Computers Help Revisions  
*By Josh Adair*  
*Blackburn College*

Recently, I have been working with a student who came to the writing center for help with revisions of sentence-level problems; however, I have been working with him in a totally new way. Generally, this student has difficulty with sentence-level revisions because he cannot conceptualize how to correct a paper when it is covered with comments from the professor. To get around this problem, I have found an interesting and useful method — use the computer.

When this Student comes to me for help with a revision, we start by discussing the comments on the paper. This process is semi-helpful. However, this student often still has difficulty grasping the directions of the comments. He usually stares at me blankly as I ask, "Do you understand?" In order to combat the "I dunno" syndrome, I sit in front of the computer and ask him to sit beside me, so that he can see the monitor. I generally do the typing because his typing skills are poor and his ideas flow too quickly, so he loses his train of though when he tries to do his own typing. Thus, I can concentrate on typing while he concentrates on forming sentences. We work through the paper, usually line by line, discussing what would sound more effective. Then, we discuss grammatical and syntactical errors. Finally, when we have discussed all of the problems with the original sentence, he forms a new, more effective sentence — he then dictates this sentence to me, complete with punctuation, and I type it into the computer. This method works more effectively because we get more accomplished in a short period of time.

Why is this method effective? I believe it works because this student can explain clearly what he thinks and we can discuss the problems with the paper as we encounter them — however, the student must be willing to speak freely with me. More outgoing students tend to like "talking out" their revisions better — shy students do not do as well because they are not as willing to discuss their ideas. Plus, the process of tediously writing and correcting grammar are alleviated. The student tells me what should be written and I can type it into the computer quickly. In addition, once the sentence is on the monitor, the student can see what he has created and decide whether or not it should be kept or deleted. Finally, this process is productive — this student leaves with much of his revision completed instead of stumbling out of the writing center with my explanation and a dumbfounded stare. I swear by this process, and so does this student; he has raised his revision grades from Cs to As. “I love it!” he says.
How does one react to a student who comes into the writing center with an assignment due exactly thirty minutes from the time the student steps into the writing center? Should Tutor Extraordinaire "fix" the obviously bad paper or should Tutor Extraordinaire "hold the party line" and insist that ownership of the paper belongs to the desperate student?

I was faced with the above dilemma when a student came into our writing center with a good, but rough, final draft of a cover letter and resume she had prepared for a business class. Ten minutes into the tutoring session, I had made some comments to the student on her need to add sentences here and to shorten sentences there. I had even asked pithy, Socratic questions to help the student clarify her ideas for the inevitable rewrite. But when I began to leave the student so that she could do some of this rewriting, the panic I had felt underlying our tutoring session exploded: "But this is due in fifteen minutes!"

Sitting down with the student and purposefully pushing the paper in her direction, I again brainstormed with her about ways to rewrite and clarify. Creasing her brow and staring at her assignment, the student folded her arms and looked distraught: "I just don’t know."

And to torment me further, she added, "And it’s due in ten minutes — and I still have to type the changes."

At the time, I could not understand why I felt so responsible for this student’s assignment. Things happened so quickly. A kind of "anxiety/ownership transference" or "student/tutor symbiotic stress osmosis" had occurred. Pulled into a vortex of anxiety, I did what any good person/bad tutor would do: I fixed the paper. Of course, I did enough tutorial "mumbo-jumbo" so that I did not feel that I had fixed the paper: "Now, these are just suggestions," I told my student as I wrote complete sentences onto her paper. "You don't have to use these suggestions if you don't want to."

Yeah, right.

Shortly after my (now) happy student left with her corrected assignment, I felt miserable. "Have I been totally manipulated, or what?" I thought. And I could just hear the student tell her professor, "But that's not wrong. The graduate student in the writing center wrote that for me."

Ugh. What I have since rediscovered is that in order to be a good tutor, sometimes I have to be a "bad" person. In other words, I have to risk that students will be angry when I insist that they take responsibility for their own writing and for their own anxiety. I knew
this, of course, while I was tutoring the student described above. I just allowed myself to become too involved, too "sucked-in" by those desperate brown eyes.

Now when confronted with "anxiety/ownership transference," I — though sympathetic and even nurturing — hold the party line: the student is responsible for his or her own paper.

**Tutoring客观ly**  
*By Victoria Roger*  
*Suffolk Community College*

One of my students brought in a quote from Plato's Apology, "The life which is unexamined is not worth living." As I sit here, trying to think of something to write that would qualify as a reflection on working in a writing center, I am forced to re-examine myself, my values, and my outlook.

