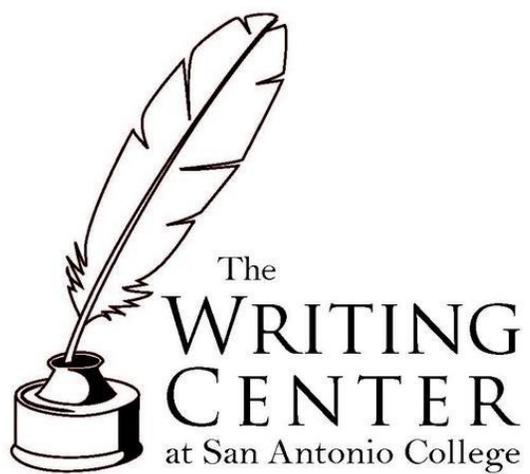


San Antonio College  
Writing Center  
Tutor Manual

by

Tutors, Staff, and Director



## Table of Contents:

<b>The San Antonio College Writing Center philosophy.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Preface.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>San Antonio College Writing Center guidelines for tutoring.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>The complexities of tutoring.....</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>A tutor’s responsibilities.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>How do I begin?.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>What should the writer bring?.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>What do we talk about?.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>What exactly should we do during the session?.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>A sample tutoring session.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Particular considerations.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Working with ESL students.....</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Working with learning difference (LD) students.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Advocacy.....</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>Characteristics of the writing of learning difference students.....</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>Suggestions for writing with learning differences.....</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>Postscript.....</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Works Cited.....</b>	<b>27</b>

(last updated: July 2014)

## **THE SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE WRITING CENTER PHILOSOPHY**

A writing center is a beyond-the-classroom space where writers can explore confusing or challenging educational issues through dialogic relationships. It is a place for writers to talk and share ideas. This can consist of brainstorming ideas or considering writing content, writing development, and writing style and correctness. Such working with others is a useful strategy for learning that can serve writers throughout their educational and work lives. Tutors, as well, learn to communicate better as well as improve their own understandings of writing.

*The following tenets guide the SAC Writing Center:*

- ❖ a desire to create a non-threatening, comfortable environment for writers,
- ❖ an intention of dealing with the writer rather than simply his or her paper,
- ❖ a hope of connecting principles of good writing with social issues,
- ❖ a recognition of the need to understand an assignment in context,
- ❖ a practice of addressing priorities (a hierarchy) in the writing process (e.g. clarity over commas),
- ❖ a practice of attentively listening to writers,
- ❖ a practice of starting to work with writers at where they are rather than where they should be,
- ❖ a practice of showing writers choices as well as encouraging them to set goals,
- ❖ an evidence of professional courtesy to the faculty,
- ❖ a desire to participate in self-reflective practices that joins a national conversation about writing center practice.

A writing center, as a writer-centered collaborative site, seeks to enhance writers' self-worth and confidence by working within non-evaluative relationships of trust. It is not a place for merely getting a text proofread; rather it is a place where a writer and a tutor work together to discover effective writing strategies as well as approaches to reading and writing that are particularly useful to the individual writer. This writing center work typically changes a writer's attitude towards writing because a writing center focuses on the individual writer more than a single paper and seeks to tackle big problems before little ones.

Importantly, tutors also should remember that what they hear and learn in the Center is confidential. This information about writers and tutors should not be shared outside the writing center.

## PREFACE

I want to welcome you to working in the SAC Writing Center. The tutoring world you are entering will, I hope, help you to become a more empathetic and supportive citizen of the world. Certainly the interpersonal and communication skills you will learn here will help you as you move on through college, to graduate school, and into other professional work environments.

The following guide is intended to help SAC writers move from simply being *collaborative* helpers (as in classroom peer groups) to becoming writing center tutors who support their tutees. That said, it is important for SAC writing tutors to remember that it is only the tutee/writer who actually writes assignments in the Center.

