedback on creative writing: If we bring more creative writing into the writing center, will tutors be equipped to respond? Ostrom argues that a tutor prepared to address unfamiliar scholarly genres is also prepared to address a play or a poem. He writes: “[M]y overarching suggestion is that you treat the creative writing that students bring to you pretty much as you would treat drafts of essays...you should, in general, proceed as you usually do.... Don’t change any of the fundamental training you have received in WC work; don’t change your professional behavior” (150). Similarly, Pobo notes, “What applies in freshman composition, technical writing, journalism, and advanced prose writing also applies in creative writing” (5). Pobo goes on to assert that the attentiveness to word choice in writing center conferences mimics the emphasis on accurate diction by creative writing classroom instruction.

While noting the similarity of working with creative writing and other genres, Pobo also notes a crucial difference: the intensity of identification that a student may feel toward their creative writing as opposed to their academic or technical work. In a description of hypothetical interactions with creative writers, Pobo writes: “One difficulty... is that the student’s ego is often easily bruised. Students who may be very cooperative when we talk with them about an essay for freshman composition may be more defensive about their own creative work” (5-6). Vulnerability around creative writing is also an emergent theme in my ongoing research. However, Pobo’s interpretation of student sensitivity is challenged by the accounts of the tutors I have interviewed. While Pobo urges tutors to push creative writers who may be resistant to feedback, vulnerability and a strong connection between creative writing and the writer’s sense of self are assets writing center practitioners can learn to work with. Furthermore, the way we work with creative writing and writers can apply to writing center sessions with any writing, with any writer.

## THE CREATIVE WRITING CENTER PRACTITIONERS OF NEBRASKA

The first phase of this research study took place at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). While working as the associate director, I noticed that not only were many of the students staffing the UNL Writing Center creative writers, but that they worked with creative writing in appointments often. This was likely due to the placement of the UNL Writing Center in an English department with a very active creative writing program. Not only does the English department at UNL offer a PhD in creative writing, but it also supports a prominent international literary journal, several active reading series, and a vibrant undergraduate program, as well. While the richness of this creative writing ecology may seem to make the UNL Writing Center an outlier, I encourage readers to reconsider: how many creative writers are already working in your writing center? There may be more than you think.

With IRB approval, I recruited eight tutors to participate in 60-minute, semi-structured interviews, recorded over Zoom. [The entire interview protocol can be found here](#). Not every question in the interview protocol was asked in every interview. While the tutors varied in life stage and experience, all participants had tutored in a university writing center, had brought their own creative writing work into the writing center for feedback, and had tutored other writers on creative writing, as well.

Once the interviews had been conducted and transcribed, I conducted a thematic analysis of the data, reading through transcripts and looking for patterns. I chose to segment the data using topic chains—longer segments of text that allowed me to capture context and nuance more effectively than single words or phrases might. Because the insights of the creative writing center practitioners in this study are informed by their dual experiences as both creative writers and writing center tutors, their responses tended to be very thoughtful, thoroughly articulated, and already couched in the terminology of writing center practice.

In this article, I address only one aspect of the interviewees' experiences: their experiences as creative writers who have brought their poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction into the writing center for feedback. I highlight one point on which our creative writing center practitioners were nearly unanimous: as writers, they found positive feedback of paramount importance, suggesting that it is crucial for an emotionally safe and intellectually productive writing center appointment. I have chosen to focus on this insight because of its immediate salience and its applicability to writing in all genres.

### **“WHAT DO YOU WISH WRITING CENTER TUTORS KNEW BEFORE THEY GAVE YOU FEEDBACK ON YOUR CREATIVE WRITING?”**

I wrote this question with tutor training implications in mind. Before conducting these interviews, I had hypothesized that the creative writing center practitioners' experience with creative writing, on both sides of the writer-tutor interaction, would enable them to identify relevant creative writing craft knowledge and writing center strategies. However, by far the most frequent type of response to this question focused on the affective dimensions of creative writing. *All but one of the eight respondents* answered this question with a statement about how strongly they feel about their writing, how important it is to them. As creative writers, these interviewees would want their tutors to know just what Pobo wrote: they are attached to their writing; their identity is wrapped up in their creative work.

One of the writers I interviewed said that specific praise was helpful, noting that, “praise helps early on and especially in creative writing work. And encouragement, right? Pointing to the places that are working, asking questions. I think that's really really important.” This approach to positive feedback—a specific, pointed moment of praise—is in line with past descriptions of effective strategies used by tutors (Mackiewicz and Thompson). However, most of the interview participants emphasized the importance of positive feedback in general. For example, one creative writing center practitioner said, “I think, yeah, with creative writing, I especially...want [the tutor] to be gentle because it's something that [the writer] consider[s] creative... I would just want [the tutor] to be, like, especially tender.” Another tutor answered, “I would want [tutors] to know that I...like to receive...praise before any sort of constructive criticism... It's like, ‘Don't forget to tell me that I'm really brilliant because I could really use that right now!!’” While this tutor gave this answer with a knowing laugh, they were also earnest. Like the other interview participants in this study, this tutor had amassed enough creative writing and writing center experience to be able to ask for exactly what they needed; they knew that before they can feel receptive to a reader's response, they need to be reassured that this writing project is more than a whim or a self-indulgence: It's a worthwhile endeavor.

