Tutor's Column

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Tutors—Writing Myth Busters

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Key Words:

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Abstract:

The purpose of this essay is to help tutors understand that myths about the writing process are hurting students and their writing. Peer tutors are in a unique position to teach students the truth about the writing process. Many students feel incapable of writing well because they struggle with the writing process. Helping students recognize false beliefs about writing and understand the truth will do more to improve student writing and confidence than teaching writing mechanics. When students have a deeper understanding of the importance of having a focused audience, writing bad drafts, and allowing for their limited time frame, then they will have the tools and reality check needed for a better writing experience.

Tutors—Writing Myth Busters

When students are given instructions on how to write an essay they are lied to. Sadly, these lies have become legitimized myths that students believe. According to handouts and whiteboard diagrams, essay writing follows simple, logical steps. The truth is the writing process is a non-linear, messy, maddening, chaotic process. Writing myths are damaging more than papers. Students begin to feel they are broken when they do not fit the supposed mold taught. Sometimes, when students bump up against the reality of writing, they are unprepared to struggle through the writing process—they were expecting the myths about writing to be true. These students are not alone. Research suggests that "around 50 percent of doctoral students in the U.S. and Canada drop out during the research proposal or dissertation-writing phases of their degrees before finishing their programs" (Green). Graduate students are also facing writing difficulties and letting them win. Tutors do more than help individual essays improve, they combat writing myths by teaching students the truth about the writing process.

In composition classes the concept of writing for an audience is taught as an important thing to recognize when writing. It is wrong to gloss over audience because writing for a specific audience is not just a good idea; writing for an audience is *essential*. The better a writer knows a specific audience, the more successful and poignant the writing. Psychologist John Ault said in an interview that students who are most successful in school are students who truly understand their audience. Whether the audience be a professor or a specific demographic, being able to tailor arguments to the target audience makes the writing more effective. The writer will also feel more focused and less stressed. Having a clear audience makes writing easier because it breaks the world of possibility into

specific, related, and logical arguments. Consider, if an essay topic is about the effects of divorce. The writer would present different facts and argument styles depending on if they are writing to divorce attorney's or couples considering divorce. It can be overwhelming as a tutor to know how to help a student with a multitude of writing needs, but assisting them in finding a specific audience helps them become clear and effective.

Another myth is good papers come from good drafts, but the truth is good papers often come from bad drafts. An English professor at Utah State University teaches that most students believe they first have to write a good draft to get a good paper, when it is actually the opposite. Bad drafts produce good papers (McCuskey). Most of the students I have tutored start sessions with disclaimers like: "I suck at writing" or "this is a very rough draft, just so you know" or perhaps "I don't know what I'm doing". Students who feel the need to attach a disclaimer to their paper are essentially saying, "this draft isn't perfect". Drafts are supposed to be imperfect. Writing bad rough drafts is a great place for students to start. The drafting process gets them thinking and engaging with the prompt. It also relieves the pressure to produce something perfect. As students in a highly competitive world, we often expect perfection immediately. Psychologist Carol Dweck recommends that all students learn to adopt the "growth mindset". Growth mindset students embrace challenges and enjoy working through hard material. These students are willing to write poorly at first because they see the big picture. Nonfiction writer, Shaun Anderson, embraces drafting as part of his process:

> Usually I write about things until I find a question that I don't have any real answer for, and then I spend my…time writing…exploring all of the potential answers I can

think of for that experience. Then it's still a lot of free writing still, but directional

free writing that all works toward a certain something.

In other words, when Anderson finds a prompt, he does not respond to it immediately, but

first, writes different questions and ways to approach the prompt. As tutors our job is to

teach and explain, and we need to explain to students the importance of writing bad drafts

in an effort to write a good final paper.

School systems perpetuate the myth that good writing is the product of a few weeks,

because that is the time frame given to students. Patience is necessary to learning anything,

however, patience is not merely an attribute worth having in writing; it is an important

step in the writing process. As students, we read writing that was polished enough to be

published, but writing worthy of publishing takes a long time. Star Coulbrooke, Poet

Laureate of Logan City, explained her writing process as something she allows to age. She

says "[I] read aloud and re-work until it feels right, print out and set aside. Come back to it,

revise somewhat, take to writing group. Set aside again and then revise a final time". For

Coulbrooke, allowing time to take a break from what she has written is crucial.

Unfortunately, many students usually do not have the time to allow essays to rest for a few

months so they can return to it with a fresh perspective. Tutors help students by giving

them a reality check: good writing takes time. Tutors need to help students recognize their

time constraints and create realistic and appropriate goals.

The biggest myth I see with students I have tutored has nothing to do with how

writing is taught, but their own insecurities. Many students believe that when they

struggle with writing it means they are incapable of writing well. These feelings of failure

impact sessions, because students believe that they are inherently bad writers. The truth is

many good writers struggle with writing. Open-minded learning does not happen when students are feeling insecure or frustrated. Start sessions with empathy. A psychology journal defines empathy as "an 'other-centered' emotion, which can result from observing another individual in need and imagining the person's situation (Batson, 1991)" (Rumble, et al.). In other words, empathy is being able to connect emotionally with another by understanding their perspective. As peers we have experienced our fair share of stressful assignments, surely, we can empathize with a student who is stressed out over an assignment. Empathetically sharing an experience helps the students understand they are not alone or stupid. The benefits of empathy also help sessions because "experiments have shown that empathy enhances helping and cooperation" (Rumble, et al.). In my own tutoring sessions, I have seen students become more responsive and workable after I have listened to their struggles, imagined how they must be feeling, and validated them. Empathy creates a relationship of respect and trust between students and tutors. Taking a few minutes to empathize with a struggling student is appropriate and will create a positive atmosphere for learning for the rest of the session.

Tutors are not writing masters, and as peer tutors we are especially prone to human error. However, we are students who have learned to write well, which means on a certain level we have been fighting these and other writing myths in our own writing processes. Writing mechanics and grammar are useful things for students to learn, but if our job was just teaching mechanics then we would not be as useful. While we can help a student find a solid way to remember how to cite, certainly it would be more useful to help insecure students learn that they are not broken, they are just fighting with the writing process.

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