*To begin, there are some essential golden rules for tutors:*

1. The writer should be the only one holding the pen above the assignment paper (although you may take notes and transcribe on a separate page or write dictated sentences on the white board).
2. Remember you are not a teacher or editor; you are a tutor. Try not to act as a teacher would. Instead, think of yourself as a facilitator.
3. Always refer the writer to his or her teacher for the final word.
4. Help the tutee learn actively by asking questions, not simply answering them. You should be working to encourage the tutee to speak and speak often.
5. You cannot tutor anyone in your own class or taking the same class with the same teacher. You cannot officially tutor outside the Center.
6. Don't answer a question to which you don't know the answer. Ask someone for help or go to a reference book.
7. Always respect the writer and every other person at SAC. Practice professional courtesy towards teachers. Remember to treat your work confidentially.
8. Behave appropriately. For example, the Center is not a dating service. You should not use your work as a tutor to "pick up" dates.
9. Remember that the writer, not the paper, is the ultimate priority. *The Center's goal is not to produce perfect papers but to change writer attitudes and approaches towards writings.* Therefore, helping the writer "reflect" (thinking about where he or she has been as a writer and where he or she is going) is an important ongoing activity.
10. Help writers understand they have both choices and goals.
11. When in doubt, ask the Director (even after the fact).
12. Show up for appointments on time. If you "forget," you not only personally let down your writers, but you also damage the reputation of the Center.

## **SAN ANTONIO COLLEGE WRITING CENTER GUIDELINES FOR TUTORING**

*Tutors may:*

1. help a writer with brainstorming.
2. encourage a writer to talk about what he or she wants to say, what details to include, and what points to make.
3. have the writer read a rough draft (being sure the reading is identical to the written text) and then offer general advice (e.g. “Let’s check your thesis and see if it addresses the assignment question.”)
4. assist a writer in identifying errors and providing practice at correction in the context of an ongoing tutoring relationship.

(For international writers tutors may correct the first error for the purpose of demonstration but then have the tutee work on correcting the others, often with the support of an appropriate handbook.)

5. help a writer use appropriate online resources.

*Tutors should not:*

1. provide a thesis statement.
2. provide specific details.
3. suggest specific wording (except in the case of international writers as above).
4. point out specific errors or correct them (except in the case of international writers as above).
5. type a writer’s essay, do research online, or provide documentation.

(Revised July 2014)

## THE COMPLEXITIES OF TUTORING

Being a tutor means doing more than answering questions about grammar. It means being a writer advocate. Think about how you can be one. Here are some questions that help us consider being a writer advocate.

*How much of a peer should I be?*

You want to make writers feel comfortable. In other words, you want to be friendly during tutoring sessions. However, you also want to make sure that your session is productive. How do you balance talking about the upcoming soccer game with talking about a draft? How can you act professionally as a tutor and also be friendly?

Being friendly is part of the professionalism of tutoring. A tutor's display of friendship as well as professionalism is shown in the following behavior:

- ❖ Be an enthusiastic and supportive tutor
- ❖ Remember details of past sessions
- ❖ Be on time for appointments
- ❖ Talk about your own experiences of writing and school.

*How much should I talk, and how much should I listen?*

This is one of the most difficult questions to answer. In early sessions a writer often expects a tutor to explain exactly what to do, answer all questions, as well as to fix the writer's paper. At first, writers want to make sure they are gaining something tangible from sessions. Once writers understand what the writing center is, they should be able to help set agendas for themselves.

Tutoring is not a one-way street. A good tutoring session requires a sharing of the conversation. Just as a tutor does not hold the pen, he or she also should not hold the floor. However, it may take time for a writer to learn to speak up. If you work with a writer week after week, you will find out that the tutee gradually learns to be more responsible for his or her agenda. You may have to begin by asking questions such as "Does this sentence work in this place?" "Does this part make sense?" "Do you think this sentence/phrase is awkward?" In time, the writer should ask these questions on his or her own.

Being a good listener is often the best tactic for a tutor, even with the quietest writers. Do not be afraid of silence. Give writers time to think. If a writer seems reluctant to talk (remember some folks come in under stress), you might put him or her at ease by talking about times you have found it difficult to share a draft or talking about parts of the writing process you have found difficult. Such sharing helps the writer feel more comfortable. Be sure to remember that the session is not about your writing but about the tutee's.

Another part of being a good listener is to remember and mirror what the writer says by repeating what the writer says. If you are meeting a writer on a weekly basis, weekly notes may help you remember what sessions have been about. Even within a session, these quick notes will help you at the end of a session to sum up what the writer has covered that day and, importantly, to guide the writer in his or her own review. Asking a writer what he or she plans to work on before seeing you again and also asking how the writer will accomplish his or her goals will give you another way to end the session and a source for more notes.

*The following are ideal goals for ending a session*

At the end of a session a writer should:

- ❖ be aware of what occurred in the session.
- ❖ have a sense of what still should be done.
- ❖ know how to do this work.
- ❖ feel confident about the worth of the work done in the SAC Writing Center.

