

## Tutoring Writing

Composition students and students trying to write papers often do not understand what they are trying to accomplish, the path by which they could succeed, or how to address their personal obstacles and weaknesses as writers. As tutors and teachers, we may be in a position to help them with these issues. First it is important to address students' fear of and confusion about writing and communicating. Then, we could guide students and help them discover an approach to writing that works for them. By drawing out content, working with organizational issues, and finally working with editing issues, always focusing on the student's learning process, tutors can play a significant role in helping their students learn to write.

### A. An encouraging audience, an inquisitive reader

Our role as tutors is to help students learn how to learn, and to help bring students to the next step in their learning process. For writing tutors, this process often begins with the student's fear of or lack of familiarity with the process of self-expression. Such fear may be paralyzing, inhibiting students from even beginning. In such a situation, the first task of the tutor is to be an encouraging audience and an inquisitive reader, drawing out the student's descriptions and basic ideas by expressing genuine interest in what the student has to say.

Like theatre, writing always has an audience, implicitly or explicitly. Even master writers never really outgrow the benefit of receiving feedback about their writing from friendly, encouraging, and knowledgeable sources. Why would this be the case? Written work, by definition, is a social event, a kind of conversation. Writing is something we do *for* somebody-or-other. Unlike math, where  $1+1=2$  whether anybody else appreciates that or not, if one writes a paper and nobody reads it (not even the author), what good is this? For this reason, when we tutor writing, our relationship to communication differs in that it may be the focal point of the tutoring session, rather than a means to an end.

It is common to encounter students whose sense of having an audience, or even engaging in conversation, is undeveloped. Many students are frightened of having anyone witness their writing, including themselves. A person may be too shy to closely read even his or her own paper, much less let anyone else see it. Perhaps that person has never been encouraged to write, or never been listened to at the dinner table, or even witnessed much dinner table discussion. The student may not be used to being questioned, to being invited to describe something or defend an opinion, to speaking genuinely and from the heart. Moreover, many students are not experienced readers, especially of well-written work, and so have few models for good writing.

When a student first gives a tutor a draft of a paper to read, the chances are that tutor will be the first person (including the student) to take a close look at it. The notion that anyone might take his or work seriously could be an extremely foreign notion to the student. Therefore, asking for help with a paper requires bravery, and this should be respected.

The challenge to write may bring up many of the student's social frailties, including feelings of shyness or social inadequacy. In turn, the tutor may also feel awkward and mistrusted. Under such circumstances, it is not difficult to appreciate that many people feel blocked when they attempt to write, and are unwilling to let others view their work. The student may feel that he or she is writing for an unsympathetic or intimidating audience, one of whom will grade their work. Not only that, but once the student has written something and given it over to someone else to read, it is entirely out of the student's hands. Unlike an ordinary conversation, where the participants can read each others' body language and ask questions, the only thing that matters in writing is what makes it to the page in black and white. The student may feel a loss of control,

and the tutor, in turn, may not know how to work with the student's fears, which could be expressed as various forms of aggression and withdrawal.

Lacking a clear sense of "audience" and not being careful readers their own or others' work, students may be very unclear about what they have actually managed to bring to the page and what has remained unexpressed. Teachers often give the feedback "show don't tell," but a student who does not read their own work has a very difficult time knowing what this means. The tutor can assist with this by asking questions, drawing out the student's specific descriptions and inviting them to clarify their thoughts. An example of this process is given in the case study which appears later in this article. This kind of interest and questioning for details may even come before helping the student clarify their thesis statement.

Since this is the case, it is always beneficial, as a tutor, to be genuinely interested in what your students have to say, or might say. There has to be curiosity, a passion to hear their opinions, hear their stories. You could be more interested in what they have to say than they are. Basically, the intention is to form a friendly human relationship where one party, the tutor, is particularly interested in the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the student, and who encourages the student to get those down on paper. Often, the best way to do this is to engage him or her in conversation — not to provide ideas, but to invite the student to articulate ideas and to describe the missing details. A writer needs to develop a sense of "audience," and the first audience may well be the tutor. Simply being a good reader or listener can be a great gift to a student, even if that's all one has to offer!

