

12-7-2017

# Wearing the Collaborator Hat

Jessica Hahn  
*Utah State University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc\\_tutor](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor)

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Hahn, Jessica, "Wearing the Collaborator Hat" (2017). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 16.  
[https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc\\_tutor/16](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor/16)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the USU Writing Center at DigitalCommons@USU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tutor's Column by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@USU. For more information, please contact [rebecca.nelson@usu.edu](mailto:rebecca.nelson@usu.edu).



Jessica Hahn

English 4910

7 December 2017

Wearing the Collaborator Hat

Keywords:

collaboration, peer, peer tutor, peer tutoring, edit, editor, expert, writing center, tutor, writer, writing, learner, student

Abstract:

Writing tutors take on several roles when working with students, which range from coaches to counselors. However, one of the most important roles of writing tutors is the collaborator. Collaboration encourages both the tutor and the student to draw on each of their strengths, rather than only relying on the knowledge of the tutor alone. Some roles that restrict tutors as collaborators are roles such as editors and experts. Tutors avoid being editors of papers because they are only able to address surface level issues in writing rather than global issues. Being an expert is too much of a burden for peer tutors because they too are students and humans with an incomplete knowledge. But being a collaborator provides the tutor and student with opportunities to work in tandem to learn and find solutions and develop stronger writing skills.

## Wearing the Collaborator Hat

The Utah State University Writing Center maintains three goals. Among those goals are opportunities to work on an individual basis with students, share our expertise, and become better writers as a result of our peer reviewing (Coulbrooke 2). We work to become writing peers and encourage an environment of mutual learning. As a writing center, we take on Andrea Lunsford's philosophy, that we "need to embrace the idea of writing centers...as centers for collaboration" (qtd. in Gillespie 148). Upon my hiring, I received *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. One section in the first chapter explains the different hats that tutors wear. Some included are the Ally, the Coach, the Commentator, and the Counselor. While I've worn all of these hats as a tutor, there is one in particular that has been the most applicable and the most useful: the Collaborator. While taking on the title of Collaborator, I have learned that there are some titles that restrict our ability to collaborate. A collaborative tutor is a peer and a fellow learner. A tutor is not an editor or an expert.

### **A tutor is not an editor.**

Approximately one out of every four of my sessions begins with students asking me to simply fix their grammar or check for spelling. Usually students request simple edits because they don't know what else they are supposed to fix. There is a false belief about good writing: good writing equals good grammar. However, as my composition instructors and nearly every English professor has told me, writing does not equal grammar. Good writing often includes good content and strong organization of ideas. Bringing a paper to the writing center with only simple edits in mind is like taking clothes to the dry-cleaners: they can remove some stains and make a blouse look as good as it ever can, but they cannot change the blouse into an evening gown without new material and ideas (Gillespie 44). The same is true at the writing center. If we

only work with surface level error, if we only make minor edits, then we can only help students achieve a small level of improvement. Editors focus on the text, the small stains in the writing. Tutors focus on the content, the differences between a blouse and an evening gown. An easy visual for the distinction between editor and tutor can be found on page 45 of *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring* by Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner.

<b><i>Editors</i></b>	<b><i>Tutors</i></b>
Focus on the text	Focus on the writer's development and establish rapport
Take ownership of the text	Make sure the writer takes ownership
Proofread	Start with higher-order concerns and worry about correctness last
Give advice	Ask questions
Read silently	Ask the writer to read aloud
Look mainly for things to improve	Comment on things that are working well
Work with an ideal text	Trust the writer's idea of a text
Make corrections on the page	Keep hands off and let writers make corrections; help them learn correctness
Tell writers what to do	Ask them their plans for revision

### **A tutor is not an expert.**

No matter how much effort I give to understanding and perfecting every aspect of the writing process, I still struggle with weakness as a writer. Being a tutor does not nullify my weaknesses. In fact, tutoring has helped highlight my shortcomings as a writer. Occasionally a student will explain that they would like help with  $x$  in their paper. Unfortunately, I too struggle with  $x$  in my own writing. The first session I ever tutored involved AP citations, which I had never needed to understand. Nervously, I scoured the internet and our in-room handbooks to try

and make some sense of the student's questions. I could not rely on my prior knowledge because it was extraordinarily limited for this student's needs. When the student noticed my struggle to effectively answer his questions, he asked, "Shouldn't you know this stuff?" I am sure he did not mean to question my qualifications as a tutor, but his comment still sparked my own doubts. I wondered how I could be a tutor without knowing the answer to every question. How could I provide knowledge and wisdom for students if I lacked that knowledge myself?

