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Grammatically Speaking:

A Look into Writer Development

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## Abstract

This Tutors' Column explores the ways in which focusing on grammar and mechanics in tutoring sessions at the writing center both helps and hinders students. This paper begins with a first-person explication of a new peer tutor's past writing and editing experiences from high school to the time that she began working at the writing center. The author describes her previous view of the importance of grammar and acknowledges how this view has changed and developed during her time as a peer tutor. Using research from four different writing center and education journals ranging in years from 1984 to 2016, she defines lower and higher order concerns and describes their relevance to tutoring sessions and student success. The author covers specific topics that include collaboration during sessions and emphasis on the peer tutor role. This paper ultimately settles on the belief that students will best be able to reach their potential as independent writers when tutors focus most on higher order concerns.

*Keywords:* writing center, grammar, lower/higher order concerns, collaboration, student success, independent writer

### Grammatically Speaking: A Look into Writer Development

Grammar is the key to a successful paper. A paper will falter in its ability to effectively deliver an argument without proper sentence structure, word construction, and punctuation. Who can take an essay seriously that is teeming with grammar errors? Grammar, when used incorrectly, distracts from the content of the essay and alters the focus from the main idea to the misplaced commas littered throughout each paragraph. We, as writing center tutors, cannot possibly believe that we do not need to focus on grammar, right?

Wrong. One year ago, I would have agreed with every aforementioned statement and responded wholeheartedly in support of grammar dominance to every previous question posed. I would have pointed out all of the punctuation errors and rambled on about appositives before I addressed the content and overall organization of someone's essay. In fact, my teachers in high school instructed me to pay careful attention to certain aspects of grammar that may distract readers from the content of my essay, so I learned from a young age to place my sole focus on grammar. I remember one teacher, specifically, who loathed passive voice and misplaced commas, so I spent a large portion of my time writing each essay only concerned about looking for and catching those errors. I was not going to let a grammar mistake ruin my grade, especially since I had developed a strong sense of pride from how much I excelled in and enjoyed the craft. Yet despite my teachers drilling these practices into my soul, the writing center changed my perspective when I joined. Grammar is no longer my most important concern.

Working at the writing center has been my dream job since my freshman year in high school, so imagine my excitement when I opened my email to discover a message announcing my acceptance as a new peer tutor at my university's writing center. To finally accomplish this goal made me soar with enthusiasm. I brimmed with hope and excitement, thinking of all the

commas I would get to correct and all the grammar lessons I would have the opportunity to give. I wanted to help students become better writers by fostering the development of impeccable grammar skills. I decided that my gift to the world would be sharing my talent of grammar.

Naively, I went into my first semester at the writing center still believing this. However, I quickly learned that grammar is defined as a lower order issue that should not be considered a high point of concern for writing center tutors (Winder, Kathpalia, & Koo, 2016). I remember the disappointment I felt when discovering that I would have to focus on content and organization before addressing other elements of writing. High school and my lower level freshmen English classes inadvertently taught me to place lower order concerns above all else. I was anxious that I would not make a competent tutor because I was not accustomed to ignoring grammar.

Surprisingly enough, my first few weeks at the center went smoothly, and I quickly learned how to set aside the grammar and focus primarily on the content. I discovered that students often struggle to successfully compose a strong paper if their content and main ideas lack consistent focus. I have reviewed papers with perfect grammar that skip from one idea to the next without any purpose or concentrated line of thinking. I have also reviewed papers with terrible grammar that tell beautiful, fluent stories and end with powerful takeaways for the reader. Decent grammar does not equal success, and I am ashamed to say that I took years to learn this truth.

However, despite my learning curve, I eventually found my stride and committed myself to helping students in ways that will aid them in their future writing. I want every student I tutor to walk out of the center with a sense of accomplishment and an idea of which step to take next. I realized that when I only focus on grammar, students leave thinking that they now hold a

perfect paper in their hands. However, if I address the content of their essays and give them a few ideas to think about, then they leave feeling as if they made some real improvements but knowing that they still have some work to complete. Addressing the persuasive elements of the paper over the small grammatical mistakes will almost always support and remain with students much longer than until the due date of that specific assignment.

Although using grammar and mechanics correctly is essential to the success of a paper, these elements do not make up the foundation of learning to write. Much like with the construction of a house, beginner writers need to focus on the structure of the essay before decorating the sentences with semi-colons and repairing the fragments. The elements that make up this structure are commonly referred to as higher order concerns, which include content, organization, argument, and assignment requirements (Winder et al., 2016). According to two peer tutors at the University of Rochester, these higher or global concerns center more around the thought processes of the writer rather than the mechanics of the text (Raymond & Quinn, 2012). Since these thought processes make up a writer's character, addressing them will more likely affect the student to a greater extent in the future. For example, the way in which someone thinks and processes information is ingrained in the brain and not easily altered. Similarly, the way in which someone originally constructs an essay comes from deep within the writer's habits and experiences with school and writing. However, with careful consideration of these habits, tutors can learn to impact students' thought processes by consistently addressing higher order concerns, allowing these higher concepts to steadily improve their writing.

Centering more on global matters also tends to localize the session around the writer instead of the paper. In doing so, students become active participants in each session, and we as tutors are able "to enhance the writer's control over his/her own writing processes and writing"

(Raymond & Quinn, 2012, p. 64). Students should always remain in control of their papers, able to modify sections at their own discretion and under no pressure from us to do so. We are peer tutors, not authoritative tutors, and remembering this identity allows us to better assist the student as a writer instead of as someone who needs help fixing a broken paper (Hedengren, 2014).

When I emphasize my role as a peer tutor during my sessions, students no longer expect me to repair their damaged writing. They instead expect me to collaborate with them to discover their potential and build on their existing skills. Previously, these same students would approach a session with the desire to edit at the sentence level, not understanding the broader opportunities at hand. However, when I chose to momentarily set aside their grammar concerns and address areas of improvement within the content, I often saw their eyes brighten as they realized the potential their papers already had. Most never fathom that they can truly improve their organizational skills within an essay until I point it out to them. This enlightenment can then lead to the creation of better informed and more talented writers.

I want to emphasize, though, that taking the time to address grammar and punctuation is not inherently substandard nor should it be avoided at all costs. Grammar is considered a local concern, but it is not “mutually exclusive” (Raymond & Quinn, 2012, p. 73) from the global concerns that more often influence writing improvements. Local concerns reveal global concerns just as global concerns inform local concerns. Additionally, an essay riddled with mechanical mistakes usually distracts from the overall content and message of the essay, downplaying any strengths present, so addressing those mistakes is vital to the paper. Finding a balance between addressing both higher and lower order issues then becomes an essential component of peer tutoring. We can achieve this balance when we focus first on higher concerns and then address grammar and mechanics when the student is ready to progress.

As I have tutored in the writing center this semester and struggled with putting grammar aside, one statement has stood out to me and guided my sessions: “A tutor's job is to produce better writers, not better writing” (North, 1984, p. 438). Since reading this statement by Stephen M. North, I have learned the true meaning of producing better writers. Although becoming a better writer will naturally give way to better writing, merely improving one paper without the focus on the student often will not result in an improved writer, as well. The development of higher order skills early on in the process yields the best results when striving to help students reach their potential as the successful writers lingering inside. Remembering this simple fact can help tutors achieve the writing center goals and mission statements of helping students become more independent writers for the future.

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