### **EARLY IMPLICATIONS FOR TUTOR TRAINING**

I expected responses from the interviewees that confirmed past suggestions for training tutors to work with poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Specifically, I expected the interview participants would recommend any tutor faced with a creative writing appointment to focus on

questions that build genre awareness (Ostrom; Ozer) or to focus on the details of language to support artistry at the level of the sentence or line (Pobo). The responses of these interviewees, however, point in a different direction.

The emphasis the interviewees placed on supportive and encouraging feedback at the outset of an appointment confirms some aspects of earlier, practitioner inquiries into working with creative writing in a writing center context. However, the way these creative writers talked about this affective dimension of writing center work differs in attitude and in implication from previous scholarship. Comparing the results of these interviews with Pobo's recommendations for tutors is particularly interesting. While Pobo, like the interviewees here, notes that tutors "do not want to discourage students" (6), he returns his focus from the affective to the textual when he advocates for the importance of clarity and diction in creative writing, reminding readers, "On the other hand, we do not want to encourage mediocrity" (6). According to Pobo, tutors should skate over the emotionality often present in creative writing appointments to encourage the writer toward objective improvement in the writing.

The results of these interviews, however, ask us to understand that the emotionality present in creative writing appointments is inseparable from the writing itself. There is no creative writing without the creative writer's presence, without their messy, difficult emotions—without their fragility and without their resilience. The difference between a professional writer and a beginning writer is not necessarily the difference between a perfectly chosen word and a merely expedient word in a line of poetry. Rather, the difference is that the professional writer writes another line, and another, and another. Writers, and not just creative writers, need reassurance that their grand risk has been worth it—that their vulnerability will be met with appreciation, not with tepid, niggling judgements.

## **POSSIBILITIES FOR TUTOR TRAINING AND CULTURE-BUILDING**

Practicing praise and supportive talk may help tutors work with a range of writers and writing; it will prepare them particularly well for working with creative writers and with creative writing. While I have not conducted specific assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of the following strategies, I have found them useful for creating a culture of positive feedback.

***Make Room for Reflection:*** Reflecting on their own experiences with feedback may help tutors absorb the importance of positive feedback for writers writing in any genre. A reflective activity to promote encouraging talk in tutoring sessions can involve freewriting in response to the prompt: What is one memory of feedback that made you want to keep writing? What is one memory of feedback that made you want to never write again? The group can then generate scripted phrases to use in appointments.

***Make a List:*** Watching other tutors practice this type of emotional scaffolding may normalize phatic praise and encourage new tutors to engage in similar talk with writers. To reap this benefit in tutor training, I recommend recording an appointment with an experienced tutor and then watching it back with your staff. Ask staff to note every time the tutor in the recording uses positive feedback in their conversation with the writer.

***Make it Part of Writing Center Culture:*** Giving and receiving positive feedback can be difficult! To make this part of our workplace and pedagogical culture, we have started a practice of receiving and giving affirmations every staff meeting. There is a jar in our writing center labeled "Affirmations for Writers." At the beginning of our staff meetings, we all take one slip of paper, reflect on the message, and potentially share with the group. Then, at the end of the meeting, we write new affirmations to go into the jar.

## AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This first insight from this research study is necessarily limited. However, the intersection of creative writing pedagogy and writing center practice could be a fruitful site for learning more about valued practices in each complimentary sphere and in their overlap. Future research may consider the following:

***Evaluate claims from different perspectives:*** The creative writers in these interviews are all empowered to identify and verbalize their support needs as writers. However, not all creative writers coming into writing center appointments will have an extensive writing center vocabulary. Future research may involve talking to creative writers who use the writing center but who have never studied or practiced tutoring themselves.

***What else works in creative writing center appointments?*** For tutors unsure of the best way to approach creative writing, positive feedback provides a useful, harm-reducing place to start. To build a more complete understanding of valued writing center practices in the context of creative writing appointments, more research is needed. The data generated by interviewing creative writers seems promising for providing insight into the complexities of these conversations.

## CONCLUSION

I want to challenge the notion that the insights offered by this data apply only to creative writers and creative writing. While the affective dimension of tutoring may be more pronounced in creative writing appointments, it is not absent in others. Even in tutoring technical writing, as Jo Mackiewicz has noticed, compliments and other motivational scaffolding strategies are important facets of the tutoring conversation. Mackiewicz notes that a blend of “formulaic” complimenting (compliments that take a common, non-specific form, like “This is good”) and “nonformulaic” complimenting (compliments that take a specific, nonstandard form) is typical for tutors working with technical writers (25).

Mackiewicz does place a higher tutoring value on nonformulaic compliments, noting that formulaic or non-specific compliments “lacked specificity and, therefore, instructive value” (25). However, Mackiewicz cannot entirely discount these nonspecific expressions of praise and their positive effects on tutoring results. She writes, “they seemed to generate worthwhile outcomes...motivating students to continue to work on their writing and bolstering students’ confidence about their writing” (25). In short, telling a technical writer and/or a creative writer (they might be both!) that what they are working on is interesting and worthwhile may have similar, positive, motivating effects. Therefore, I suggest—and look forward to exploring further through research—that what works in creative writing center sessions also works when tutoring other types of writing. In fact, looking at these strange, emotional writing center tutoring interactions may nuance established, valued writing center practice.

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