At the end of a session, a tutor might say to a writer, “we accomplished a lot today. Let’s review what we did. Can you tell me what you have learned today?” In fact, actually writing a list of what the writer learned on paper is useful for the writer, not just the tutor (who writes the session notes). Before the end of the session, the tutor might also ask the writer to explain what he is going to work on next and how exactly he plans to do this work.

The tutor form (found on our website) is the last essential step of the session. The tutor form is important because it keeps track of statistics concerning classes, majors, and other information of the writer. It also gives the writer a chance to offer his or her feedback on their experience here at the SAC Writing Center. Tutors learn from this feedback by taking note of what helps the writer and what could be done differently. Remember, this step is essential, so always remind the writer of this last request to fill out the tutor form. Tutors may help writers fill out most of the information on the form, but the writer must fill in their personal response in private. Responses can be viewed through our records at a later time. Feel free to talk with the SACWC staff about tutor’s notes.

## **A TUTOR'S RESPONSIBILITIES**

The goal of the writing center is “not to merely improve a writer’s grade (although that’s nice, too!) but to leave each writer with something useful long after the end of the tutoring session.

*A tutor should be working to help each writer:*

- ❖ learn to enjoy writing more by gaining confidence.
- ❖ learn to appreciate the usefulness of writing.
- ❖ learn basic processes for steps of writing (brainstorming, prewriting, organization, drafting, revising, and proofreading).
- ❖ work on issues in a less stressful environment than a classroom.
- ❖ foster writer independence through interactive sessions.

*Each tutor needs to have the following important characteristics:*

- ❖ Strong listening skills (to both tutee and director)
- ❖ Patience
- ❖ Friendliness
- ❖ Respectfulness (appreciate the tutee’s efforts)
- ❖ Caring
- ❖ Open-mindedness (willingness to entertain new ideas)
- ❖ Tactfulness (speak only after thinking of the tutee’s feelings)
- ❖ Enthusiasm about tutoring
- ❖ Responsibility (to show up and to be on time)
- ❖ Supportiveness
- ❖ Commitment (to tutor the whole semester as well as attend meetings)

A tutor needs to be kind and tolerant in his or her work knowing that the tutor is responsible only for educating the writer on writing issues, and the tutor is not responsible for the writer’s work. The writer is the one who is responsible for actually writing an assignment.

*The tutor also should remember to not do certain things:*

- ❖ Do not predict grades. That’s the teacher’s job.
- ❖ Do not write the text for the writer (although modeling is good for ESL writers).
- ❖ Do not support a tutee’s negative assessment of a teacher (e.g. personality, grading, or teaching).
- ❖ Do not ignore policy as stated by the director.

## **HOW DO I BEGIN?**

- ❖ Meeting someone new can be daunting, but your own enthusiasm for writing will help you support anyone who visits the Center.
- ❖ Get to know the person and the writer. Be polite. Exchange first names. You also might talk BRIEFLY about any common interests (e.g. classes or extra-curricular activities). For required appointments, tell the writer that when he or she has a draft, you will talk about the stage of writing the draft represents, the opinion of the draft, and what needs to be worked on; together you'll read and discuss the draft. Otherwise, if there is no draft, you will spend the appointment time looking at assignments, discussing class readings, brainstorming, or working on general writing issues.
- ❖ Be welcoming—smile, speak clearly, and look the tutee in the eye (although cultural differences may prevent reciprocation).
- ❖ Make the writer feel comfortable. If the writer is new to SAC, show empathy and explain how you felt when you were new.
- ❖ Explain what a tutor is (someone who does not give grades or evaluate but someone who supports).
- ❖ Find out what the writer is trying to do. Begin by getting a full explanation of the assignment, and then discover where the writer is in this assignment.
- ❖ Let the writer help establish the agenda by asking questions like “What part of the assignment would you like to work on today?” “Do you have any particular problems you’d like to talk about?” or “What questions do you have about this assignment?”
- ❖ Let the writer be aware of choices. There usually is more than one way to approach an assignment. If the writer is near a deadline (an all too typical time for a writer to come to the Center), ask if the writer wants you to look for surface errors or for errors in logic/development. If the writer opts for only surface errors, gently remind him or her that an earlier appointment would have allowed for more in-depth attention to the text. Also, kindly explain that considering the hierarchy of writing concerns -- such as improving a thesis rather than fixing commas -- benefits the writers greatly more than focusing on surface (lower order) concerns.
- ❖ Encourage the writer by giving positive comments on any strengths in the text.

