



What Tutoring Writing Isn't is an excerpt from *Tutoring Writing: A Practical Guide for Conferences* by Donald A. McAndrew and Thomas J. Reigstad.

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Chapter Three

What Tutoring Writing Isn't

This chapter looks at tutoring by using Aristotle's method of arguing from opposites, exploring what the tutoring of writers is *not*. Although tutoring writing is one-to-one, it is unlike other one-to-one situations, and the writing tutor should not emulate those other situations. Tutoring writers is *not*

- patterned after the typical conference between a professional editor and a journalist
- giving false praise
- simply detecting and correcting errors
- adopting the cloak of therapist
- taking ownership away from the writer
- necessarily having all the answers
- responding too late

The Editor-Journalist Model

Over the years well-intentioned writing teachers from Mina Shaughnessy (1977) to Charles Moran (1994) have promoted the editor-journalist relationship as an ideal that writing tutors ought to imitate. This model once served a useful purpose by encouraging writing teachers to transform traditional teacher-centered classrooms into more individualized, student-oriented workshop environments, but its value for writing tutors has been distorted and misrepresented.

The myth of the nurturing, caring editor working side-by-side with an author has been perpetuated and glamorized by stories about Maxwell Perkins, the legendary editor at Charles Scribner's Sons who worked with such authors as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Thomas Wolfe, and Marjorie Rawlings. At first glance, Perkins would seem to be the prototype for a perfect writing tutor. He adhered to a simple principle: "An editor does not add to a book. At best he serves as a handmaiden to an author" (Berg 1978). Perkins adjusted his mentoring style to fit the author. He often paid personal visits to Fitzgerald and Hemingway to discuss their drafts, and he spent a great deal of time with Wolfe. Most of Perkins' feedback to Rawlings was delivered through extensive correspondence.

Perkins is the exception rather than the rule; the typical editor-professional writer relationship is more of an "antimodel" for writing tutors.

Tom Reigstad worked as a copy editor at a daily newspaper in a large city. In two years on the job, he had only one direct conversation with a reporter about a story (and it was by phone, not face-to-face) because such contact would have violated the unofficial pecking order of the newsroom. If copy editors had questions about a story, they went through a chain of command: to the chief copy editor, who went to the city editor, who might then phone the reporter. Copy editors and reporters rarely consulted with each other about pieces of writing.

Maryanne Reigstad and Meghan McAndrew attest to the surprisingly antagonistic nature of the editor-writer relationship in journalism. In reminiscing about her seven years as a professional journalist, Reigstad (1990) identifies just one editor who behaved as a "teacher"; who was "adept at working with writers to let them see for themselves what information was lacking, and how the piece could become better." Reigstad mostly encountered editors who had their own agendas: When they assigned a story, they had a preconceived notion of what it would be like and did not welcome a surprising fact or twist if the reporter collected data that did not fit that notion. McAndrew's three years as a newspaper reporter also confirm that the editor-writer model is not a desirable one for writing tutors to follow. When time was not an issue, her editor would talk about a piece he had assigned her, or about other pieces she had written that he thought were particularly effective, or even about writing in general. But when the time crunch was on, as it frequently is in newspaper work, he took control of the process and product. McAndrew found more sympathetic readers in and got more down-to-earth advice from other reporters, with whom she frequently discussed pieces.

Donald Murray helps shatter the myth that the bond between editors and reporters is like the one between tutors and students. Murray, a writing teacher, former journalist, and pioneer in the field of tutoring writers, provides many firsthand accounts that suggest that real-life, editor-journalist conferences are more adversarial than collegial.

Some of Murray's most revealing anecdotes come from his days as a staff member at *Time* magazine. He admits that he "didn't learn much about writing from the *Time* editor who made a glider out of one of my stories and tossed it out the twenty-eighth story window" (1985). He also expresses disgust over editors' stylistic changes: "When I was on *Time* I sometimes felt that the senior editors (senior rewriters) would choose the metaphor over the story. It was not a good way to go" (1983). Murray calls his tenure at *Time* "a disaster. I resisted editing. I found that most editors were absolutist in what they had to say. They were curt and authoritarian . . . they were a burden that I had to put up with to get ahead in the profession . . . I don't think that they were a model for teaching" (1979a).