### **What is a good audience?**

- Have the patience to let yourself read carefully, with interest in what the student is trying to express.
- A good audience doesn't critique or correct grammar prematurely.
- A good audience asks questions that draws out more detail.
- A good audience is also interested in the main point, what the paper is really about, the "thesis."
- Can you think of other qualities of "a good audience"?

## **B. Common misunderstandings about writing assignments**

Beyond basic issues of audience and expression, students may hold misconceptions about the nature of both the writing process and what constitutes a well-written paper. As we discussed, students often have little sense of what it means to write for a reader other than themselves. Even if a student is able to write a good "rough draft," he or she may not recognize that it is *just* a rough draft, and may not be able to properly interpret faculty comments. Faculty may state that the paper has no central thesis, that the thesis shifts over the course of the paper, that the thesis lacks supporting points, that the supporting points lack detail, or that there are parts of the paper that seem to be unrelated to or that contradict the thesis. Any or all of these organizational and conceptual issues are likely to arise whether the assignment is a five-paragraph autobiographical essay or a one hundred page master's thesis. So, the role of the tutor, as a good audience, also includes taking interest in and inviting the student to clarify what the paper is truly about and help the student with resolving problems of organization.

Students may not see the need for this tutoring role. Often, they do not understand that learning how to write is a process, and that writing well, even writing one paragraph, usually includes "freewriting," initial composition, feedback, working with feedback, and revision. They might not see the need for techniques such as conceptual mapping. Even though faculty teach about the writing process in writing classes, students initially do not share this view about how to develop their writing or their writing skills. In fact, most students don't even think of "writing skills" as something that can or should be developed. Many believe that they should be able to just sit down and write the paper, fully formed. Most students think of writing as being something like simple "talking," simply expressing oneself, telling a story. They believe that composition courses exist so that they can put in the good work of simply expressing themselves and that faculty will reward them with a passing grade, in return for this labor of story-telling.

A typical writing assignment, on the other hand, is not simple story-telling. It may require that a paper be organized around some central thesis that is stated near the beginning of the paper. That main subject, "what the paper is about," should then be developed both experientially and logically. Supporting points should be fleshed out with concrete examples. The writer should also be mindful of transitions as the paper moves from point to point and from paragraph to paragraph. More sophisticated assignments require that possible counter-theses should be addressed and put in their places along the way. Finally, near the end of the paper, students are asked to remind the reader of the thesis they opened with, confirming the way in which they answered that question or demonstrated that initial position over the course of the paper. They are specifically asked not to introduce a new thesis that would require further support at the end of the paper.

One may ask: why is this so difficult? Why is this so difficult, not only to accomplish, but even to appreciate as an intention? Any writing teacher or teacher who requests written work will readily acknowledge that — whether the assignment is a five-paragraph argument or a three-page autobiographical essay or a twelve-page term paper or a one hundred page masters thesis — most students hand in "rough drafts" thinking that they are final copy, and are confused when they receive evaluations expressing this notion.

As tutors and teachers, we could reflect on why this might be the case, not only that students write this way but that they are surprised and offended when this is pointed out to them. We may even wonder why students do not understand and execute these seemingly simple instructions, clearly stated, which point out exactly what a finished paper is supposed to look like. If they can't even understand the assignment, how in the world could they ever learn to write that way, with or without tutoring assistance?

### **C. Appreciating the creative nature of the writing process: Meandering one's way to a thesis statement**

It is not that students are thick-headed. It is just that the natural process of mind is creative, like a conversation, and this conversational approach is mistaken for what a completed paper is supposed to look like. For the most part, unless we are extremely visionary (or what learning style theorists call "intuitives"), we discover what we want to say by talking to ourselves or others. In the normal process of thinking, we usually don't begin with our argument, position, or thesis statement. Such usually occurs only at the end of a long, meandering conversation, either with another person or oneself, the progression of which often includes detours and is not completely logical. A particularly effective way of "talking to oneself" preliminary to writing a paper is a pre-writing process called "conceptual mapping," which can aide in organization and clarification of the thesis and supporting points and shorten the writing process considerably.

