The Ten Commandments of Tutoring

Before we turn to the practices of tutoring, it's useful to review some of the guiding principles that should help shape our conversations with clients. We set these principles forth as "The Ten Commandments of Minimalist Tutoring," though we didn't exactly find them on a mountain top and etched in stone. They are simply our best attempt to describe a set of rules that have worked well for us and which can help to guide your own work. And, unlike the Biblical edicts, we tried to come up with some "thou shalts" to accompany the "shalt nots."

## **I. Be positive and do no harm**

“Doing harm” in this context means doing anything that interferes with a client’s desire or ability to write. Doing harm could be making fun of a student’s pronunciation or grammar or being overly critical of their behavior. Many students come to writing with a lot of negative baggage connected to their previous experiences of writing in school. Ask any of them to tell their "institutional writing autobiography," and you may hear stories of ruler smacks, mean comments, uninspired teaching, or what President Bush has called "the soft bigotry of low expectations." I cannot tell you how many students have said to me over the years that they "always got As" in high school writing but knew that the standards were too low to inspire their best efforts. While some high school teachers of English create a negative atmosphere in the classroom, some others play the role of self-esteem boosters and do not push their students to achieve anything close to their true potential. As a tutor, you get to be the best writing coach a student ever had by personalizing your lessons, keeping a positive attitude toward student success, and helping each student measure up to the high standards that the Writing Program holds.

## **II. Be friendly but don’t “socialize”**

Tutors are expected to find a balance between “peer” and “authority,” as Peter Carino has suggested. We are coaches, not teachers or friends. Establishing this relationship can feel strange, especially if you are younger than your client. Just remember that your client sought your help because you have the more advanced skills in this particular field. The client’s transition to advanced skills is a process that will take place over time.

## **III. Cut the talking and get them writing**

The more a tutor talks, the less the client writes. A session in which a tutor and client “discuss” ideas may feel satisfying, but the discussion is often abstract and the client leaves the Writing Center with little writing and quickly fading memories of the “discussion” in which the tutor did most of the talking.

## **IV. Think long term and don’t let “paper panic” shape the session**

While students want to focus on the last grade they got or the next grade they will get, we want to urge them to focus on their overall progress and skills they are developing over the course of the semester. We show them how to receive teacher’s grades and comments calmly as barometers of progress and as guidance for their next set of tasks. Do not discourage students from taking grades seriously, but lead them away from early despair. Try to get them to concentrate on the comments more than the letter grades. However, if a student seems to be making no progress over two or three papers, please speak with the coordinator. If a student is frantic because he or she hasn’t started a paper that is due in two days (or two hours), you can gently suggest that students who come to tutoring with the most preliminary work done make the most progress. Then go on to do what we always do—begin the assignment with appropriate tasks, reminding the student that he or she will continue the work you begin on her own and that you have several sessions to “nail” the writing process. Even if a student is in danger of failing the course late in the term, we should still focus on the long term. After all, if the student cannot pass this term, he or she gets another semester to reach greater potential as a writer.

## **V. Keep the tasks authentic – there are no “generic” tasks**

There should be nothing formulaic about tutoring. Each student brings different strengths and weaknesses, each writing project has its own logic, and each step in the writing and revision process has its own requirements. Tasks that address the unique writing situation and the unique writer will be “authentic.” A plan for one student’s paper may be inappropriate for another’s, or will surely be inappropriate for the same student’s next paper. Rather than assuming that the “Writing Process” is a sequential set of steps carved in stone, we help students identify the practices and writing strategies that are most productive for them. You have three sources to consider when devising the right tasks for the right students in the right sessions. First, you have the teacher’s comments on the last paper. Next, you have the student’s assessment of his or her own writing. And finally, you have the student’s writing itself. No session should go by without you having read a student’s whole draft, or what there is of it. Practically speaking, you can’t always do this before assigning a start-up task, but you need to make time as quickly as possible to read what the student has written with respect and interest. Otherwise, you will be resorting to inauthentic or generic “tutoring tasks.”

