

### WRITING CENTER TUTORS CAN OFFER HELP IN MANY DISCIPLINES

by Karen Bilotti, Writing Center

#### INTERESTED IN THE BASICS? HERE ARE THE FACTS.

What can the Writing Center offer the wider campus community? First, there are areas in which all tutors are skilled, regardless of their major: they can help with reading strategies and annotating a text for greater clarity and understanding; they can review a paper for grammar, mechanics, development, establishment of a thesis and an organizational plan; they can help implement a variety of documentation systems (e.g., MLA, APA, Chicago); they can assist with basic research of databases or library materials. Often, students will come in with a paper in a specific discipline and start working with any peer tutor or faculty tutor. The tutor then makes a determination as to whether the student needs an additional visit or visits with a tutor who has experience in the specific discipline. Many students come in and, during their initial visit, see a tutor in a certain major—particularly when the course's professor recommends that particular tutor.

Returning to the earlier question: What does all this mean for the campus community? This semester, the Writing Center has in its employ 53 peer tutors and 5 faculty tutors. The peer tutors represent at least 25 majors, including but not limited to Architecture, Engineering, English, Marketing, Economics, Political Science, Creative Writing, Communications, Criminal Justice, Marine Biology, Chemistry, and Psychology. In addition, the tutors all boast an equally diverse range of minors and Core Concentrations. Further, their GPAs are almost as impressive as their ability to work one-on-one with their peers. This past fall, the tutors participated in 6 tutor education sessions in addition to the required journal

readings posted on our "Tutor Education" web site and distributed during the fall and spring semesters. We believe that the breadth and depth of the peer tutors' experience in a broad array of majors, their impressive work in those majors, and their education as tutors provide a rich resource that students and faculty across the curriculum can draw upon.

This semester, we will post on our web site ([writingcenter.rwu.edu](http://writingcenter.rwu.edu)) and distribute to each department, a list of the Writing Center tutors with their majors and tutoring schedule. If you have a student who might benefit from working with a particular tutor, please send the student to see that tutor in the Writing Center. The tutors are happy to help with any writing-related assignment; in addition, we often have students come in for help with reading a text or with basic study or research strategies. This past semester, one of our Political Science majors, Leigh Wilmot, enjoyed great success working in foundation courses with a Criminal Justice major. When I approached Leigh about helping this student in his introductory coursework, she replied, "I'd love to! As a Pre-Law student, I always wanted to know more about the criminal justice discipline." The pairing was beneficial to both the student, who excelled in his coursework, and to the tutor, who expanded her knowledge base. Indeed, Leigh said about one of her sessions with the student, "I recall a day when I helped the student study for a criminal justice exam on policing. Because I knew that his professor was a constitutional lawyer, we zeroed in on exploring the constitutionality of police procedures. We pored over the Fourth Amendment and Eighth Amendment in particular, and I asked him to give me examples of police confrontations so we could evaluate their constitutional merits together. Being the authority on policing in our exchange, the student taught me a great deal about that

criminal justice topic while I helped him apply the letter of the law. I remember this tutoring session as one of my favorites because both of us taught and both of us learned." This is an excellent example of a tutor drawing on her expertise to help another student work on a subject-driven assignment, as well as a perfect representation of the tutor and student negotiating "power and authority" as discussed below.

### INTERESTED IN MORE? HERE'S THE THEORY.

Certainly, at many colleges and universities across the country, writing fellows programs, both graduate and undergraduate, are gaining in popularity as more and more writing center administrators and faculty recognize the ability of tutors to provide the type of assistance Muriel Harris wrote about so brilliantly in her 1995 article, "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors." Harris sees tremendous value in the tutors' ability to engage student writers in constructive conversation: "Tutors use talk and questioning and all the cues they can pick up in the face-to-face interaction. The conversation is free to roam in whatever direction the student and tutor see as useful" (29). Tutors can use that communication route to engage in a variety of activities involved in the writing process: "Tutors can help students learn *how* to proofread, *how* to let go and brainstorm, *how* to capture a flood of ideas in the planning stage, *how* to take all those scraps of paper and note cards and organize them, *how* to insert revisions into a text, *how* to draw back and figure out if the organizational structure is appropriate, or *how* to check on paragraph development" (Harris 33).

