

What Students Want from a Writing Tutor

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Most writing tutors would agree that their ultimate goal is to assist writers in being self-sufficient. This doesn't mean that writers no longer need outside advice and are "perfect", but it does mean that the writers are able to work through the writing process comfortably on their own.

Two separate programs at Utah State University have been founded to help students achieve a high level of writing competency. Most students on the USU campus, or at least those who have taken an English class here, know about the Writing Center. Students make appointments to come in to the Writing Center to discuss their assignments with well-trained writing tutors who offer assistance in any area of writing. The majority of students that make use of this program are English students who are directed there by their professors.

On the other hand, the Rhetoric Associates Program is designed to assist students in writing across the curriculum. Rhetoric Associates are writing tutors who are assigned to specific classes in various colleges throughout campus. For example, RAs assist students with writing assignments for several classes that are in the College of Natural Resources. RAs aid students with writing assignments that are not unlike projects they will encounter after graduation.

Because writing is so important in many fields, it is crucial that students realize that it isn't just necessary for English classes. Many people agree that writing is an important skill that permeates every discipline and every career field. Each student

should leave the university with the ability to communicate his or her thoughts clearly in writing. By having students meet with RAs, professors offer their students an opportunity to improve those writing skills necessary to become valuable employees.

Of course, the Writing Center is open to all those who are willing to stop by for help with their assignments, so any student can reap those benefits. However, many students won't take the time to make an appointment if it is not required by their professor. This is another advantage to the Rhetoric Associates Program. The majority of the professors that use the program require their students to have a conference with an RA regarding their papers. Students simply sign up for appointments during class or by email. Then they meet with their RA at their convenience. One student who has participated in the RA program said, "I wouldn't ask for help on my own; this program provides the help I don't ask for but need."

Since Utah State University has two peer-tutoring programs available to help students with their writing, a survey of students who have had experience with both programs was conducted to determine if they have a preference regarding the way in which they receive help with their papers. Four classes that currently use the RA program were systematically selected to participate in the survey. Students in those classes were asked to fill out a short questionnaire.

To see what kinds of students were using the RA program, the first questions dealt with demographic information. These were followed by questions regarding students' opinions about how helpful the RA program was to them personally, and also about how they felt about writing in general. The final questions, which contained the most interesting results, were concerned with students' preferences for receiving writing

assistance: via the RA program or the Writing Center. Based on the 112 students surveyed, it was determined that 53% preferred the RA program over the Writing Center, 6% preferred the Writing Center, and 41% had no preference. So what is it about the RA program that students like?

This question was answered in part by students' comments. At the end of the questionnaire, students were asked to write down what they liked and what they wished was different about the RA program. Several students praised the convenience of the RA program and positively remarked on how the conferences benefited them. They liked how meeting times were scheduled, and that, because RAs work with the professor, they knew about the assignment before the writing conference. Also, many students expressed their approval of the fact that RAs have already read over their papers; hence, the entire conference time can be spent discussing the paper and the student's questions.

Writing conferences provide the one on one attention that many students need. In this setting they are able to comfortably express their concerns and receive the individualized instruction necessary to help them improve their writing skills. The meeting times are set so that both the tutor and the student have time to discuss the writing assignment. In a conference setting, tutors are able to discuss specific areas of the assignment in more detail than can be written in the margin of a paper. Regarding written comments, Andrew Cohen said, "Sometimes [teacher feedback] may be too abbreviated in nature, too general, and possibly not focused enough in the areas where learners want feedback for it to have much impact on the learners" (qtd. in Harris19). Conferences help to alleviate this problem. Because the tutor and the writer are looking over the paper together, the writer can ask questions that will be personally beneficial. One student

remarked, “[The RAs] help with things I am concerned about regarding my paper. We can look at specific things that might be worrying me.” Another general comment made on several surveys was that students enjoyed the one on one attention they receive during conferences. Both the Writing Center and the RA program effectively provide this one on one learning environment that students want and deserve.

Another area that both tutors in the Writing Center and Rhetoric Associates can help with is writing techniques. Both kinds of tutors are skilled writers themselves and have had some training on how to help their peers. However, there are some differences between RAs and Writing Center tutors when it comes to helping students with specific assignments. RAs have the benefit of having met with the professor before the conference, so they are familiar with the assignment and its requirements. This is one thing that distinguishes the RA program from the Writing Center. RAs are assigned to specific classes and have met with the professors, so they usually have a good understanding of what is expected by those professors. Students see this as an advantage: “RAs often understand the assignment and what the professor wants, so meeting with them is really helpful in making sure your paper is appropriate for the assignment.”

Students also enjoyed the fact that RAs have read their papers before the conference. This way both parties come ready with ideas and questions about how to improve the assignment. This is another characteristic that separates the RA program from the Writing Center. At the Utah State University Writing Center, students sign up and bring their papers to the center to receive help from a tutor. Usually the student comes to the meeting without knowing the tutor, and the tutor has never read the student’s assignment. While the tutor can provide good assistance, he or she must spend a

portion of the conference becoming familiar with both the paper and the assignment requirements. This is a result of having a program of this kind available to the entire campus. While more students are assisted, it is impossible for the Writing Center tutors to know about all assignments students present to them. This is where the RA program is seen as valuable to students. Because RAs are assigned to a specific class, they receive students' papers in advance and come to the conference ready to discuss the paper. The tutors' time as well as the students' is used more effectively. One student enjoyed "how [the RAs] have already read through my paper and have suggestions and ideas ready." Most students have busy schedules, so they find this characteristic of the program very appealing.

Another advantage of the RA program is that students are able to form a relationship with their RA. Muriel Harris, director of the writing center at Purdue University, mentioned, "Early conferences need to focus on getting acquainted, on breaking the ice so that future interaction is informal and comfortable" (41). This breaking of the ice allows the students to become more comfortable in discussing their work with the RA. A relationship of trust is built so that the student becomes more receptive to the suggestions of the RA. When an RA can conference with the same students multiple times, he or she can track the students' progress, and help them improve their writing over the whole semester. The RA can be aware of those concepts with which the student is struggling, and therefore be a great help to that student in fulfilling multiple assignments.

Although students appreciate the help they receive from RAs, there are things that students wish were different about the RA program. Several students expressed a desire

to have a set meeting place for writing conferences. As is, RAs are free to choose where they want to hold the conferences. On the other hand, the Writing Center provides a set meeting place which is not hard to find. This eliminates the hassle of trekking across campus, trying to determine where the conference is and who the RA is.

While neither program is perfect, each provides a great service to the students who take advantage of the assistance provided. Obviously there is room for improvement with both programs, but of those students who had a preference for obtaining help with writing, the RA program was preferred. Why is that?

Based strictly on student comments, it appears that the students prefer the Rhetoric Associates program because of its convenience and the relationship the RAs have with both the students and the professors. Many of the other issues students commented on are common to both the Writing Center and the RA program. Because of the perceived benefits, many students expressed a desire for RAs in more of their classes. While this may not be feasible at the present time, it is definitely something that should be kept in mind.

No matter what kind of tutoring students have available or choose to take advantage of, one would hope that they find it effective. It seems that Utah State has provided the resources necessary to help students triumph in their quest for better writing skills. With some hard work, a little direction from professors and tutors, and a lot of practice, students should be able to achieve that level of writing proficiency which will enable them to succeed and excel in their future endeavors. It may be a small role, but writing tutors can gain great satisfaction from knowing they have provided a bit of assistance to students in their pursuit of knowledge.

Works Cited

Harris, Muriel. Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference. Urbana: NCTE, 1986.