Murray (1961) writes about submitting a 5,300-word article to the *Saturday Evening Post* and receiving a letter of criticism from the editor that was 3,750 words long. He and the editor eventually met and went over the article word by word. The editor offered to rewrite it, an offer that Murray declined.

Among Murray's chief criticisms of editors is that they don't listen to writers and don't invite quality work. Like Reigstad, Murray finds editors to be overly rigid, expecting writers to jump through hoops of conventional prose and formulas. He says that "the usual city room climate outlaws risk. . . . That climate can be reversed if the editor stops behaving as top sergeant, treating reporters as troops on latrine duty, and makes writers colleagues" (1989).

In the last fifteen years newspapers have attempted to repair the distrust between editors and writers by hiring consultants to serve as writing coaches, which has greatly improved both journalistic writing and the relationships between editors and writers. Coaching journalists has become a kind of cottage industry, with a newsletter, "Coaches' Corner," and a book, *Coaching Writers* (Clark and Fry 1992), targeted to newspaper writing coaches. But until such coaching achieves more widespread change in journalistic practices, the traditional newspaper editor-writer relationship will be of limited use as a model for writing tutors, perhaps even functioning as an antimodel, a *modus operandi* to be avoided—despite the persistent myth in popular and education-related literature that professional editors and writers collaborate in a pervasive spirit of goodwill.

Cheerleading

Writers, like other human beings, see through false praise—but writers are particularly sensitive and suspicious when tutors give them a steady stream of positive comments about their work. Writers need honest feedback, not empty flattery. One of Nancie Atwell's (1998) guidelines for conducting one-to-one conferences is “avoid generalized praise.”

Don't misunderstand: Positive stroking is good. But tutors should not use praise to sugarcoat the truth. Atwell goes on to suggest how tutors can compliment writers when it is warranted:

Praise by paying attention to the writer. Praise by becoming involved in the writing. Praise by congratulating writers who solve problems by dint of hard work. Praise by acknowledging writers who try something new. Praise by describing the effects of specific techniques on you as a reader. (225)

The distinction between genuine and false praise is an important one for tutors to keep in mind.

Donald Murray articulates the difference between a tutor who is “legitimately helpful and supportive” and one who is a patronizing “Mister Goody-Two-Shoes.” He reinforces what tutoring is *not* when he says about his philosophy for writing conferences, “I don't patronize and pat somebody on the head. . . . When you genuinely see a good piece of work done on the page or when you understand from what the student has said that they've gone through a logical process in producing what's on the page, you reinforce that” (1979a).

Correcting Errors

The flip side of “do not cheerlead” is for tutors to avoid being overly critical and nitpicking about writers' work. Finding fault should never be the mission of a one-to-one tutoring session. Sondra Perl's research on composing processes (1978) and Mike Rose's research on writer's block (1984) underscore that obsessing over rules can be damaging to a writer. Premature concern about grammatical correctness and other rules of standard written English may truncate the rhythm of writing or even raise anxiety about writing to a crippling level.

Thus, if a tutor zeroes in only on surface errors—what we refer to as *lower order concerns* (LOCs)—the effect on the writer may be harmful and adverse to the goals of tutoring. Acting as Mr. or Ms. Fix-it by hunting for punctuation errors should be low on a tutor's list of priorities. If a tutoring session is consumed by pointing out a paper's

cosmetic flaws, the writer will likely feel demoralized and unwilling to improve the writing. The tutor's job is to encourage the writer to revisit a piece, not to cancel her invitation to write.

Therapy

Tutors may form close bonds with writers, especially if the relationship stretches over a significant time span, but the subject of the interaction should be the writing, not the writer. Do not fall into the trap of becoming the writer's counselor or therapist.

This particular "don't" is tricky, since writers often use writing as an emotional outlet and address highly personal issues and feelings in their work and in their conversations about it. The tutor must recognize the thin line between being an empathetic respondent, which is a useful posture, and being an armchair psychologist, which isn't. In attempting to sort out this distinction, Christina Murphy (1989) makes too strong a case in favor of writing tutors behaving as psychotherapists. She sees a clear connection between the transformative interactions and outcomes that are involved in tutoring and those that are involved in counseling, and even suggests that the terms *tutor* and *student* might be substituted for *therapist* and *client*.