In any case, most students take an indirect course when approaching a theme they wish to write about. They move from subject to subject, remembering first one detail then another, refining

inexact logics and descriptions as they go along, sometimes stumbling over exactly the opposite of what they mean to say, then correcting that. They struggle to express both they want to say, the main points as well as related supporting and contrasting points. Often there is repetition, circling around the thesis statement with greater and greater clarity at each pass, like a vulture gradually circling in on a dead animal from a great height. Sometimes, upon closer inspection, the thesis statement may shift radically; the thesis may turn out to be quite different from what was expected in paragraph one.

The discovery of the thesis, the main point — which may come at the end of a long, hard-won process of creative inner conversation — is usually accompanied by an immense sense of accomplishment. The writer finally grasps that concluding point, that thesis, like a lion holding a piece of meat in its mouth. Usually, this thesis appears in the last two sentences of a half page paper, or the last two paragraphs of a three page paper, or the last ten pages of a hundred page paper, and so on. The writer have little recollection of what went on during the first part of the paper, although he or she may be attached to many aspects of it. “Who cares about how I got here? Here I am.” It is unlikely that the writer understands the logical relationship of where he or she ended up and the journey to that place. When the teacher breaks the bad news that the thesis statement, which should be present at the beginning of the paper, is only present in full force at the end of the paper, that the beginning is sloppy and meandering, and that the supporting points are spread out over the course of the paper in a haphazard way, this is taken as an insult. How depressing! “All that hard work for nothing.”

In fact, it was not for nothing. The writer has done nothing wrong, but simply doesn’t understand the process, or its relation to the end result. What the writer did is a natural expression of the writing process, which follows the form of a meandering course. Insight is not there in full form at the beginning, but is embryonic, takes nourishment, and finally grows up into “what I was really trying to say.” This is hard work; and at the end, the writer is usually exhausted. To be told that he or she is not at the end of the writing process but in the middle may be very disappointing if that writer doesn’t know and understand how the writing process works. Those gems that have been discovered need to be cherished, polished, and rearranged. The result, as far as we’ve come, is not a “bad paper.” It’s an excellent “rough draft.”

#### **D. What to do with an excellent rough draft?**

First, according to this approach, it is important for the writer to take stock of what’s there, actually read the paper, which usually is embarrassing. The paper is no longer the writer’s personal embryo. It’s umbilical cord has been cut; it’s in the world now and needs to be appreciated as an independent entity. The writer must read the paper as someone else would. This is equivalent for many people to having their precious baby exposed to the eyes of potentially cruel, unsympathetic strangers. Most of us have had a good dose of that in our developmental process. For want of a better expression, this is usually experienced as being a great “challenge to ego.” The dream world of the ideal baby is disturbed when you actually look at that baby sitting there in black and white on the page.

However, the tutor or teacher, as we said before, is a friendly person who is interested in what the writer has to say. He or she could be a sympathetic ear, and could help the student acquire that kind of clear, but sympathetic, attitude, towards his or her work. The work is something to be valued, nurtured, and developed further, so as to be of benefit to others. The tutor or teacher may be the first to love that rugged baby, in the sense of seeing its potential as a beautiful, independent being.

When the paper is read carefully, in the light of day, weaknesses and strengths often become very clear. The tutor could give himself or herself the opportunity to read the paper in its entirety, not

stopping to nitpick about editing issues or other flaws, but working to discover the gems that may not occur until the end, or just before the end. If a tutor can appreciate the writer's main point, that person may be much more open to experiencing what's there and preparing it for the consideration of others.

It is often useful to help the student read the paper and state exactly what's there, paragraph by paragraph, sentence by sentence if necessary. Sometimes, going through this process, one discovers major points in single sentences that are not developed but could be. Sometimes, one discovers reoccurring themes that occur in a number of different paragraphs that can be integrated and brought together in a single paragraph. Supporting points or sections of the paper are defined, and a logical progression for the paper may be discovered. At this point, creating a conceptual map and, from there, an outline, may be quite workable.