The students I work with represent all aspects of an adult society. I have worked with kids right out of high school and returning students old enough to be my grandparents, covering the full spectrum of possible socio-economic and racial backgrounds. I am not sure who had learned more from these encounters, the students or me. My students, hopefully, come away with a greater understanding of writing skills, and an increased faith in their abilities. I am left to ponder my own life as seen through the perspective of their papers.

Most of the papers I see have some basis in personal opinion, whether or not this was the assignment. Students tend to reveal themselves in the choices they make, in the things they say (or leave unsaid), and in the view and the voice they bring to an assignment. When working with a student, I cannot help but be affected by what I see. It is difficult to think that my life is hard, or that my lot is unfair, when I read a paper about a little boy who was beaten with an electric cord because he "got out of line," or to consider my husband insensitive when I read about a boyfriend who punched his pregnant girlfriend in the stomach and then walked away. My student leaves, happy that she now knows that she needs a comma after a subordinate introductory clause, and I sit and watch her go, amazed at the life story she revealed to me. I always knew that tragedies really did happen in people's lives, but I never knew that the people they happened to often did not know that they were tragedies. My problems, the things I thought were important, suddenly seem very trivial.

It is sometimes difficult to remain objective when I read students' papers. I have read papers which disagreed with everything I stand for, everything in which I believe. I have had to bite my tongue and comment on grammar while being very careful to keep my opinions to myself. In this way, too, I am often forced to reconsider my views. When I read a well thought out, reasonably argued paper that is completely at odds with my views, I have to re-evaluate those views.
Working in a writing center makes me examine my life and my beliefs regularly and consider what is really important. It makes me realize that there are intelligent, well-educated people who disagree with me. It also makes me realize that I have no answers, only more questions.

Modern Language Association Documentation

By Charles Kovach, Instructor
San Diego City College

I was an English tutor at San Diego City College for six years before I became an English instructor there. I now also conduct training workshops for City College English tutors. When I was an English tutor there, I noticed that students who were required to use Modern Language Association (MLA) documentation in their papers often used other styles of documentation.

Students learning MLA were often confused because they read articles and books not documented according to the MLA style current at that time. While students were learning to use Works Cited pages and parenthetical citation to document sources according to MLA, they were reading books and articles using footnotes and end notes to document sources. Also, students were reading articles documented according to the American Psychological Association (APA) style. To help students understand MLA better, I showed them articles documented according to other styles and explained that the documentation they encounter in their reading could differ from MLA style and that they still needed to follow MLA if their instructors required it.

Regardless of which documentation style a student is using for a class, a tutor can help to alleviate some of the confusion surrounding appropriate documentation by showing the student the different styles of documentation.

Tutor Training Practicum: A Family Experience

By Kathleen Perkins
University of Southern Indiana

Our English 490 Tutor Practicum class met as a group for two hours each week. During those sessions, we reviewed theory and discussed our class projects, but, most importantly, we shared our experiences with each other. A remarkable phenomenon occurred during those sessions: we blended together into a single, yet diverse group. We became a family.

The sense of family among peer tutors grew with the sharing of tutoring experiences and the challenges of our own writing. In the sharing, we vented frustrations, rejoiced over accomplishments and analyzed perceived failures. We laughed, we encouraged, we argued, we celebrated. Differences of race, sex, and age were erased by our commitment to our program goals and to each other.
During our bonding process, the personalities of the tutors broke through in subtle, sublime ways. Some tutors excelled in grammar, others in organization, still others in planning or "inventing." Our diversity and uniqueness, interwoven with our common love of writing and our desire to serve our students, formed each of us into a complete peer tutor. As within a family, the personalities of the tutors enhanced one another. The tutor blessed in the ability to organize and build resembled a father figure supporting a family structure. Keeping the essay focused and on the right track reflected a maternal influence. Some tutors brought life and playfulness into the serious, dull subjects. They put excitement, exploration, and intrigue into tutoring, much like young sons seeking new adventures in the back yard. Still others wove words around important issues without creating disrespect, much like the daughter who sweetly wraps her father around her little finger. The list of complex abilities continues into the maelstrom of peer tutor personalities, ever whirling, changing, and creating.

All the parts described are not separate tutors, but all tutors. We each have strengths and weaknesses that bring the peer tutor family into wholeness as the separate units of parent, son, or daughter merge into one family. As the family is the guardian of humanity, tutors become the guardians of shared words and lives, even if just for a short lifetime.