## **VI. Don’t try to address everything – think “triage”**

The first time you see a student paper with lots of problems, you may think that you have to try to deal with everything that’s wrong or everything that might keep the student from passing. You don’t. And don’t even try, or you’ll go crazy trying to cover it all and the student will not even be able to absorb it. Instead, think like an Emergency Room triage nurse and just identify the three areas that need the most help. Ask “where is the bleeding most severe?” and “what problems are most likely to be fatal?” Recognize that the student will be back next week – and hopefully for five weeks – so you have plenty of opportunities to work on the less fatal issues during the rest of the term. The paper before you might perish, but even a student who fails some papers can still be saved.

## **VII. Supplement and don’t supplant the teacher**

Your work complements class work. It does not replicate or replace it. Teachers must focus primarily on results and what is of “universal” concern to the group; tutors focus on process and what is of specific concern to the individual student. You have the luxury of customizing assignments, strategies, and short-term goals. Teachers have syllabi to “keep up with.” You can break down each discrete “writing moment” as much as your student needs you to. Thus, you want to focus on very specific reading, writing, and critical thinking strategies rather than engaging in general conversations about the texts or the topic. Encourage students to take advantage of teacher office hours as a different sort of help from tutoring – one that can help address the larger issues of the assignment. Ask students to report back on what they learned in office hours. Most importantly, maintain your role as tutor and not teacher. Do not challenge the instructor’s authority or question the instructor’s methods – at least not in front of your client, anyway. If you do see a problem with the teaching, bring it to the attention of the Writing Center director. Often what you see as a problem will really be a misunderstanding or miscommunication. But sometimes it will be a sign of a teacher who has gone astray and may need some quick intervention to set back on track.

## **VIII. Be their coach, not their savior**

If you’re half as invested in your students’ success as most tutors, you may be secretly disheartened when your student does poorly on a paper. Keep it to yourself. Remember that what happens in tutoring is only a tiny portion of what goes into producing a paper. You may need to remind your client that you are not responsible for the paper’s success or failure. The onus for success is on the writer, not the tutor. Don’t let your students get dependent on you. To avoid dependency, do not give students your email address or phone number, and do not meet them outside your scheduled session. You may seem like the world’s “nicest tutor,” but you will just be encouraging tutor-dependence and helping your students to continue to feel disempowered when it comes to writing.

## **IX. Start with ideas, then work on form**

Too many tutoring sessions get derailed before they start with a focus on “the thesis statement,” as though every paper needed one to get started. A “thesis statement” is rarely a starting place for writing. “The thesis statement” is simply the formal presentation of the writer’s ideas – and those ideas can only emerge through the writing process. Much work can and should come before it. It’s also common to look at a paper for the first time and immediately be struck by the need to get it organized or cleaned up. In fact, many problems in form are a manifestation of conceptual confusion, misunderstanding the assignment, misreading the texts, relying on underdeveloped ideas, making flimsy connections, etc. There is no point “fixing” a seriously flawed paper when clarifying connections and thoughts will often help a student regain control of grammar and syntax. Address concepts and ideas first. A challenge may arise when a teacher sends a student to the Writing Center because the student keeps losing structural and formal control. Of course, we want to help students write organized and correct papers, but those issues should not become our primary concern. Work you do with students on these issues should be: 1. tied to the content of their papers (“Let’s work on these pronouns so your reader will be clear about which of Gertner’s researchers made which discoveries”). 2. geared toward strategies they can repeat on their own. 3. discussed in clear ordinary English. (Who needs to know what to call ablative absolutes?) 4. come after seriously revising ideas. With students who have serious presentation issues, you should spend at least some time in each session addressing those issues directly. But generally that work should only come near the end of the session, after the larger conceptual tasks are completed.

## **X. Teach the writer, not the writing**

Don’t try to create the perfect paper. Try to create a better writer. In many ways, this commandment sums up all the others. The nine principles above provide the pedagogical basis for all that we do in the Writing Center. Likewise, those same principles dictate what tutors do not do in the writing center – despite the temptations.

Goeller, Michael and Karen Kalteissen. *The Task: A Guide for Tutors in the Rutgers Writing Centers.* New

Brunswick: Rutgers University Writing Program, 2008.