

Timely Tutoring: Tips to Effectively Using the Tutoring Session

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The sun sets, the bell rings, the clock strikes, and another space of time is used up. If only I had another hour for every time someone asks, “Where does the time go?” The world spins consistently marking off each 24 hours, yet we are often left scrambling trying to fit in all there is to do. As time passes, it increasingly becomes rarer, heaving its value to the status of diamonds, oil, and land. Of course, History has yet to record a war being waged over time. But as the world seems to continually increase its spin cycle, I can’t help but wonder if the conflict could begin over the infamous wasting of time.

So time leaves us, as tutors, with a measly 30 minutes to spend with a writer. As usual, we have the choice to waste those precious minutes or the choice to effectively take full advantage of that time. Certainly our goal as tutors is not to watch the stop clock and mark up each minute lost or used. Our goal is to improve writers. But that goal can be severely hindered by several parameters dictating our tutoring session. One of those is the very noticeable time limit. So how can we as tutors use this time effectively?

Preparation is a main component of a successful tutoring session. Tutors must spend time beforehand reviewing the writer’s work and formulating useful and insightful comments. This preparation time should also be used organizing one’s thoughts concerning the organization of the session and priorities that should be addressed during the session. This preparation will help the tutor effectively direct the session to be most profitable to the writer.

Preparation also extends to bringing useful resources and guidebooks. In the Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring it says, “Don’t be afraid to take a handbook off the shelf and say ‘Let’s look this up.’” Tutors are not all knowing, and any question that

can be answered with additional resources is helpful. Preparation should include gathering any extra help, and it will help the session be much more effective. I once tutored several students that were required to use the APA style of citation in their writing. Because I was prepared, I could look up their questions on certain technical points of citation. I was also able to give them a website on APA citation that could answer any further questions. Instead of just fixing their citation mistakes, I gave them tools and sources to be able to discover answers on their own.

As the tutoring session begins, introductions are usually the first item of business. This can be a useful tool to get a good line of conversation and interaction going between the participants and, therefore, help the session go smoothly and be most effective. But if friendly conversation seems stretched, a tutor should not be concerned or try too hard; some students aren't interested in small talk or are shy. Remember the main goal is to make this student a better writer, not a conversationalist. I can remember being frustrated with a tutor that seemed intent on making friendly conversation with me. Although a friendly welcome is great, I was frustrated that we couldn't move on to the reason I was there which was my assignment.

Another very important factor in effective tutoring is addressing the "higher-order concerns" first. In the book Peer Tutoring, Gillespie and Lerner suggest, "As a tutor, you'll save grammar and correctness for later. Higher-order concerns are the big issues in the paper..." Some of these important concerns include: the organization of the paper, if the student is fulfilling the assignment given, a clear purpose or intent, or sufficient content to support their purpose. Although each writer will differ, it is a good idea to address these first. Perhaps a writer will have these areas pretty well covered; it is then

that a tutor can move on to lower order concerns. These include such things as grammar. With each paper, a tutor should look at both higher and lower order concerns, but the session will be most effective, and the writer will be most improved, by focusing on higher order concerns during the session. This method will also ensure the most important elements are taken care of in the time allotted. I recently read over a series of research papers that were of considerable length. I was worried that we would not be able to discuss the entire paper in the time allotted. This suggestion of focusing on higher order concerns first, worked well at organizing the session and rendering it most productive. It is also important to note that the tutor should always begin the session with a positive remark about the paper. The tutor-writer relationship is fragile and it is important to make it a positive experience.

Because of all the preparation, the tutor may have the tendency to dive right into their comments and ideas. This can result in the tutor being very productive, but the writer getting very little out of the session. Although the tutor may need to direct the session to take advantage of time, listening can also be an effective tool. The student may have questions or their own list of “higher-order” concerns. The session is for the student, and it will only be productive if their issues are addressed. In several sessions, I found the focus being redirected by a student’s question. They certainly come with their own set of concerns, and I often found it most beneficial to ask, “Do you have any questions for me?”

Of course, students may be unwilling to open up on their own, so the tutor can use the effective tool of asking questions. In the book Peer Tutoring, Gillespie and Lerner say, “When you ask questions, wait for the answer. Be patient.” Of course asking

questions can be extremely useful or especially wasteful. If the tutor is asking questions just for the sake of asking them, or already knows the answer, then it really is a waste of time. Gillespie and Lerner also mention, “Ask questions only if you really want to know the answer. This might mean letting go of an answer you may think you know and trusting the writer to know a good answer.” Often the writer is unwilling or unable to interact or answer the questions; if this happens, don’t be too concerned but go ahead with the issues that have already been spotted.

The interaction between tutor and writer can be a balancing act but, if used correctly, can enhance the session and cause great productivity. Students may come with many questions and concerns, which can enhance the session or be frustrating for a tutor. The valuable time in the session may be used up with a talkative student, although hopefully the student will be concentrating on the writing. The best direction for the tutor to take is to be aware of the time involved in the session, and what higher-order concerns still need to be addressed. It is up to the tutor to discern what the highest-order concern is, although the student will often offer what they deem the most important concern. The student can often be the best indicator of problem areas. But if the tutoring session is clearly off track and time is short, the tutor should be directing the course back on track.

On the opposite end of a healthy interaction, communication may seem like a huge obstacle. Students will sometimes have nothing to say. This can often disrupt the tutoring, since no feedback or opinion is voiced. If the tutor is prepared, there will be plenty of points and comments, but the writer will be the one missing out. Tutors are encouraged to try to involve the student, but certainly this situation is left up to the writer. They may have their reasons including: being forced to be there, being shy, or being

content with their paper. Either way, it is the writer's decision to take advantage of the opportunity or not.

Tutoring is a two way street, and the time involved in the session can only be used effectively if the writer also contributes. Just like the tutor, the writer must also come prepared. The writing session should have taken place before the tutoring session, and the most substantial of work should be turned in to the tutor. It is a waste of everyone's time if the tutor is looking at work that the writer was not serious about. On more than one occasion, I received a paper from a writer that was obviously a "midnight wonder," and constituted no more than two pages when the assignment asked for ten. I have been frustrated not only for myself, but also for the student. The required tutoring session can become a complete waste of time. Although the writer missed out, I found it useful to discuss their future plans and organization for the paper. This seemed to salvage some of an opportunity missed.

The next important part of a session, for both the tutor and the writer, is to show up and to show up on time. The interaction cannot occur if both people are not there. Along with showing up, the writer needs to come prepared with questions about the paper. No matter how proficient writers are, he/she can always benefit from a reader's input. Donald Murray, in his book The Craft of Revision, said, "The good reader makes me see new possibilities, new challenges in the draft." The tutor will bring comments and questions, but a writer should not rely on them to read their mind. The session will only be productive if, and only if, they are involved and interested.

There is one thing more valuable than time and that is the productive use of time. Although the tutoring session may seem short and insignificant, a great deal can be

accomplished if wisely used. The responsibility rests on the shoulders of both the tutor and the writer. The tutoring session can be a great opportunity for learning and peer cooperation, and certainly writing abilities can be improved as both tutor and writer come to the session prepared and ready to interact and discuss.

Works Cited

Gillespie, Paula, Neal Lerner. The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring. United States of America: Pearson Longman, 2004.

Murray, Donald M. The Craft of Revision. Canada: Thomson Heinle, 2004.