## **WHAT SHOULD THE WRITER BRING?**

Please help the tutee understand that he or she must bring whatever it takes to provide you with adequate information for the session.

*The necessities include:*

- ❖ the assignment
- ❖ knowledge of reading materials (and the materials themselves)
- ❖ questions to ask you
- ❖ a current draft (and past drafts), outline, notes
- ❖ past graded papers with teacher comments

Remember, if a writer forgets to bring a needed text, you should tell the Director who will give the tutee a “talk” for lack of preparation (this gesture quickly solves the dilemma of a writer repeatedly “forgetting”). If a writer repeatedly fails to bring an agenda, please remind him or her of this necessity and inform the Director of the ongoing issue. (Remember that sending an e-mail of inquiry to a teacher about assignments or asking how to specifically help a particular weekly writer is always appropriate.)

## **WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT?**

You can begin a session by gathering information about the writer's class and assignment. This process requires more than seeing the actual assignment sheet because a teacher will often add to the understanding of the assignment by talking about it. Class discussion also adds to the dimensions of the assignment. Therefore, the tutee needs to explain to you not just the assignment but also what has happened in class. A tutor can help writers more effectively by understanding the teacher's expectations. In fact, as the tutee explains an assignment, she or he comes to understand the assignment more.

Furthermore, conversations with writers can also help them to understand choices they are making in response to assignments. A writer may decide to go against the grain and approach an assignment in a way you think is at odds with the actual expectations of the assignment. Through talk, you can make the writer aware of the effects and the consequences of his or her choice, such as risking a grade. While the writer has a right to make such choices, you have a responsibility to note the consequences, not necessarily in an effort to get the writer to change his mind but to help him clearly understand his reasoning and also to encourage him to share that reasoning with his teacher. You may even directly ask the writer which consequences he prefers—the higher grade or the opportunity to write about an issue in his own particular way.

*Let the writer set the agenda:*

Many times the tutee will know exactly what his or her goals are. However, sometimes the writer will arrive with an interest in a lower level concern, but you quickly see that he or she should really work on a higher level concern to make more effective changes in the writer's paper. For example, if a writer wants to work on grammar, but you see his organization is problematic, try to steer him into talking about organizational concerns (e.g. topic/thesis sentence). Set priorities by talking with the writer. Above all, try to relax and remember you cannot always do everything in just one session. However, the writer should always meet the obligation to come in with ideas for work; a tutee repeatedly saying there is nothing to work on is not being responsible and should be referred to the Director for a conversation.

*What if there's really nothing to do?:*

Sometimes a writer will come to the Writing Center for a weekly appointment (or even occasionally for a required one-time session) saying she or he has "nothing" to do. Many writers with required appointments will talk this way, hoping to leave, but with required appointments leaving is not a possibility. Thus, the tutor needs to be ready to consistently engage the writer in meaningful work. These appointments with no specific goals are times to work on a writer's lingering writing issues. These days

are also times to talk about the writer's general survival strategies by asking what he or she thinks is necessary to succeed at SAC. Such an exchange is a way to learn about another's approach to education. If the tutee comes from a different culture, such talk can be especially enlightening.

Remember, there also are specific exercises available to ESL writers in these situations. As well, there are abundant handouts (some prepared by fellow tutors and others borrowed from other writing centers) giving ideas for such days.

The tutor must try to come up with ideas for the tutee on such days so the Center remains useful throughout the year, not just on assignment days. The tutor should create work based on the grade level of the tutee. A freshman, for example, can benefit on a session focused on the structure or content of a short essay. Or a previously consulted teacher also can offer suggestions for a variety of general exercises so the tutor can save them for this type of "rainy day." The tutor should take the initiative to e-mail or talk to the teacher about work to put in reserve for slow sessions.

One caveat: How can the tutor be sure that the writer really has no work? The answer may require some sleuthing and contacting a teacher.

In other words, the tutor needs to calculate how to keep a tutee in an appointment for at least thirty minutes. If the writer cannot come up with work, you as tutor need to be inventive. For example, if you make it a habit to have the writer do some free writing about thoughts on an issue of interest or write summaries of sections of current readings, the writer will become accustomed to being active in the Center. In the long run, such writing will help a writer become a better writer and may also come in handy for a future assignment. It is a good idea to date these writings and keep some of them in the writer's folder. At the end of the semester or the year, you then can pull these old writings out and ask the writer to reflect on what kind of progress she has made over time and as a result of coming to the Center.