### **E. A tutoring case study**

My colleague Shelly Todd has a great deal of experience working with students' writing. Recently, she described the work of a tutor, Sally, whom she was supervising. (Details about the tutor, student, and the paper have been altered to disguise the identity of the student.) Sally was working with a young man who was trying to develop very basic writing skills and who was working on a descriptive essay of about one and one half pages. This young man was attempting to write about the nurturing experience of spending time with a favorite uncle when he was a child. Supporting details would eventually include the description of what the uncle was like and what it was like to be with him, their time together in the woods, and the experience of making friends with his uncle's dog. The main point, or thesis, had to do with experiencing value in himself and the world, a sense of awe, and appreciating nature.

Upon first reading the paper, the rough draft or pre-rough draft, Sally could find no development of the supporting points on the page, but merely a repetition of how much he appreciated his uncle, his uncle's smile, the dog's eyes, and the way the dog barked. She asked the student what the paper was about, and to talk a bit about his uncle. The student thought that she was pretty stupid, that it was obvious what the paper was about, but talked with her anyway. She told the student that what he said the paper was about was not on the page. He said that it *was* on the page. She read the paper with him sentence by sentence to demonstrate to him that what he said was there wasn't there. He said it was there. (This is obviously a very abbreviated summary of their conversation.)

Finally, after consulting with Ms. Todd, the tutor, in a subsequent tutoring session, drew pictures of the three main sub-themes of the essay, which she had gathered from the student in conversation, on three separate sheets of paper — a stick figure for the uncle, a rough drawing of the dog for the dog, a tree for the woods. She asked the student to cut up the paper sentence by sentence, taking each sentence and placing it under one of the three pictures, whichever picture was appropriate. If the paper was truly about those three things, as he said it was, she told him, and he agreed, that there should be a number of sentences grouped under each of the figures when he was done with the project.

After cutting up and placing what sentences he could, the result was: under the uncle, there was one incomplete sentence, a reference to his smile and his beard. Under the dog, there were two sentences that essentially said the same thing: that he liked his bark and that he had mournful eyes. There was no description of the woods at all. Doing this, the student was able, for the first time, to see his writing through the eyes of another, in this case Sally, who was interested in what he had to say, and very much wanted him to express what he had to express.

At this point, he had several options: to write the paper about what he said he wanted to write about, or to discover some other theme or themes in the collection of disconnected sentences on the table, or to start over. When Sally then asked him questions about his uncle, asking him to describe his uncle and situations of being with his uncle, he was able to write about his chosen topics. Perhaps she turned on a tape recorder. Her genuine curiosity, together with his realization that what he thought he had communicated was not truly on the page, became an opportunity for him to begin to express what he wanted to say.

## **F. The Overall Tutoring Process**

So far, we have just been discussing the process of actually reading a student's paper with an open mind and creating a situation where the tutor and student can explore the paper together, discover what's there, and discover what the paper is truly about. If the student and tutor do not know what the paper about, where the "juice" is, and where the good descriptive passages will come from, there is not much point in trying to write an introduction or make an outline. Usually, some process of discovery has to happen, whether in the form of a "mapping" strategy, or just by taking a closer look at what's actually there, as described in the example above.

Along with this, however, the tutor and student could take some common sense steps that are similar to other tutoring situations. For example, first the tutor and student could look at and understand the assignment as best they can. Ideally, the student will bring in the teacher's assignment directions along with his or her work. Having done so, the tutor and student could review the student's work and diagnose the situation, getting a sense of where he or she is and where the student needs to go in order to be successful. The previous section describes one approach to that process. It's this process of careful reading and analysis which tell the tutor and student where they are, and where they would like to go.

Sometimes, at this stage, even if the thesis statement is unclear, there may be an even greater issue: the paper may suffer from a paucity of good descriptive material, "no meat." At this point, the tutor may take the road of inviting the student to describe further anything that has been alluded to, any undeveloped area that draws interest or has energy, in order to put some meat on the bare bones of what has already been written. Doing so may enable the student to discover their main point, their thesis statement. How the tutor proceeds could depend upon both the style of the tutor and that of the student. There is no one right way to tutor.

