

A Writer's Life

The ins and outs of the Writing Center



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How do you tell a person that the paper they are lovingly presenting to you has no purpose and does not fit the assignment? How do you explain the need for a word like "the" to a student whose native language does not use it? How do you sit and listen to someone read a 15-page research paper on the pH of soil when you have your own presentation due in less than 12 hours?

As a Writing Center tutor, I am expected to deal with these situations every week. Few patrons of the Writing Center know anything about the people they depend on to "help them become better writers." Anyone has the opportunity to know what it is like to be a tutee at the Writing Center, but it is a small number of dedicated students who know what is like to be



Here freshman Kate Bradley tutors a fellow student. Pictured above is veteran tutor Heather Trant in a conference.

a tutor. Contrary to popular belief, Writing Center tutors do not have to be gifted writers or hardcore grammarians. In fact, all they have to do is sign up for the Writing

Center workshop course, taught by Barbara Gordan. Many of these students take the class because they had experience helping friends with their papers, but several others take it because it is a

requirement. I found myself tutoring within the first week of this class after having read only one chapter in the course textbook.

The fear of having to be an "expert" after just a few classes was an obstacle I had to quickly overcome as fellow students started turning to me for help. The biggest obstacle a tutor has to overcome, however, is the writer.

No one wants to deal with a writer who comes in and expects the tutor to re-write their paper or act like an automated grammar-checker.

Writers like that tend to assume that by just walking in and sitting down at the Writing Center, their paper will magically receive bonus points, regardless of how hopeless the situation is.

When it comes to hopeless situations, the worst is when a writer comes to see me when I have 20 minutes left in my shift, their 20-

page research paper is due in the morning and I realize that they do not have a thesis.

Another nightmare is when a writer refuses to make any changes to their draft that are more complicated than adding a comma. These writers also have the impression that because their writing is so good, and because they are not making any important changes, the conference will be easier for the tutor as well.

Unfortunately, we tutors tend to care a great deal about the writing that comes from one of our conferences. When I have a writer come back and tell me the last paper they turned in got an "A," I get just as excited as they do. Sure, I didn't write the paper and we only spent 30 minutes together, but I am essentially earning a grade with every conference.

I have to use a semester's worth of knowledge on learning styles, brainstorming exercises and tutoring guidelines in just 30 minutes, and I have to make sure the writer walks away with more confidence.

Each and every session acts as a final exam for a tutor, and the grading does not begin until the writer sits down alone after the conference to begin changing their work based on what they have learned from me.

Many students are apprehensive about using the Writing Center because the thought of asking for help from a fellow student makes them uncomfortable, and they do not realize how nervous the tutor might be.

Whether or not the writer gets an "A" on the paper is not important to a tutor. A "D" does not turn into an "A" overnight, but if the writer can look back on a tutor as helpful, then everyone makes the grade.

Contact Kaitlyn North at pendulum@elon.edu or 278-7247.

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