Finally, Harris discusses two of the most common concerns in tutoring sessions: helping students translate assignment prompts and determining what instructors mean in their comments on drafts. Harris points out that much of the confusion for students arises because of "shifting conventions in various kinds of academic discourse" (40). After all, an "analysis" of a Shakespearean sonnet will

involve different criteria and organizational patterns than an "analysis" of the data in a Chemistry paper.

You might ask: how are tutors educated to negotiate this challenge of tutoring in disciplines with which they might not be familiar? In his essay "Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring" (2003), Peter Carino offers advice for tutors in the use of directive and nondirective techniques, particularly for discipline-based papers. Our Writing Center tutors have been educated in Carino's technique: "tutors should be taught to recognize where the power and authority lie in any given tutorial, when and to what degree they have them, when and to what degree the student has them, and when and to what degree they are absent in any given tutorial" (109). Carino presents a scenario with a tutor who is a journalism major/theater minor and an undeclared freshman who is assigned to write a review of a play for an Introduction to Theater course. In taking the traditional nondirective approach, the tutor withholds key information to avoid any accusations of plagiarism or compromising the "nonhierarchical peer relationship" (105). In what Carino sees as a more productive session, the tutor "takes more authority, is more responsible for the shape the paper will take. ... the tutor uses her authority—familiarity with the conventions of play reviews and the rhetorical need to consider audience—to provide instruction that will be useful to the student in completing the paper as well as others in the future" (106).

On the other hand, when the tutor lacks "authority" in a particular discipline, the tutor can be trained to "draw [knowledge] from the student. When such is the case, a question such as 'Do you want your thesis last?' becomes a real question, and not a ploy to push the student to move it where the tutor thinks it belongs" (Carino 109). When tutors feel less knowledgeable about a discourse community, they can refer the student writer either to the instructor for specific information about some aspect of the paper or to a tutor with training in that discipline. However, tutors should feel the "power and authority" to proceed in areas that they know about, including grammar, phrasing,

and mechanics. Carino slams the traditional view towards such help: “Unfortunately, writing center orthodoxy would train him or her to reserve those areas [i.e., sentencing, grammar, mechanics] for last, or to shun a tutorial that works primarily at the sentence level as the demeaning stuff of the fix-it shop, rather than value it as a service to the student based on the authority available in the tutorial” (110).

Educating our Writing Center tutors about how to determine, within the confines of the tutoring session, their “power and authority” in relation to a student writer’s own “power and authority” is an ongoing process. During our tutor education sessions, we utilize actual student papers (anonymous and always with the student’s permission) to wrestle with which approach(es) would work best.

Please do not hesitate to let me know if you have any questions or concerns, or if you would like to learn more about how we can help your students. Please contact: Karen Bilotti, Assistant Director, Tutorial Support Services; Coordinator of Writing Support Services; Center for Academic Development. [kbilotti@rwu.edu](mailto:kbilotti@rwu.edu).

### Works Cited

- Carino, Peter. 2003. “Power and Authority in Peer Tutoring.” In *The Center Will Hold: Critical Perspectives on Writing Center Scholarship*, edited by Michael A. Pemberton and Joyce Kinhead. Logan, UT: UT State University Press.
- Harris, Muriel. 1995. “Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors.” *College English* 57. 1:27-42.

### WHAT THE TUTORS ARE READING THIS SEMESTER:

The tutors are working their way through *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life* (2006) by Chris Thaiss and Terry Myers Zawacki.

The Writing Center is located on the second floor of the Main Library, within the Center for Academic Development. We are open 56 hours per week: Monday through Thursday, 9 am – 8 pm; Friday 9 am – 3 pm; and Sunday 2 pm – 8 pm. Our mission is to help all RWU students with any writing-related assignment. All of the services of the Writing Center are offered free of charge to RWU students.