

Coaching Your Comrades

Tutoring friends, family, and acquaintances effectively

Danielle Hegsted

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Rhetoric Associates Program
Professor Julie Foust
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ABSTRACT for:
Coaching Your Comrades
Tutoring friends, family, and acquaintances effectively

We as writing tutors often are put in the position of tutoring friends and family. It is not necessarily a negative thing, but I have found it requires a unique combination of skills to be able to handle the situation well

- Staying focused in light of intimidation and distractions
- Giving validation and relevant direction
- Establishing an ethos as a writing tutor
- Dealing with the desire for a perfect paper
- Following up

The phone rings.

“Hello,” I answer.

“Hi Danielle, it’s Melissa. Are you terribly busy right now?”

[I have learned to be wary of this question, and I brace myself]

“Why?” I ask.

“Well, you see, I have this paper I am working on...”

Immediately, I know what she wants. She needs some guidance with her paper; she needs a writing tutor.

“You see, I got a really bad grade on my last paper from Professor SoAndSo, and I think this paper is alright, but obviously I am not seeing what the professor sees. Can you look over my paper?”

Or, how about this one:

“Danielle, my favorite sister in the whole wide world, I have a paper due in, oh, about 35 minutes. Can you look it over and tell me if it is okay?”

Or this scenario:

“My roomies were talking yesterday and Beth said you proofread papers. And, I thought, yeah, she’s nice, maybe I will have her proof my paper.”

Or my personal favorite I have received this year:

“Hi, my name is Jessica. My best friend’s cousin’s roommate is dating your roommate’s best friend Shirley. Anyway, I heard you are really great at editing papers...”

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No doubt, we as writing tutors run into this all the time—friends and family wanting to use our skills as editors. It is not necessarily a negative thing, but I have found it requires a unique combination of skills to be able to handle the situation well. The rest of this article is aimed at helping you stay on task and be the most effective tutor-friend you can possibly be.

## **Staying focused in light of intimidation and distractions**

Tutoring people you know well or care about can be very intimidating for you, and on the other hand, it can be very scary for your writer friend as well. We do not want to lose face in any way to our friends or family. So, sometime this can all be a little scary and we might lose sight of the task.

Or else, the complete opposite can happen. You are such good friends that you know virtually nothing you can do or say will ruin that. Once again, the challenge comes in focusing on the charge you have as a writing tutor. It is easy to become sidetracked and talk about different subjects.

One of the best ways to deal with this is to have a plan for your session. However, most tutors know that a session rarely goes exactly according to plan. The idea is to know your destination and determine the exact route as the session progresses. Speaking on this plan, William J. Macauley, Jr. said,

“I like to think of this plan as similar to charting a course on a road map. A road map is open-ended in that it shows you many possible routes to travel, but the specific course you choose on the map never lets you forget that you’re on a purposeful journey to your destination” (Macauley 1).

## Giving validation and direction

One of the reasons your friend might have come to you instead of going to another is because he or she is unsure of his or her writing skills and hopes you, as a friend, will be more sensitive and give useful critiques. Watch carefully for this. Before you even start to read the paper or point out a single thing, make sure you talk to your friend and discover the feelings about the class, the paper, and writing in general. You can then change your tutoring skills to reflect their needs. Leigh Ryan points out that tutors wear many hats, which include the ally, coach, commentator, collaborator, writing expert, and counselor (Ryan 23-24). With your friends, family and acquaintances, it is even more important that you are aware of these different roles and are capable of slipping in and out of them as needed.

I have found that my friends seem to fit in one of three general camps:

1. They are unsure of their skills as writers—If this happens, be especially aware of their needs. More than likely, they are better writers than they realize and their ideas are sound. They just need someone to tell them that; they need validation.
2. As far as they can tell, their paper is good, but they want to make it great. They are generally strong writers, but need a little more to make their paper shine. They are hoping you will be able to give that to them because you are their friend and you will give honest and qualified advice. If this happens, you can be a little more blunt. Cut the fluff and get to the heart. Try very hard to find something they can improve on (see “Establishing an ethos as a writer”)
3. They are too lazy to go to the writing center or to the professor. Actually, I think these are the easiest to deal with. You can use many of the same tutoring skills you are already have.

## **Establishing an ethos as a writer**

You have to be able to assert your skill as a “writing expert” to your friend. He or she may know you well, but it is highly probably your friend has not seen your writing and does not know you as a writing tutor. Your friend comes with many preconceived notions about you. And, whether or not they are true, they probably do not have much to do with your writing skills. I think the easiest way to do establish yourself as a writing expert is to find one thing in the paper your friend could improve that would make a significant change for the better. Help them to see how to immediately apply it. Make it seem that coming to you really was worth their time.

### ***Possible items for improvement could be***

- Passive voice
- Using active verbs (as opposed “to be” verbs)
- Overuse of the word “that”
- Sentence organization in paragraphs
- Organization of main ideas
- Tone or voice

Now, let me reiterate; just pick one item and sell it big time. Help them to be excited about how they can improve. One of the best ways you can sell it is to talk about how you want to be able to help them. That is what friends are for, right?

## **Wanting to make the perfect paper**

This is something I deal with repeatedly. I care about the person I am helping and I want to help them get an ‘A’. But, sometimes, the paper has a multitude of issues. It is not feasible to point everything out; it will probably just be confusing anyway. When this happens, I try very hard to use what I call “top-down” editing. Start with the global issues and work down. It is nearly impossible to try to cover everything at once—trust me. Not long ago, I helped my brother with his freshman English paper. We spent over three hours going over things he should work on. Three hours is excessively long. We were both a little frustrated and sick of the paper (and, dare I say each other?) when we were done

Instead, be honest with your friend. Tell them what you are doing (“top-down” editing) and that you will be more than happy to look over another draft once they fix the things you mentioned. And, then, stick to your guns. Your friend will probably try to use his or her ethos as your friend to get you to do it all at once, but I promise, it works better this way. It is better use of everyone’s time.

And, now a word of caution: you must be very careful not to rewrite your friend’s paper for them. I have found that when I know the person, they frequently want me to reword a sentence for them or rework a paragraph, and when I try to convince them to do it, they push harder. If you end up working for them, you are actually burdening them with a disservice. Their learning will be more complete if you coach them to rework the awkward parts of their paper themselves. Ask leading questions, give them examples that do not relate to their paper, or show them once in their paper and then have them apply the same principle later (Harris 30).

## **Following up**

Finally, these are your friends. Make sure you follow up and see how the paper went. Did it come together well? How does your friend feel about the paper? How about the grade? I have found this to be a valuable tool, not only for the friendship, but for my skill as a tutor. Your friends will usually give you honest feedback, and you can take the feedback and figure out how to better yourself as a tutor.

My skills as a tutor have improved drastically from the feedback I receive from my friends as they go through the writing process.

If you follow these steps, you can make a potentially sticky situation, helping family and friends, into a rewarding one, where you both learn more than you are able in a normal tutoring session.

Good luck!

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