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# Spiders, Satan, and Uncertainty: Turning Idle Tutoring Sessions into Teaching Opportunities

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**Abstract:** Though brand new writing tutors are given an army of tools and resources to aid students in the writing process, it is inevitable that they will come across a session that they just do not know how to handle. Whether it be vague and confusing assignment descriptions, unenthusiastic students, or a discipline outside of the tutor's knowledge-base, seemingly fruitless sessions will land in the room of almost every tutor. This essay aims to help tutors recognize when sessions may not be going anywhere, and offer them advice and specific ideas for handling these sessions in a way that has students leaving with an understanding of the writing process and a greater confidence in that process.

**Keywords:** writing confidence, miscommunication, confusion, writing process, assignments, universal writing skills, understanding, tutoring

### Spiders, Satan, and Uncertainty

I think it was probably when the spiders crawled across the screen of the Satanic Temple advertisement that I knew this was going to be an interesting session, one of those dreaded sessions. One where, no matter what you try, you just don't know what to do. You get stuck. As new tutors we're taught skills and techniques that get us through most sessions; however, it's inevitable that we will encounter sessions where we just don't know. And as a new tutor, I was terrified of this; yet, it happened. My first sessions went really well. I started gaining confidence as a tutor and a good understanding of how to help students; however, a few weeks later, I had a session that tested that confidence. Jamie came in with a rhetorical ad analysis. Up to this point, the majority of my sessions had been for similar assignments, but this one was unique.

First, the instructor assigned a specific ad she wanted her students to analyze, the Satanic Temple ad. This contrasted with the previous assignments where students got to choose their ad. Next, and also contrary to the previous assignments, this instructor wanted the students to discuss not only the rhetorical elements, but the wider cultural impact and the implicit intentions of the ad creators. None of this caused the assignment to be particularly difficult to tutor; in fact, it made the essay more interesting. The difficulty arose because the assignment description lacked clarity; there were vague recommendations, no explicit expectations or requirements, and only general instructions for writing rhetorical analyses. None of this supported Jamie's understanding of the assignment, which put us at an impasse. Not to mention, Jamie was not enthusiastic about the assigned ad – *at all*. As I read through the assignment requirements with her, I found myself asking her lots of questions that she couldn't answer. In turn, Jamie pressed me with questions that I, also, was unable to address. I began to sweat with frustration; I couldn't help this student. As a result, my developing confidence in my tutoring skills began to plummet. If I was unable to help Jamie with an "Intro to Writing" rhetorical analysis, how was I supposed to help students

with more complex assignments? As the twenty minutes dragged on without an ounce of productivity, we became increasingly discouraged. Though she was understanding of my plight, and I of hers, Jamie left feeling stressed and unconfident in her assignment and writing abilities, and I felt like a terrible tutor.

My experience with Jamie caused me to ponder what tutors can do to help students with their writing even when the specific assignments are ambiguous or unclear. Though many students come into the writing center expecting to get help with one specific assignment, that's not the only option. As tutors, we're taught to promote the development of writing confidence in students and teach universal writing skills. Typically, tutors use students' specific writing assignments to facilitate this instruction, but that doesn't always have to be the case. In some situations, the assignment just becomes a barrier to the greater purposes of a student's visit to the writing center. Sometimes, it's appropriate to put the assignment to the side and offer the student more general advice about writing. This may prove difficult, however, as there are so many different students in so many different majors, each of which has its own quirks with regards to writing techniques. Nonetheless, there are some writing skills that apply across the board.

First and foremost, tutors should approach the student with honesty, express their confusion, and inform the student that they do not understand the assignment well enough to give them effective and specific advice. Though the student may be frustrated, tutors can help them understand that though they may not be able to answer specific questions, the two can still discuss elements of writing that will ultimately help the student with the concerning assignment, and many more to come. Because of this confusion, tutors should, first, gear the student towards their instructor. Though it is often intimidating for students, sometimes it's the only choice for tutors to ensure students are getting help with their specific assignment. If students are intimidated, tutors can help them come up with a list of questions to ask their professors to

facilitate an effective conversation and reduce intimidation. Dr. Marissa Vigneault, an art history professor at Utah State University, who assigns multiple, and sometimes experimental, writing assignments each semester, suggests helping students develop a rough outline of their ideas and identify where they need assistance. Doing so, she says, helps her understand exactly where her students are struggling (Vigneault). If the student still expresses a fear of talking with their professor, tutors can help them draft an email. If tutors can help students draft carefully worded, tonally appropriate emails to their professors that address the student's specific needs, the instructor will be much better able to help the students with their concerns.

After guiding the student to their professor, tutors should take the remaining time as an opportunity to discuss more general elements of proper writing, as regardless of discipline, there's always an expectation of good writing. Dr. Vigneault expressed her expectations that students come into her classes with a strong understanding of basic writing skills. Because she's not an English or writing instructor, her goal is to focus on the content she teaches, and expects students already understand the writing process (Vigneault). This goes to show that instructors across campus see basic writing skills as a necessity and suggests that "whatever you are writing, your aim should be to make your text as clear as possible" ("Developing Your Writing"). One of the main goals for tutors is to help teach this kind of clear and concise writing.

Helping students define their writing processes can be a really effective tutoring technique when tutors are at a loss with the assignment descriptions. If tutors can help students understand how they write, it will help not only with that specific writing assignment, but with the student's writing in general. Tutors can also help students set writing goals, and articulate what things they need to accomplish in order to write their paper successfully. However, the goals need to be realistic. Though it's important for students to stretch themselves when writing, in an effort to improve, creating unrealistic expectations can cause students extra stress if they

cannot meet those goals (“Developing Your Writing”).

Also, students can benefit from instruction on specific writing techniques. Perhaps, in a seemingly fruitless session, tutors can go over ideas for brainstorming, such as mind-mapping or free-writing. Students can also be taught how to outline. Perhaps the outline may not be specific to the paper; but helping students understand the necessity for strong introductions and conclusions, where thesis statements go, and how many paragraphs they may need, can make the writing process less intimidating (Heaps). If none of these strategies feel appropriate for the session, tutors can try discussing mechanical rules or issues that may arise, especially the lesser known and misunderstood rules. Dr. Vigneault expressed that even when students have good papers, she still recognizes little issues, such as passive voice (Vigneault). If tutors can explain these issues before the student writes, they will become less problematic in the paper.

In the writing center, students come from across disciplines. Tutors should engage with students about their education, major, or desired career. Perhaps, tutors can research with students the details of writing in their major. What is expected of their writing? What citation style do they need to use? When is jargon appropriate and when should ideas be simplified? All these questions can be answered, or at least researched, in a directionless tutoring session.

Overall, the tutor’s job is to inspire writing confidence. Tutors should engage with the student about where they are with their writing skills to gauge what aforementioned elements may be useful to them. Also, tutors can share with students a situation when they struggled with writing, and how they overcame that, encouraging students to overcome their writing struggles as well. Sometimes, students need to be reminded that they are students; they are in college to learn, and writing is an education upon which one must continually build. They don’t have to be perfect; they just need to do their best. They should be reminded that even tutors are still learning to write, as well. Had I some of these tools in the back of my mind sooner, Jamie and I may have

had a productive session, spiders, Satan, uncertainty, and all. Even in situations where helping a student may seem impossible, tutors emphasizing these specific, yet universal, ideas can help students feel encouraged about their writing skills and understand that writing doesn't have to be intimidating. This is, in fact, the ultimate job of tutors.

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