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Tyler Monson
Utah State University

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Tyler Monson

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Confidence is Key

The importance of building a student's confidence in writing

It's Friday afternoon and there's barely any wiggle room between tutoring sessions. Every English 2010 student has been rushing to the Writing Center to get their papers edited before they have to turn it in at midnight. Some papers are contemplative, well-structured and only need light tweaks, while others are "more of a thought piece at the moment."

I'm two hours and four appointments through my shift when a student comes into my office looking defeated. Her hair is scraggly, and I can see her backpack sliding off her shoulder before she drops it on the floor and falls into her seat.

We exchange pleasantries before she pulls out a copy of her essay. "I wrote all of this at 2 o'clock in the morning so you can judge it as harshly as you want. I just don't know how to write it anymore." She says, sliding the paper in front of me and burying her face in her hands. "I'm just done."

I'm bracing myself for the worst. But it's only a few paragraphs into the paper that I begin to realize: this is a good essay. A *really* good essay. The ideas are thoughtful, the word choice is nuanced, and the organization makes for a well-structured argument.

"You lied to me!" I say, looking up from the first paragraph, "you said this was going to be awful!"

She looked taken aback but smiled at my compliment.

I decided to spend the rest of our session pointing out all of the things she had done well throughout her paper and what she could do to apply those strengths to the rest of her paper.

Somehow, these kinds of experiences aren't uncommon. Especially when working with non-English majors or young adults who don't have too much experience in college. I've seen a lot of students who have come into the writing center with shattered self-confidence and almost no faith in the overall quality of the papers they've written.

I've *been* one of those students. Multiple times.

This raises an important question: how can we help students engage with their work and leave a tutoring session with a positive experience in writing?

It goes without saying that writing is a deeply personal experience. Usually, every word on the page represents a deliberate choice that has been made by the author. Their *ideas* are on display when a paper is finished. It's grueling to put your thoughts into words, and it takes a lot of vulnerability to share it with someone else.

As writing tutors, it's important for us to recognize the effort a student is putting into a paper. But it's especially important to validate what they are doing well. Sylvia Plath once wrote, "The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt" (Plath). We can be our own worst critics sometimes, especially when it comes to writing. By being open and positive with a student about their writing, we can help them to eliminate their negative outlook on their papers and help build them up as writers. Instead of leading a discussion by pointing out the negative aspects of a paragraph, a tutor could take the time to acknowledge the student's effective word choice, or even to compliment the ideas behind the writing. Sometimes it can be difficult, but doing so helps the author to have a more positive outlook on their work moving forward.

Starting a session with a compliment or two can help the student to be a bit more receptive to some of your more...*constructive* bits of feedback. Because writing is so personal, it can be difficult for a tutor to know how to provide such suggestions without offending the student. Alina Tugend of *The New York Times* noted that there's a delicate balance in "making negative feedback precise and timely enough so that it's helpful but neutral enough so that it's not perceived as harshly critical. That's particularly difficult in a culture like ours, where anything short of effusive praise can be viewed as an affront" (Tugend).

Luckily, most students come into a session ready to receive feedback about their writing. Writing centers should provide a positive environment for students to talk openly about their writing. While a tutor shouldn't worry about burying the lead when providing a critique of a paper, they should also be cautious about the way they do so. As tutors, we are in the unique position to be able to play the part of a collaborator and friend to the students who we talk to.

The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors illustrates this point in its opening chapter. "You are a friend who offers support to a writer coping with a difficult task—writing a paper. You are sympathetic, empathetic, and encouraging and best of all, you are supportive and helpful" (Ryan and Zimmerilli, 5). It's evident that writing can be a difficult task sometimes, so it's important to acknowledge a student's struggles and validate their concerns. As you do so, you can play the part of an ally for the student and help them to feel safe sharing their ideas with you.

If anyone knows how to cater to their customers well, it's the employees at Disneyland. Their entire customer service philosophy circulates around the desire to make sure that their patrons have a good experience and want to come back. They spare no expenses in making sure that their parks are clean and operational and that their employees do everything that they can to mitigate any concerns that a customer may have. Not surprisingly, they're really good at it. Their top-

notch customer service has helped to establish them as one of the most popular vacation destinations in the US, serving 81.1 million guests in 2014 alone (Harwell).

As tutors, we can learn a lot from Disney's customer service policy. Their employees actively try to engage with their guests and do everything to try and ensure that they're having a positive experience. We need to do the same and make a conscious effort in helping build up our students and to help them to change their negative preconceived notions about writing. Like I said before, we can still do this at times when we need to give criticism. Doing so helps our writing centers to feel like a safe environment and can help change a student's opinion on their own writing and boost their confidence.

As tutors, our most important responsibility is to help our guests have a positive experience with writing. The papers that we are working on together have due dates, but the lessons that they can learn from our interactions don't. As we strive to build a student's confidence with their writing, we can change their perspective on their current papers and all of their assignments to come.

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