A Moment for Reflection

By Bridget M. Schulte

Colorado College

Writing tutors are hired not only for their ability to work well with their fellow students, but also (in my experience) because of their love of writing. For many people, writing can serve as a connection to the world, an escape from it, or an outlet for the gripes that build in everyday existence. It can function in much the same way a self-help group does, allowing the writer to work through their ideas or feelings. Writing gives the writer a sense of creation as well as a sense that someone out there might actually read the creation.

Our Writing Center at Colorado College provides its tutors with an open writing forum in the form of our Tutor Journal. The Tutor Journal is a nondescript, dark green spiral notebook. If you didn't know what it was (or missed the title boldly written across the front cover), you may think some student might have left it sitting on our coffee table. Within it, however, are not the notes from some class that is now set at the wayside, but the musings, wanderings and commentary of our center's tutors.

Its first entry begins with a recount of one of the banes of my own tutoring existence: this-paper-is-due-in-an-hour syndrome. The next entry is a bored musing of a tutor on his Friday shift. Another lauds our computerized Writer's Helper program. A fourth is titled Ron Capen's Luncheon and contains the notes from one of our biology professor's lectures given at our lunch meeting regarding his views on the biology senior thesis. Throughout the journal are sprinkles of random humor and random confusion and lots of random philosophy. Most of the entries in some way relate to what it is to be a tutor, and there are many things only a tutor would find interesting and possibly amusing. It is
almost as if we have our own running magazine with just us CC tutors as writers and readers.

Perhaps this journal is simply an archaic, pre-on-line form of a chat room, but there is something so much more personal in it. It holds the handwriting of the tutors that contributed to it. It holds the ideas of tutors who have sat in the same chairs I've sat in and encountered the same problems. It is a place to go when you can't whine at the secretary or the director about that awful session you just finished. Sometimes a journal entry will call for a response and get one. And our journal is full of tutors’ reflections on what it is to tutor here, at this little liberal arts college, under this system, often with these professors. The writers in it have had relatively the same training as I did, and, perhaps, what I am trying to say is that we have a bond. And sometimes in this world of originality, diversity and difference, it is good to know there are also people out there with whom you have something in common.

National Conference on Peer Tutoring in Writing  
October 25-27, 1996 Oklahoma City, Oklahoma  
**Keynote Speaker: Christina Murphy, Texas Christian University**  
**Theme: Exploring Complexity**

Peer tutors work in a mosaic of sites, roles, and disciplines with a full spectrum of perceived authority. They tutor writers with a wide range of abilities, backgrounds, and challenges. This conference theme will help us focus on the personal and institutional complexities of peer tutoring and on how we prepare and renew ourselves for this work.

Proposal information: Please submit a 250 word description of your presentation, workshop, panel or roundtable. Indicate if your presentation is intended for an audience new to peer tutoring or for one that has an established program. Identify the speakers and their roles within your institution. Your proposal will be included in the conference program. We strongly encourage proposals from peer tutors.

Send proposals by June 10 to:  
**Molly Wingate, NCPTW Program Chair**  
Colorado College Writing Center  
14 E Cache la Poudre Ave.  
Colorado Springs, CO 80903  
e-mail: mwingate@cc.colorado.edu  
phone: (719) 389-6742; fax: (719)634-4180
Conversations of Complexity
By Jeff Tieman
Colorado College

Like anything worth the effort, tutoring writers is rarely simple and straightforward. You can read books on effective communication or even peruse the multitude of texts which have been written on the subject of peer tutoring in the writing center. You can have theoretical conversations about how to work with people of different ability levels or personality types. Mock sessions offer the opportunity to practice and test those theories. You're ready to face anything - or at least you think so. Then you start tutoring real, live people with real, live problems. One of the tutors in our writing center did not get past his first session before the student with whom he was working asked about his age and qualifications.

For this year's conference in Oklahoma City, Molly Wingate (director of the Colorado College Writing Center, and my favorite boss) has selected the topic of "Exploring Complexity." With this broad designation, she has intentionally left tutors lots of room to do whatever they want. This is our chance to add complex issues to the already long list. More importantly though, the conference will be a forum where we can teach and learn from each other ways of handling this exciting but constantly changing job of ours.

Every one of us has “freaked out" on occasion. Maybe the writer doesn't know we are in the throes of a tutoring dilemma because we manage to stay so calm, but we are wrecks. Questions perhaps no one can answer soar through our confused tutor brains. "What was I taught to do when they ask me to predict a grade for their paper? Why is this guy asking me to do so much work? Why is this woman crying about her terrible roommate?"

