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# How Not to Panic in the Face of Panic

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## Abstract

While tutors may not interact daily with students who have reached a point of panic, they should be prepared to handle these potentially precarious situations. A student who is truly at the end of their rope likely needs specific tutoring techniques not always focused on in other sessions. Tutors have the potential to be a turning point in a stressed student's life, if they have taken the time to learn how. This essay equips tutors with a strategic plan, including specific phrases, to coax a student out of their panic and into state of confidence.

## Key Words

Difficult tutoring, stress, confidence, tutor preparedness, tutor techniques

## How Not to Panic in the Face of Panic

Quick footsteps nearly run into the Writing Center appointment desk, and a breathless voice asks if there are any walk-in appointments available. As the supervisor checks the schedule, you overhear a panicky explanation that the paper is due tonight and they have no idea what to do. Slyly you lean back in your chair to try and catch a glimpse of the breathless voice. You can't help but grimace at the sight of a face that has clearly gone too many nights without sleeping. You slowly rock back into your office, crossing all your fingers that the supervisor will forget you're there and give this appointment to someone else. But the next thing you know, the supervisor pops their head in your office and says, "Are you ready to go?"

"Yep!" You respond, trying to hide your own rising panic.

As the student rushes in and explains their desperate plight, you scramble to figure out how to address what has become a high-stress situation. Is it possible to calm the student down to the point of productive conversation? How are you going to gain control of the situation and leave the student feeling optimistic about their paper—and do it in under twenty minutes?

A panicky student with a threatening deadline is a combination writing tutors dread but are likely to encounter. What do you do when procrastination is thick in the air? How do you help when it seems far too late?

These kinds of situations are daunting, but with the right techniques it is possible to turn panic into hope. As a tutor, you have the power to subdue a student's current emotional turmoil, and change the way they approach writing in the future. Let's use the familiar format of a standard essay to walk through the techniques tutors need to succeed: introduction (how to start the session), body paragraphs (what to do in the middle), and conclusion (how to wrap things up). By the end

of this paper, you won't be *as* tempted to curl up and hide in the corner from your supervisor's head.

## **Introduction**

When faced with a panicky student, the first step is to pinpoint the source of their stress. For example, there is a difference between the student who knows they have procrastinated and realizes they could have done better, and the one who has put in the time but just keeps hitting dead ends. Discovering the core of the situation will help you determine what kind of feedback to give. You can try asking questions like, "Will you tell me a bit about your writing process with this paper?" or, "What do you feel like was the hardest part of this assignment?" or, "Will you tell me about your topic before we get started?"

Once you have a better grip on the situation, the next step will be to instill a sense of hope as to the potential of the next twenty minutes. Do this by stating a realistic vision of what can be accomplished during the session. As long as a student feels like all hope is lost, you are not going to make much progress. Depending on the situation you can say something like, "You are going to leave this session with ideas," or, "By the end of this session we are going to have a solid outline," or, "We are going to buckle down and leave this session feeling better."

One final suggestion for this introductory stage is to validate the student's frustrations. For example, you could say, "You are not the only one struggling with this," or "These situations are why we have a writing center, and why it is full all the time." Validating their frustrations will help the student begin to trust you as a friend. Once you've discerned more details about the situation and fostered a sense of hope, you are ready to dive headfirst into the paper.

## **Body**

We English-lovers have always appreciated a good rubric, but in a situation of panic you need to cling to it if you want everyone smiling by the end of session. Why? Because the rubric may be your only hope for offering positive feedback on the paper—something that your student is likely craving right about now. Focus your attention on using the rubric to offer factual praise; point out exactly what requirements the student is currently meeting. This factual praise can be as basic as pointing out that they have a topic, or at that they have research (even if it is poorly integrated). Or you can even praise correct formatting. Students may feel they have done absolutely nothing right, so identifying any redeeming aspects via the rubric will be appreciated.

The rubric is also your BFF when it comes to prioritizing what elements of the paper to focus on. Make a point to show the student what aspects of the paper are worth the most points and should therefore receive the most attention. Having a firm starting place can help motivate students into making revisions.

Your language is crucial as you work through the session. When tutoring it can be easy to categorize our comments into “good” and “bad.” For example we may be tempted to say, “Your introduction is good, but your transition to the next paragraph is weak.” This is an ineffective approach, especially with a frazzled student, because it can feel like the tutor is commenting on the student themselves, and not the paper. Instead, try the phrasing “what is currently working” and “not working.” This prevents the feedback from feeling like a personal attack. Writer and Editor Vicki Hudson provides a useful pattern to follow when giving feedback. Here is her four steps process:

1. Start with positive feedback.
2. Ask the student questions.
3. Give constructive feedback for what didn't work.

4. Finally, leave the writer feeling good about her work by summing up something positive about the piece overall (Hudson 9).

Another name for this feedback technique is the “crap sandwich.” In summary, a tutor should point out what is working, show what is not working, and then end with another positive aspect. And with a name as catchy as crap sandwich you’re bound to remember it, right?

Also be aware of what your face looks like as you work through the paper. Students need to see that you are confident, calm, and not judging them during their panic. Keep working through the paper, rubric close in hand, until about three minutes before it’s time to release your student back into the real world.

## **Conclusion**

Don’t work until the very last second of the session. Deliberately leave a few minutes to talk with the student about what you’ve worked on together. They will likely be anxious for confirmation that this appointment was worth their time. Compliment them on their participation during the session, point out how well things went, and show them what progress they made. If you have been taking notes during the session, be sure to pass them along. Once you’ve done that, all that’s left to do is enjoy the impressed glance from your supervisor as you walk a now calm student out the door.

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