However the tutor and student are proceeding, whether they have a sense of the whole project with a clear thesis statement or not, the next step is to choose a particular task and to break that task up into parts. It is necessary to identify the first step in that process, and determine what the tutor and student will be working on in that particular session. Having established an agenda for that session and conducted the tutorial, it's important to leave time at the end to summarize what has been accomplished and what the next step will be. That next step could include making an appointment, assigning homework, soliciting further feedback from the teacher, and/or referral to other resources. In the following paragraphs, we will present more specifically how this might look in the process of tutoring a student with a writing assignment.

## *Tutorial Sequencing*

### *1. Beginning*

The first few minutes of a tutorial may be a getting acquainted time (if this is your first time together), a time to establish a comfortable working relationship and to gather some information that allows you to meet the student and to determine what his or her desires and problems are. You may ask some of the following questions:

- What is the assignment? Do you have notes from the teacher defining the assignment?
- When is it due?
- How long can you stay for this tutorial? (Do you have to leave soon for a class?)

### *2. Diagnosing*

Then read the paper, read the instructor's comments (if there are any), and review the original assignment. Be sure to give yourself the space to read and reflect intelligently, even if the student has to wait for your response longer than he or she would like. Much of the first part of this essay is dedicated to this process. You may wonder and reflect:

- What is the student's perception of the assignment and the teacher's comments?
- What is the student trying to accomplish?
- What do you think is promising about the paper?
- What is your assessment of the kind of help needed by the student?
- What does the teacher want the student to work on?
- Are there problems that can be grouped together in some useful way?

The handout "Assessing a student's paper in the Writing Center" may be helpful in this evaluation process. It may be clear from this process what it is that the instructor and/or the student wants and needs.

### *3. Establishing an Agenda*

You (with the student) decide what will be worked on in the tutorial. This decision should be based on what you, the student, and the teacher think should be the focus. It is best if you can communicate to the student what the whole process of working with the paper might be, and how your work together in this session is the first step of that process. This orients the student and yourself to the reality of the situation, and can be the ground of a good working relationship.

In deciding what to work on first, generally (if there is no explicit direction from the teacher) it is often better to start with issues of focus/thesis and content/organization. Once a paper is focused and fairly well organized, and when problems with the basic logic have been addressed, supporting points often become obvious and grammatical problems may dissipate. On the other hand, as stated above, if the paper seemingly has no "meat," very little description or real content, it may be better to draw description out first rather than perfecting the thesis statement. Issues of grammar, punctuation, and spelling, generally come last. There is no point in working with the grammar of material that might not make it to the final draft. This entire process may take place over the course of three or more sessions.

### *4. Conducting the Tutorial*

The task here is to help the student learn for him- or herself how to improve the writing. The point is not to write the paper for the student, but to draw out good writing from the student by being inquisitive about his or her experiences, feelings, and ideas. Sometimes, when the student is speaking and is really getting to the heart of the matter, it may be desirable to take run a tape recorder, or encourage the student to jot down a few notes. This is especially true if the student

has been stuck for ideas or good description, and then suddenly such good stuff comes pouring out.

### *5. Closing the Tutorial*

As the tutor brings the tutorial session to a close, he or she should prompt the student to summarize what has been accomplished. Tutor and student should talk about the next step, and clarify what has been helpful about the tutoring session and what might be handled differently next time. The next meeting could be scheduled, homework could be negotiated, and an agenda for that session could be created. The tutor may refer the student to various resources, such as a chapter in the class text, or suggest a meeting with the instructor. Together, the tutor and student could write down this summary, the assignments, and appointment time on a tutor session report, and each keep a copy for future reference. It is best to close on a positive, encouraging note which affirms the student's self-worth and ability to improve his or her writing skills.