## **WHAT EXACTLY SHOULD WE DO DURING THE SESSION?**

*The basic rules of tutoring are:*

- (1) give the tutee a chance to set the agenda, and
- (2) give current assignments priority.

Many writers will know exactly what their goals are. They will want to work on brainstorming or work on the organization of a draft. Let writers talk about their writing and ideas. Work together to create a session agenda. However, not all writers are astute about what they really should do, and they put lower-level concerns above higher-level ones. Many writers will come in saying they want to work on their grammar when in fact they should instead be working on what is called a higher-level concern (such as refining a thesis or providing adequate support for ideas) rather than a lower level concern (such as punctuation). In such a case, the tutor needs to guide the tutee and steer him or her to a more appropriate session focus. (Remember that while the tutee has an obligation to help set the agenda, the tutor has the obligation to be so familiar with the writing center resources that he or she can call on them for a variety of situations.)

*In deciding what is most appropriate for a particular session use the following hierarchy of writing concerns to get started:*

As you read, remember the first two stages.

- (1) give the tutee a chance to set the agenda, and
- (2) give current assignments priority.

However, remember that if there is a need to change the focus of the session, you owe the tutee an explanation for the change. And, of course, the tutee should be able to ask questions as he or she pursues a new discussion.

*Reading Drafts Using a Hierarchy of Writing Concerns/Setting Priorities:*

1. Early draft: Discuss content (what the writer is trying to say)

Help the writer consider:

- Meeting needs of the assignment
- Using thesis as a control to focus and organize the essay
- Using a topic sentence as a control to focus and organize a paragraph
- Meeting audience needs

2. Intermediate draft: Discuss development, the organization and support of content.

Help the writer consider:

- Whether the ideas are developed completely and clearly;
- Whether the ideas are concretely supported and illustrated (adequate details, examples, quotations);
- Whether there is an introduction and conclusion;
- Whether the text meets the audience's needs;
- Whether each paragraph has one main idea related to thesis (shown in a topic sentence);
- Whether the organization and order of information is appropriate;

3. Close to Final Draft: Consider style and correctness. (For a thorough overview, see “Editing, Proofreading, Preparing a Polished Draft,” Caposella 62-71.)

Help the writer consider:

- Using adequate transitions between paragraphs/sentences;
- Correcting wordiness and awkwardness;
- Eliminating mechanical errors;
- Checking for correct documentation forms (e.g. parenthetical references);

*How do I end a session?*

Review the session by asking “What did you learn today?” and getting the writer to list what she learned. Also having the writer actually write a list to take away is very useful. (Remember to check for any omissions by using the notes you have been writing down throughout the session.)

Mention what the writer might work on the following week.

Show that you have listened to everything the writer has said by giving a review at the very end of the session. This review may take the form of comparing your list of notes to the writer's. Be sure to note anything the tutee has overlooked.

Finally, kindly ask the tutee to complete a tutoring session form. You may need to assist them with part of this form, but their response to the session must be done on the writer's own.

## **A SAMPLE TUTORING SESSION**

### *A Rough Draft:*

Establish a friendly relationship. Let the writer talk. After having the writer explain the assignment fully (so that the tutor understands its intent), ask the writer how and why she feels he or she has written to the assignment. Use that explanation to determine where to begin. Also, ask the writer what he or she feels she needs to work on at this point. Using the hierarchy, begin work on the more important concerns first. For example, it is more important to have the writer work on formulating a clear thesis appropriate to the assignment than tidying up punctuation. Provide explanations when necessary. Rather than simply going over what can be done, also give explanations of why certain work is necessary. For example, if a thesis statement or topic sentence is missing, explain how each works to hold the text together giving it focus and organization. Model ways to find answers using the following tools: dictionary, thesaurus, MLA handbook, etc. (Be sure to learn where these are located in the Center.)

### *Tutoring a Final Draft:*

Students who visit the Center well in advance of an assignment's due date will have more opportunities for revision. However, some writers will visit at the last minute. If the writer has a night left before the due date, there are more opportunities for revision than if the assignment is due the same day. In the case of ample revision time, the tutor can follow the following standard steps:

- ascertaining the assignment scope
- having the writer read the text aloud
- asking what the writer would like to do in the writing center

If the tutor feels that there is too little time left for extensive work, he or she should clearly explain the limitations of the situation to the tutee. Be sure to note the possibilities of what could have been done in a more generous time frame. The tutee should realize that any compromise in the quality of the paper is a result of the tutee's lack of planning and preparation rather than any inability of a tutor to help.