Training courses can never address all these questions because no one, not even the people writing the books, has experienced it all. In the academic world, very little can be classified into the category of simplicity. Professors write page-long assignments and mention ten supplementary questions in class. Some professors are wild about commas and others will drop you a letter grade for not using gender-neutral language. As part of
the collegiate environment, the writing center has to confront all of these challenges as well as deal with the dynamics of its own unique and often complicated atmosphere. We wonder if we are doing too much or not enough for the people we tutor. We dread the writers who make us crazy or irritate us to a headache.

Thankfully, we have built-in therapy options. We can complain to and ask advice of each other at weekly meetings, or write in the tutor journal if we have trouble venting via conversation. Also, like many other professions, we have an annual conference that lets us meet dozens of tutors with perspectives we have not yet considered. Conferences are fun and energizing, but perhaps their best feature is that of empathy. It is comforting to know that others experience the same tribulations that you do, deal with the same serious issues, and get the same rushes and the same headaches.

Since almost everything we do in the writing center is far from simple and is often perplexing, Molly Wingate hopes the conference will offer its attendees new ideas about those foggy, difficult situations all of us find ourselves in every day. Perhaps the best way to prepare for this event is to watch yourself tutor and listen to the joys and moans of your colleagues. This is the substance of great presentations as well as the fuel for questions all of us can help each other answer.

If our jobs weren't complex, we probably would not enjoy them as much as we do. As someone who will be graduating in less than two months, I have to prepare to enter a real world which, I am quickly learning, is much more complex than I would prefer. Understanding and accepting that complexity is the best way to manage it, in the writing center and everywhere else.

Don't Touch That Pen! Laying Off the Ink
By Shalin Hai-Jew
South Seattle Community College

When a student approaches me with a paragraph, business letter, or essay, my right hand — as a reflex — begins to twitch. It begins to ball up in the pen-holding position, and I find myself with a cheap blue Bic in hand marking spelling, grammar, syntax, and mechanic mistakes.

A year at the South Seattle Community College Writing Center has taught me to lay off the pen. Several factors brought this about-face.

First, writing is primarily about substance, ideas, creativity, and originality. Only later do issues of organization, clarity, and secondary support come in, and finally the editing and mechanics. Dealing with a student’s paper with pen in hand encourages the marking of the minutiae and possibly a mis-focus of the larger issues of the ideas and actual revision.

Second, I would see many repeat users of the Writing Center who would make a beeline for me — bypassing all the many other talented tutors with their different approaches and insights. Paper in hand, they would say, "Correct this for me." They would bring out their
former paper and show how well they’d done, or grumble about editing mistakes I’d left behind. My "rep" on the campus became one of the tutor to go to for a "quickie." Was I becoming a crutch for students who needed to learn editing skills for themselves?

Third, English instructors began grumbling about just how "cleaned up" students papers were, and that some were getting mysterious "outside help." Were they referring to me? Possibly. A Writing Center needs to be a support, not a one-stop Do-It-All-For-You for students. I could learn from an instructor who would not even mark his students' literary critique papers, but would speak into a cassette recorder on the content. That concept works in a Writing Center where a student’s ideas and output may be reflected on in order to provide the students with an "ideal reader."

Fourth, not having a pen in hand helps me show students that they're the ones who must ultimately make the decisions — not any outside force. There's something terribly compelling about taking responsibility for oneself which enhances learning.

I will be there to help students towards appropriate reference texts like the clerk at the gas station with the map; to help then — lost wandering souls — muddle through English computer programs as well as word-processing software; to unclog the mental drain with brainstorming, listing, clustering, free-writing, and encouragement for class assignments; to fit papers into rhetorical modes sometimes the way Cinderella's sisters stuffed their feet into the glass slipper; to make former thugs and thugettes sound like new-born gentlemen and gentlewomen in business memos and professional letters with nudging and tweaks, but I will no longer do their work for them.

Sacred Signals
*By Morningfire Myers*
*Southern Illinois University*

We all respond to and with body language. Babies do it, cats and dogs do it, even goldfish do it. And, yes, peer writing tutors do it, too.

Before you poise your passive pen, the tutee smells your intentions, and you instinctively know your reaction to this temporary partner in a serious, albeit brief, process. We are on holy ground in a Writing Center. Sniff the incense of creativity. Sit close to the creator. Participate in this sacrament deferentially, courteously, reverentially.

