

5-2019

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## Recommended Citation

Whittier, Andrea, "Don't Overlook the Power of Praise" (2019). *Tutor's Column*. Paper 43.  
[https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc\\_tutor/43](https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/wc_tutor/43)

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## **Don't Overlook the Power of Praise**

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### **Abstract**

Writing center tutors should prioritize the use of praise in sessions with each student, whether or not the student may respond the way the tutor expects. For some students, this brings energy to the session that fuels discussion about the paper, and for other students, this may function as a tool to show them the positive culture of the writing center.

**Keywords:** praise, writing center culture, positivity

Coming to a writing center appointment, especially for the first time, can feel daunting for students. While tutors focus the session on helping students become stronger writers, tutors must also recognize the important role of encouraging students in their writing. As a new tutor, I have enjoyed exploring the art of giving meaningful praise as I work with different students. Despite my best efforts to encourage students, however, I have found that giving praise does not always result in the same outcome. Sometimes, when I express excitement about a student's work to them, they feed off of the energy and the session improves from there, while other times, I express the same level of excitement, and the student stares at me blankly or simply does not seem to care. In order for students to have their needs best met in the writing center, tutors should use praise as a tool for driving the session in a positive manner, even if the student may not seem to receive it well.

In *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors*, Leigh Ryan and Lisa Zimmerelli suggest that tutors use praise as a tool in sessions, explaining that "feeling successful in some areas allows writers to more easily continue working to improve in other areas, and places tutors in a perfect position to facilitate and encourage writers, especially those who struggle" (53-54). Even as a new tutor, praise has played an important role as I work with writers, and I have often found the outcome of using praise to be positive, as I would expect. For example, in one session with a student (we'll call her Ashley), I opened our discussion on her paper with praise, and the conversation went about like the following:

"I'm mainly concerned about length," Ashley told me. I glanced at her paper, and it was only a few sentences long. "I've had a hard time getting going on the assignment, so I wanted to come here to start working through it."

“Okay, great!” I told her. After discussing the purpose of the assignment, I said, “Will you tell me what all the points are that you’d like to hit on in this paper?” She launched into an energized explanation about why a community garden would benefit her student housing complex; she was passionate about the topic, and I was impressed. “Wow!” I responded. “I love how passionate you are about your ideas! That will really help you make the message meaningful to your reader; I’m excited just listening to you describe your points, so I can only imagine how engaging it will be in your paper!” She beamed, even as I continued to say, “As you were explaining, however, there were a few topics I had some questions about--I jotted them down here so that maybe you can use those to help you develop the paper and get the length you need. Something I was wondering about was...”

We both jumped into the discussion, continuing to develop the ideas in her paper. She asked me questions; I asked her some. By opening our discussion with genuine praise--with excitement about her ideas that she was developing-- a more positive, excited energy led the session, helping us work through the ideas that still needed development. It provided a positive spin on the purpose of the session, and helped Ashley both feel good about her work as a writer, as well as learn about how she could improve. She understood that our purpose at the writing center was to work with her so that she could discover ways to improve her writing, but she wasn’t nervous about being corrected or being vulnerable about where she was in the writing process because she knew that the writing center was a positive and encouraging environment. Beginning with praise gave our session energy to dig into her paper.

However, not all sessions (or students!) are the same. As I began the session with praise with another student (we’ll call him Derek), it did not bring the same level of energy and overall success:

“Have you been to the writing center before?” I asked him.

“No, I haven’t,” he replied as he pulled his paper out of his backpack.

I explained our purpose and asked what he was working on, and he told me that he was working on his word meditation essay for English 2010. I was thrilled; as a writer of creative nonfiction myself, I had been thoroughly enjoying working with students on this particular assignment, and I noted my excitement to him. We discussed his concerns about the paper--“I don’t know, probably just grammar, and making sure it flows and makes sense. I threw this together last night for our peer review in class today”--and decided that our best course of action would be to read through the paper aloud together, pausing to comment throughout. We read the opening paragraph, and I was all in. He had composed an engaging and relatable description of his school cafeteria at lunchtime, so well that I could imagine that distinct and memorable smell of corn mixed with too many other flavors myself. I felt like I was right there with him.

“You nailed that description of your cafeteria! I could relate so much!” I excitedly told him after we read through the first paragraph. “I seriously felt like I was there--you gave me so much imagery, and it totally worked.”

“Thanks,” he replied indifferently--a perfectly fine response, but not the one I was hoping for. I had shared my excitement with him, as a peer, about his work, noting a specific aspect of his writing that I, as a reader, found particularly strong and engaging. A simple “thanks” was appreciated, but it was not the reason why I offered the compliment. I wanted him to feel empowered as a writer (he had shared that he did not consider English his strongest subject), and I also hoped that the praise would help open a discussion about his writing process, like it had with Ashley. Due to his lack of enthusiasm in receiving the praise, however, I lost some energy

as a tutor, unsure where to go next. My go-to tool for opening further discussion about his paper wasn't working!

Although Derek's lack of response to my praise was disappointing, it provided me with an opportunity to reflect on why not all students respond to praise the way I would expect. For instance, he had never been to the writing center before, and probably didn't know what to expect out of the session; perhaps he had been caught off-guard that we began our discussion focusing on a positive aspect of his work. In fact, in a study exploring the use of praise in tutoring sessions, Diana Bell and Madeleine Youmans acknowledge that writing center visits are a "face-threatening act" for the student. They explain that every person encounters "face-threatening acts," or situations in which they are in a vulnerable position for criticism, which naturally leads to greater apprehension (4-6). The act of complimenting Derek's writing helped diffuse this face-threatening situation, showing him the positive culture of the writing center, despite Derek's somewhat indifferent demeanor when praised in our session.

All things considered, praise is a powerful tool for tutoring sessions, no matter how a student may initially respond. Though Derek's session shows that not all students may know how to respond to compliments in this new setting or feel energized by praise, this could be attributed to the "face-threatening" nature of initial writing center appointments. Meanwhile, Ashley illustrates that compliments can function as an effective resource for starting off a conversation with energy and enthusiasm. Overall, writing center tutors should regularly use praise as a tool to create a positive culture in the session, no matter how the student may appear to receive it.

Works Cited

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