After a tutoring session, the tutor should introduce/review these proofreading skills:

1. Read slowly.
2. Look for small errors in this effort rather than looking for ideas.
3. Use a blank sheet of paper to cover all of paper except for the line being read.
4. Read aloud. Hearing rather than seeing errors can be productive.
5. Read for specific errors.

6. Break up the proofreading into short periods of time.

*Walk-in Appointments: A Special Case*

Some writers choose to drop in the Center without an appointment. Working with these kinds of appointments can be enjoyable for those who enjoy meeting new people and like challenges. However, these walk-in sessions can be intense because the writer has a focused concern. In other words, the bonus of such tutoring is that you never have to look for something to do.

## **PARTICULAR CONSIDERATIONS**

### *Building Relationships:*

A trusting relationship is at the heart of writing center work. Writers need to be able to trust their tutors will treat them with respect and concern. In fact, this trust is an important reason for tutees to make commitments to work for the whole entire academic year. Seeing the growth of a tutee over several months is rewarding. As you tutor you may meet writers who are different from you in some way (religion, political beliefs, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.). You may sometimes even read papers that you personally will not agree with. You may meet writers you do not particularly like. However, you need to keep your opinions to yourself and treat each writer with respect. Nevertheless, if a writer makes you uncomfortable (for example, by writing a paper you earnestly regard as hateful, harassing or intimidating), please talk to the Director.

In the beginning, tutors may even feel that the Director's need to give tutees misconduct reports or report them absent hinders this trust. However, these consequences are necessary for the running of the Center. Without these penalties, writers simply would not show up for appointments or would fail to bring work with them.

### *Working with non-standard dialects:*

Some San Antonio College writers speak so-called "nonstandard dialects" of English. The term nonstandard is misleading. One dialect is called "standard" simply because more people speak it, but no one dialect is superior to another.

Mastering Standard English certainly will allow writers more success in a school which English is the primarily used language, and San Antonio College is typical in believing that such mastery will allow its writers more success in college. However, tutors need to remember that writers often trade this mastery for distance from their home cultures. Therefore, when tutoring nonstandard dialect speakers, please remember to discuss errors objectively noting how they can derive from differences between dialects. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, please do further reading (Caposella 96-7).

## **WORKING WITH ESL STUDENTS**

San Antonio College has the privilege of having numerous international writers. They bring to SAC the ability to teach the community about other languages and cultures. Just as we tutors are able to learn about their cultures from them, they are able to learn from us about our culture. Please keep in mind that although ESL writers now live in the U.S., they may not be accustomed to all of our practices. In order to assist better assist these writers in their writing, writing tutors must try to understand these writers' cultures so that we may understand their actions.

*What to expect and how to react:*

- ESL writers may be afraid to ask questions. Therefore, tutors should explain concepts fully and repeatedly ask the writer if he or she has a question. Also, if the writer looks confused, be sure to explain without asking.
- ESL writers often are not accustomed to discussing religious and political views. Try to avoid discussing these matters because they might find the conversation offensive or embarrassing.
- ESL writers highly respect the tutor because he or she is a teaching authority. Therefore, the writing center relationship between a tutor and an ESL tutee might be more formal than with other writers.
- Direct eye contact is not a normal practice for some ESL writers because it is believed to be rude. Avoiding looking into the tutor's eyes does not mean that the tutee is not listening or does not wish to be at the appointment.
- Education is extremely important and highly valued in most ESL writers' countries. ESL writers, therefore, are often highly motivated and are hard workers.
- ESL writers may nod their heads as a sign of respect even if they do not understand what is being said. Tutors, therefore, must make sure their tutee understands completely before moving on. For example, asking pointed questions, such as "What did you learn today?," is a useful tactic to confirm understanding.
- ESL tutees may automatically be ashamed of grades less than an A. Therefore, if the tutor needs to discuss a grade with the tutee, the tutor should do so in a way that other writers will not know what the grade is otherwise the tutee might be ashamed.

- If the ESL writer does not seem to act in these ways and acts the opposite, the writer has become Americanized and might have learned American practices without comprehending when these actions are acceptable and when not. Thus, “odd” or “rude” behavior may result from unseen cultural differences. Therefore, if the ESL writer seems to be acting rudely, please let the director know. In the past, it has been helpful for him or her to arrange a conversation between the tutee and the dean (and/or adviser) to clarify certain expectations.