There are parallels between what goes on in a face-to-face writing meeting and in a counseling session. Roger Garrison (1979b), a renowned expert on writing tutorials, explains how the writings of psychologist Carl Rogers shaped his tutoring philosophy:

I read that book [*Client-Centered Therapy*, 1951] when it was first published; and it had a profound effect on my teaching. Indeed, it's not too much to say that the book, plus other more recent writings of Rogers, was an important intellectual component in my own evolving of the one-to-one approach.

It can be instructive for a writing tutor to borrow some of counseling's nondirective intervention strategies, but it is inappropriate and at times dangerous for the tutor to adopt the role of therapist or healer in a one-to-one conference. Atwell (1998) describes the "delicate touch" necessary when responding to students, a touch whose first principle is "not to become too personal." She underscores that her purpose as a respondent "isn't for me to invite kids' personal problems or offer counsel about them." Murray (1979b) agrees that one of the potential hazards of tutoring is that tutors "get so involved in the subject matter that they may become a therapist." Murray stresses that tutors need to be trained "to make sure they create enough detach-

ment so that they don't become overly involved with the students' subject matter."

If a tutor senses that a student is in troubled waters, she should refer the student to appropriate assistance networks, such as suicide alert and other crisis centers. Unless a tutor has the professional credentials of a therapist, she shouldn't pretend to be one in a writing conference.

Usurping Ownership

The writing tutor must respect the writer's ideas and words. As tempting as it might be for the tutor to rewrite the student's work wholesale by inserting her own information, style, and language (because such ingredients would improve the piece of writing), she should resist doing so, always remembering that she is not the writer's coauthor.

One of Nancy Sommers' (1982) guidelines for responding to writers asserts that the tutor should not appropriate the student's text. Writers should feel welcome to explore their own ideas and find their own ways to express them, without unwelcome intrusions from the tutor. Atwell (1998), too, emphasizes the importance of students maintaining ownership of their work. Murray (1982a) warns that tutors who "pounce on first-draft writing and make corrections . . . take the writing away from the writer." He portrays such heavy-handed tutors as first-draft "kidnappers" who stifle the writer's voice, wrest the responsibility for making meaning out of the writer's hands, and ultimately guide the writer to produce work that is "trivialized, unchallenging, unauthoritative, impersonal, unimportant."

Being an Expert

Diane Stelzer Morrow (1991) changed careers from medicine to teaching. In her discussion of the similarities between being a doctor and being a writing tutor, she describes her pleasant discovery that tutors, unlike doctors, do not need to appear infallible. Morrow's finding is particularly relevant for peer writing tutors, who need not feel pressure to have all the answers, much less the "right" answers. Rather, the peer tutor can help by "nudging" the writer, in a facilitative way, toward routes to the truth, the facts, and the best structural scheme. The tutor should give honest feedback and not feel inadequate if she can't answer a writer's question. Sometimes the best

reader is a “dumb reader,” one who is not an authority in the subject matter. The tutor can fill that role.

Part of being an effective tutor means equipping writers with strategies for discovering their own answers, perhaps by suggesting a potentially useful website, book, or resource person. By reading widely, the tutor will develop a rich network of materials to refer writers to.

The real expert about the writing is the writer, who knows the subject matter better than the tutor does.

Responding Too Late

When we conduct writing workshops in the world of business and industry, we usually invite participants to bring in samples of writing-in-progress so that we can give them feedback. More often than not, writers instead bring in artifacts from their files—reports from a month back, letters from a year ago—apparently expecting a kind of postgame critique. These writers miss an ideal opportunity to have a private audience with a live reader of a live piece of writing. One of the joys of tutoring is being on hand when the writer needs you. Atwell (1998) calls this constant of writing conferences “the immediacy of response.” Murray (1979a) uses the metaphor of writers needing “somebody running along beside them while they have the experience of writing”—the tutor is that runner. Tom Newkirk (1979) has reservations about conferences that are “only a postmortem on a paper.”

We are not referring to editing or even proofreading conferences: Those acts are vital to composition, and a final get-together between tutor and writer can result in impressive last-minute fine-tuning. We are referring to conferences that talk about stale writing products, “done deals” that have already been finished. An after-the-fact debriefing about a completed piece of writing is not an effective use of a tutor’s skills. The best time for tutors to help is when writers are engaged in the composing process—searching for a subject, starting a draft, revising, and editing. The tutor must be at the writer’s side when the writer needs her the most.

The tutor should take advantage, then, of the unique face-to-face intervention that tutoring writers affords, making herself available while the writer is at work rather than waiting until it is too late.