### ***Final Steps of a sequence of tutorials, Part One: Re-Writing the Introduction and Conclusion***

Often, in a sequence of tutorial sessions, one of the last content-oriented sessions the tutor and student may have may be concerned with writing or re-writing, not only the conclusion of the paper, but the introduction. Fully understanding what the paper is about, the thesis that is stated in the introduction may only become clear in the last stages of working with the content of the paper.

### ***Final Steps of a sequence of tutorials, Part Two: Sentence Structure Problems and Problems of Grammar and Usage***

Finally, students may have difficulty with spelling, editorial, and grammatical issues, and the tutor may be in the position of assisting the teacher in helping the student learn to identify and correct these. Spelling errors are often best dealt with by encouraging students to begin their own "spelling dictionary" of words which they commonly misspell, and to work with flashcards. Generally, editorial issues are dealt with last in the writing process, unless the teacher directs otherwise, or learning some aspect of grammar is the actual subject of the assignment. In conducting the tutorial, if the student is working with sentence structure problems, it is important to refer the student to grammatical exercises provided by the teacher, or the relevant sections of the text. If a tutor does not feel confidence in this area, he or she may well have to refer the student to their teacher or a more experienced writing instructor. However, if possible, it is good to at least point out grammatical and usage errors. A general strategy for working with such problems is as follows:

#### **Some strategies for working with editing issues**

- Work with one type of error at a time
- Identify an error and explain it; show how to fix it.
- Find another similar error and ask the student to fix it.
- Tell the student to find the other similar errors. (You may give hints as to the general location of the errors, or other types of hints.)
- Check in with them as they work. Provide feedback.
- Encourage students to make notes describing the types of errors they make.
- Refer to the relevant chapter in the text. Encourage students to put tabs marking the sections that they personally need to refer to a lot. Try to make connections between the explanations in the book and the problems occurring in the student's work. See if handouts in the writing center may be useful as well.

## **G. Hierarchy of Conferencing Issues**

Here is a list, ARRANGED FROM MOST IMPORTANT TO LEAST, that one can use to help develop questions for writing conferences. In particular cases, tutors may choose to change the order with which they address the first three content issues:

### **CONTENT ISSUES**

- 1. THESIS STATEMENT — STATED OR IMPLIED**
- 2. SUPPORTING POINTS**
- 3. DEVELOPMENT OF SUPPORTING POINTS  
(CONCRETENESS)**
- 4. ORGANIZATION OF SUPPORTING POINTS**
- 5. COHERENCE — TRANSITIONS BETWEEN SENTENCES AND  
PARAGRAPHS**
- 6. UNITY OF PARAGRAPHS AND ESSAY AS A WHOLE**
- 7. EFFECTIVE INTROS AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **EDITING ISSUES**

- 1. SENTENCE FRAGMENTS**
- 2. VERBS — TENSE AND FORM**
- 3. AGREEMENT — S/V AND PRONOUN**
- 4. FUSED SENTENCES AND COMMA SPLICES**
- 5. PARALLELISM**
- 6. WORD ORDER**
- 7. WORD CHOICE**
- 8. WORD FORM**
- 9. ARTICLES**
- 10. PUNCTUATION — INCLUDING COMMAS**
- 11. SPELLING**

Natalie Anagnos, Southwestern Michigan College, sheet prepared for English 101 students

## H. Assessing a student's paper in the Writing Center

- You had a clear idea about the purpose and focus of the essay after reading the introduction
- You were unclear or confused after reading the introduction
  
- Each paragraph developed a single idea or point that supported the focus/thesis of the paper.
- Each paragraph had enough information to make the point clear, to be interesting, to involve the reader.
  
- The paper had appropriate paragraph breaks.
  
- The writer *has* a train of thought that follows a logical progression of some kind.
  
- The writer uses transitions well enough that each paragraph flows clearly into the next one and the reader can follow the writer's train of thought through the paper.
  
- The conclusion ties the paper together; it seems to suit the audience and the purpose of the paper; it doesn't introduce a new idea.

### Grammar, sentence, and spelling problems

Check these items off and rank them in some way, i.e. put a star next to the item or items that seem to be the biggest problem or the problem to be addressed first. Make a check next to the others.