## **WORKING WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCE (LD) STUDENTS**

Never ask a writer directly, “Are you LD?”! The first rule of working with a writer with learning differences is to remember that if you suspect a writer has learning differences, you should share your observations with the Director, not the writer. She will investigate the situation and give you guidelines for tutoring. If you keep working with an “LD writer,” you will need to inform yourself by reading about the subject. See, for example, “Working with Learning-Disabled Writers” and you should change your tutoring approach (The MTU Writing Center Handbook 97-99).

You will discover that other San Antonio College writers have what are known as “learning differences” (or in other terminology “learning disabilities”). Many of these writers have superior intelligence; others are average; but all must learn strategies to cope with their differences because they must work with more effort to adjust their differences to school requirements. To get an appreciation of the challenges LD writers face, turn to Caposella’s discussion (97-99) and look at the visual representation of how a text might appear to a dyslexic reader.

How can you recognize such a writer? Some writers may outright tell you about them being an LD student. Others have a secretive attitude and may pretend they have no learning differences. Still others may not even understand they have learning differences. The writings of these writers often have the classic characteristics of odd spellings or omissions of words and word parts (e.g. endings). Often these writers leave out whole sentences and make huge leaps in logic leaving gaps of reasoning. Despite their hard work, at times these writers’ seem to “throw together” papers. At other times, their differences leave the writers so frustrated that their papers truly are thrown together.

A good way to work with these writers is for the tutors to read their papers aloud and ask lots of questions about the missing parts. For example, if a sentence does not make sense, you can ask the writer what he she intended to write at that point. These writers often are fluent talkers. Therefore, you might write down what they say word for word on a piece of paper and suggest the use of the completed sentence in his or her paper. Pam Wehr, formerly an expert on learning differences at Michigan Tech, describes working with these writers:

Coaching these writers is both challenging and fun—kind of like playing a game of “Clue” where you and your writers, together, work to discover what methods of learning and writing work best for them and then attempt to use those methods with their current assignments. What’s fun about it is that in the process of helping your writers discover what type of learning style works best for them, you will discover new methods of approaching writing and studying to try yourself and to pass on to other writers you coach. It’s important to remember that the methods we use with writers

who have a learning difference are very useful for all writers (The MTU Writing Center Handbook 55-6).

While many “LD” writers will want to concentrate on the task at hand (such as a particular assignment), they should be encouraged to examine long-term solutions to use in their school work. They should consider what methods of learning work best for them.

It may prove helpful to keep records of appointments with LD students. Recording sessions allows the tutor and writer to keep track of what has been worked on or talked about, and it offers a good starting point for future tutoring sessions. More importantly, keeping a record of tutoring sessions with LD students helps you and the writer determine what methods of learning work best for the writer.

Work with a LD writer can be exciting. You may not immediately find a solution, but together the tutor and writer should come up with some useful strategies. Sometimes you will even discover something as simple as a colored transparency placed over a paper will help the writer read more easily. If you feel unsure about your approach, contact the Director who will be happy to try to find alternative strategies and information.

## **ADVOCACY**

Students with learning differences can gain accommodations through San Antonio College's *Disabled Student Services* if needed. Some writers already are aware of their rights to have these accommodations. Others may not know about their rights or may be unwilling to make public their learning differences. Certainly writers should choose their own approaches, but you can help them become aware that an ability to work from their strengths will provide them with confidence and increased success.

These writers also benefit from learning to talk to their teachers about their differences rather than simply trying to hide them. Please always refer advocacy issues to the Director.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE WRITING OF LEARNING DIFFERENCE STUDENTS**

(Wehr in The MTU Writing Center Handbook 57-62)

### *Brevity:*

Students with learning differences tend to write short papers. While they have ideas, they have difficulty expressing them. A short paper alone is not enough to identify a learning difference; it is accompanied by other characteristics.

### *Leaps in content/ logic:*

Students with learning differences usually have larger gaps in their papers. Jumps in their thinking are apparent. Sentences, words, and quotations can seem to come out of nowhere. Sometimes such a writer will find it difficult to explain to a tutor what is missing. You can ask questions, as you read line by line, to indicate where there is something missing, and you may need to ask more questions than ordinarily to make the writer become aware of the sources of confusion.

### *Poor organization:*

Students with learning differences typically have difficulty recognizing what ideas are more important and what are less important. A more random order of presentation may result in a lack of focus. Each sentence seems to bring a new idea, or paragraphs could seem unconnected. A tutor can help by working with the writer on a concrete outline (less formal than a standard outline) or by using colored highlighters to link similar sentences. You could model such a technique for one paragraph and then let the writer go through the next scrambled paragraph. Another concrete exercise is to brainstorm a list of key words for a thesis. With these word tools the writer can then better deal with the ideas behind them.