Body language never lies. Each tutee is as fluent in this primary form of communication as each tutor. Differences in age, gender, race, culture and cologne speak volumes to these temporarily yoked two. Yet, we ordained tutors whip out our pointy little weapons and immediately attack the suppliant's most precious offering. Ouch! Blood on the page hurts even when the cuts are meant in kindness. Indeed, sacrificing small parts of our body of writing - yea, verily, even tiny fragments are painful, despite the restorative properties of the rite. Watch that preachy or superior manner, Dr. Grammar and High Priestess of Style. Somehow, we cannot ignore that an evaluation is affected. Tread tenderly on this spiritual spot. Approach your tutee respectfully. Breathe in his or her
fears. Breathe out your confidence in his or her forthcoming healing. Allow your tutee to teach you. Ask about something he or she knows a great deal more about than you do. Show with your eyes that you are glad to receive this new information. Very glad. And that it is baffling. Recall that befuddlement as you make use of your passive pen.

Give and Take  
By Kathi Marsan  
University of Cincinnati

The whole concept of being a peer tutor is to help other students overcome obstacles in their writing techniques, to assist them with revisions to get a better grade, to help meet deadlines, or to help with basic editing. No, this is not a glamorous job, nor are there any awards given for a job well-done. While there are not tangible awards that can be displayed for all to see, there are many rewards to be attained by any tutor who is motivated. To be good tutors we give of ourselves anything that can be learned during the tutoring session. Keeping a positive attitude and always striving to learn at least one new thing from each tutee will help us all be better tutors.

It is my goal, as I hope it is for all other tutors, to gain some knowledge, understanding, or reinforcement of writing skills every time I have a tutoring session. This is not always easy to do. How can I possibly learn something from every person who comes into the lab? Motivation is the key. Motivation stems from a positive attitude. A good attitude improves productivity and projects a more positive image, which in turn will put the tutee at ease and make them confident in your ability to help them. Let's face it, we've all had a tutee who doesn't want to be there but is required to be by a professor. There is a brief moment when you can either allow the tutee's negative attitude to control the session, or you can get creative and try to turn it around to get some positive results.

**HERE ARE A FEW DO’S AND DON’TS FOR TUTORING WITH A POSITIVE ATTITUDE:**

**Do:**

- Greet each new student with a smile.
- Take the time to find out what they need from you.
  - Ask a lot of questions.
  - Make positive comments about their paper whenever possible.
  - If you made similar mistakes, share your secret to overcoming them.
- Relax and don't make the tutee feel rushed.
- Always invite them to come back.
- Expect to learn something.

**Don’t:**

- Make them feel they are bothering you.
- Assume you know what they need or want to do.
- Hesitate to seek information if you are not confident in any area.
_ Let them leave the lab without first confirming that they understand the corrections you have made together.
_ Write the paper for them — you won't be doing them a favor.

The Writing Ladder

*By Emily Mueller*

*University of Cincinnati*

It was a late Thursday afternoon when a student entered the peer tutor lab. He was writing an essay in which he had to grapple with both sides of a controversial topic. The essay’s structure was very loose, and he tended to wallow back and forth between opposing sides. The essay also lacked several fundamental concepts that are necessary for freshman English students to know. I posed questions to the student about using a thesis, transitional sentences, topic sentences and a conclusion. The student's puzzled look was more than enough evidence to prove that he wasn't familiar with these important concepts. But much to my surprise, I found that he was following his assignment exactly. Apparently his professor didn't care about structure; in fact, according to the professor, the less structure, the better! Despite this teacher’s leniency, however, the student seemed confused knowing that he need not bother with these structural concepts.

Following a format, especially for incoming English students, makes the writing experience feel safer. Why is this so? Because when they are provided with a format they know exactly what is expected from them and how to put it in writing. On the contrary, those students who are handed a blank sheet of paper and told to write are left in the dark. Thus, it is no surprise to peer tutors that the main goal of English 101 is to let the writer experiment with basic concepts. In this setting, structure in an essay is only a guide which allows the writer to use his or her own thoughts. Learning to write in a structured environment helps students explore their ideas, with some degree of safety and control.

The student I mentioned above, who was not provided with a safety net of basic organizational skills, came into the lab more frequently than any other student. He had no idea where he should begin his papers. We spent hours over the course of one week discussing different routes and possibilities for his essay. He once mentioned that he wished his professor had given him guidelines to follow. I gave him guidelines that showed him what a thesis was, where it might be placed, how to start an introductory paragraph, and how to conclude an essay. His attitude shows that writing is a gradual learning process, and that a student must work his or her way up the writing ladder. In light of this learning process, structural concepts should be a precursor to freedom in writing.