As a collaborator, there is no requirement to know everything about writing. *The Bedford Guide* explains that students will come to tutors assuming that the tutors will know more than them about writing. "The truth is, you probably do. Just by being a writing tutor, you become more knowledgeable about writing" (Ryan 6). Tutors can pull confidence from the fact they were chosen among other applicants to use their writing knowledge, however incomplete it may be, to help other writers. Rather than being experts, writing center tutors take on "disciplinary expertise" (Gillespie 27). In no way do we represent a group of writing experts, but our individual understandings of writing qualifies us to work alongside other writers and contribute constructive ideas to supplement the writers' own ideas.

### **A tutor is a peer and a learner.**

Every aspect of our tutoring sessions from our body language to the seating arrangement is meant to promote the notion of equality in tutoring sessions. Tutors are undergraduate or graduate students tutoring other undergraduate or graduate students; there is no hierarchy of knowledge between student and tutor. The student's role is to provide their knowledge of a topic and how they might like to communicate their topic. The tutor's role is to provide knowledge of how best to refine their ideas. One is not better than the other. In every tutoring session, both the tutor and the student will have weaknesses and strengths to offer. The best strategy to address

weakness is to build respect for ourselves and for the students. By entering the tutoring session, students implicitly admit that they have a weakness with their writing, but their willingness to seek aid is encouraging. Tutors should not fear their weaknesses as a tutor or a student, but address them as they come. Brock Dethier in *The Composition Instructor's Survival Guide* recommends an acknowledgement of weakness through phrases like "I'll have to look that up for you" (Dethier 15). Collaboration becomes a key element of a tutoring session because it allows students and tutors to benefit from each other's strengths and weaknesses.

My favorite sessions are brainstorming sessions. I enjoy the conversations about topics, controversies, organization, and the development of ideas. In my sessions I have found that "talking about writing is perhaps the most important thing you can do as a tutor" (Gillespie 11) because talking with students can create essential atmospheres of friendliness and production. Seemingly casual conversations about an essay topic are more comfortable for students than rigorous drilling over organization and mechanics. The act of simply talking about writing as peers makes the writing process seem less daunting and generates ideas and strategies relevant for both the writer and the tutor. The collaboration of ideas does more than benefit the writer. The tutor often comes away from the session with new insights about their own writing process. A collaborative session means that knowledge moves both ways. Tutors are learners and writers who are not all that different from the students they work with.

Writing centers are built on principles of mutual respect and free-flowing knowledge. Tutors avoid becoming editors because editing halts the flow of knowledge between the student and tutor. We also accept that we are in no way great-knowers-of-all-wisdom. Our weaknesses do not make us frauds; our weaknesses make us peers. The peer-tutor philosophies that exist in the Writing Center work because they promote collaboration and equality of ideas. Learning and

developing our skill as writers includes talking with others, “We need to view knowledge and reality as mediated by or constructed through language in social use, as socially constructed, contextualize, as, in short, the product of collaboration” (Gillespie 13).

Works Cited

Coulbrooke, Star, et al. *Utah State University Writing Center Handbook of Policies and Procedures*. 2017.

Dethier, Brock. *The Composition Instructor's Survival Guide*. Boynton/Cook, 1999.

Gillespie, Paula, and Neal Lerner. *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*. Addison-Wesley Longman, 2008.

Ryan, Leigh, and Lisa Zimmerelli. *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*. Bedford/St. Martins, 2010.