### *Inconsistent proofreading:*

Missing letters, added letters, missing words, extra words, wrong words, misspellings are typical for writers with learning differences. Their existence does not necessarily mean that these writers have not worked hard on a text or that they haven't proofread. They just cannot see the errors because of visual perception problems. In such cases having the writer read the paper aloud will not work because they will simply fill in the missing words and letters. You need to read the paper to them exactly as you find it because they should be able to hear the errors and then be able to correct them. Some of these writers can eventually learn to read their own papers and catch the errors, but many will never be able to do this. Encourage these writers to word process all their drafts, to use the spellchecker consistently, and use visual revision methods such as color coding.

*Emotional Issues:*

Many writers with learning differences are uncomfortable about acknowledging their differences, and they may exhibit atypical behavior during appointments. They may have spent years feeling badly about how inadequate their academic performance is in comparison to others. As a result, they may be embarrassed about their learning differences. In fact, you may find that it takes such a writer a longer than average time to get used to settling down and working in the Center (even just learning to sit still). Therefore, you may want to meet in a quieter spot if at all possible.

Never accuse a writer of having learning differences. Be sure to talk about the writer with the Director as soon as you suspect a learning difference situation. Remember to act professionally and discretely in all situations as some Baylor parents and writers do not wish to have learning differences publicized or even known.

*Characteristics of Learning Differences:*

(drawn from Wehr in the 1996 Michigan Tech Writing Center handbook (61-2))

This list is not complete, but knowing these characteristics will help you consider whether a writer might have learning differences and, thus, how you might approach working with him or her more effectively. Of course, everyone exhibits these symptoms occasionally; their combination and frequency is what suggest a true learning difference.

- reversed letters, missing syllables, bizarre misspellings of common words
- trouble listening to a lecture and taking notes at the same time
- overly forgetful, chronically late, unaware of details
- trouble with sequencing
- illegible or childish handwriting
- omitted or added words when writing or reading aloud
- difficulty “reading” social cues, such as when it is appropriate to interrupt or when it is time to leave
- easily distracted
- left and right confusion
- unusual creativity
- unusual talent in one area such as math, and great difficulty in another, such as English

## **SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES**

Suggestions taken from Wehr (62-63):

Instill confidence by making them aware of different learning styles and by helping them discover their strengths so they can work around their weaknesses. (A writer who has a learning difference may have difficulty with sequential thought patterns but be especially talented at thinking metaphorically.)

*Teach alternative methods of learning:*

- Auditory (e.g., reading aloud, tape recording)
- Visual (e.g. color coding; creating maps, charts, graphs instead of sentences and paragraphs)
- Kinesthetic (e.g., writing, notes on moveable cards)
- Mechanical aids (e.g., word-processing packages, spell checkers)

*Help them get organized:*

- Encourage them to use assignment notebooks
- Break down assignments into more manageable tasks
- Set up study schedules
- create long-term calendars

*Teach them about metacognition:*

(being aware of their own thinking)

Encourage them to take responsibility (e.g., to speak with instructors, to work out acceptable alternatives for troublesome working conditions—oral exams, taped responses, untimed tests, private testing places).

Remember that a tutor's purpose is to empower all writers by helping them learn how to best utilize their strengths. Our purpose is not to rescue them.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

Reading this manual for the first time may make tutoring seem daunting. However, once you begin tutoring you will quickly learn that being a tutor can actually be fun. You also will gain satisfaction from helping other writers and learning new perspectives on writing and writers. Yet in the first few months (and even occasionally after you have become experienced), you may feel uncomfortable and wonder whether you are tutoring in the “right” way. Please always remember that there is never just one right way to tutor. Simply follow the general “golden rules” of tutoring and the writing center philosophy, and you will discover that you will create your own style of tutoring based on your personality and your instincts as a writer. Be sure to remember that good advice is always readily available. There is a community of writing tutors—experienced tutors, fellow novice tutors, and the Director—to whom you always can and should turn to with questions.

Tutoring, quite simply, will enrich your life.

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(This document has been adopted by the San Antonio College Writing Center from the Baylor School Writing Tutor Manual. It has been changed, modified, and edited to best fit our purposes. All work has been cited and is credited here. In no way is this document an original creation of ours. We are thankful and grateful to the Baylor School Writing Center for this document.)

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