- Comma splice or fused sentences (Run-ons)
- Sentence fragments
- Awkward or confusing sentences
- Homophonic spelling errors
- Spelling errors in general
- Non-standard usage, such as "it don't"; "me and him"; "they was"; "his nose was busted"
- Other things you notice, such as slang and conversational items, such as "well," "okay," "He goes" instead of "He said".

This sheet is a slightly modified version of a sheet prepared by Dr. Naomi Ludman, Developmental Studies Chair, Southwestern Michigan College, used in a writing tutor training given in October 1998.

## I. Tutoring ESL Students with their Writing

The basic approach to working with ESL (English-as-a-second-language) students' writing is the same as the approaches outlined in the previous sections on writing tutoring. We still begin with basic issues of content, organization, and logic. However, there are some tips that we would like to share. Some knowledge of the writer's native language may be helpful; errors often occur that reflect syntactic and grammatical differences between English and the native language. Such errors probably do not reflect lack of ability or intelligence — they merely point to differences between the native language and English.

### Some tips

1. Follow the hierarchy of conferencing issues given above. ESL students need to work with organization and content issues first, just like non-ESL students.
2. It does not teach students anything to correct every minute grammatical error, one by one. The point is to help the student learn something so that he or she does not continue to make the same errors over and over. To this end, following the approach that was previously laid out — identify types of errors and address them one by one. Fix the first one yourself if necessary, then point out subsequent errors and ask the student to fix them. Ask the student to find similar errors; giving hints as to the location of errors if necessary.
3. Have identified types of errors, categorize those errors and write the general areas to work on at the bottom of the paper or on a separate sheet. Try to work with no more than three items in one tutoring session. For example:
  - a. You need to learn how to use the past tense.
  - b. Be sure that you have the right part of speech.
  - c. Write simpler sentences.
4. Having identified these areas for the student to address, refer them to the pages in their textbook or provide exercises that will help them train in those areas. Work with examples in their paper.
5. Have verb charts and dictionaries handy. In ESL tutoring, working with verbs and verb tenses can be a major part of your work.
6. Encourage the student to write using SIMPLE ENGLISH STRUCTURES. Students should not try to translate word-for-word from their language. Learning to handle the subtlety of relationships between ideas in English is advanced work that must be preceded by beginning to work with simpler structures.

## WHAT TO LOOK FOR

### OVERALL APPEARANCE

- Look at MARGINS
- Are paragraphs INDENTED?
- Are their paragraphs or just one big paragraph?
- Are there PERIODS at the ends of sentences?
- Do sentences all run together?
- Does student use CAPITAL LETTERS correctly?

## GRAMMAR AND SPELLING

- Look at VERBS first. Look out for INFINITIVE usage problems
- Look for CORRECT PART OF SPEECH errors (I was very happiness.)
- Look for missing Ss or extra Ss (My two dog does not like medicine.)
- Look at RELATIONSHIP words like *because* or *since*. Did the student use the correct word? (I need to go to the bank *although* I need money.)
- Look for other grammar errors but DO NOT OVERWHELM the student with too much information at one time.
- Ignore or de-emphasize mistakes that do not impair understanding. Misuse of prepositions (on top of, under, off), articles (a/the), too-formal language or not using the very best word can be addressed later, one by one, after more basic problems have been addressed.
- Underline or mark SPELLING errors, but don't get carried away with correcting them. Tell them to correct it by themselves by using a dictionary, running Spellchecker, or by asking a friend. Invite them to find such a good-spelling friend.
- Invite them to create their own personal spelling dictionary and flashcards for frequently misspelled words.
- If word repetition is a problem, show them how to use a thesaurus. This may be advanced work.
- Teach them how to proofread, reading aloud, reading backward sentence by sentence.
- Keep sentences simple. Break down complicated sentences into two or more sentences.

Support materials on editing and verb tenses are available in the tutoring services office.

These notes were adapted from an ESL writing training given at the Michigan Tutorial Association Conference, Fall 1999. We have misplaced the names of the original presenters.