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Finding Place for Printing

Ian Duncan

Abstract: This column examines the benefits and drawbacks of printed papers and digital essays in tutoring scenarios. It considers their roles in the learning of students, and it suggests a compromise by finding the value of both mediums of writing.

Keywords: Print, digital, paper, development, tradition, tutor

The world of writing is changing. Surprise! But it is not really a surprise. Ever since the MLA Guidebook added the citation method for a tweet, I knew that we had entered a new age of writing. Assignments are exploring different rhetorical methods; students are making documentaries, blog posts, even podcasts for class. The traditional, old-school, printed paper method is becoming more and more rare, leaving the tutors (like me) who prefer print to digital wondering, “are we old-school?” Is there any merit to tutoring students who use printed papers? Or should we make the total shift to digital and look oddly on as a student produces a stack of printed papers for our mentoring?

I tutored a student who I will call Ramone. Ramone was a dedicated student from Columbia who, despite only living in the US for a year, spoke English fluently. His writing was great and improved by leaps and bounds every time he came to the Writing center that I was working at. The Writing Center at Weber State University required students to bring a printed copy of their essays to sessions. This policy was supported by the reasoning that, like taking notes, paper essays were more easily annotated, marked, and workshopped. I got to work with Ramone on a weekly basis and I saw him implement the changes that we had discussed the previous week on new assignments. It was satisfying for me as a tutor to see him progress, and I could tell that he was happy with his increasing aptitude with English.

What made this possible?

I believe it was those pieces of paper that he got to take with him after every session. I believe that it was the printed format of his essay that opened the door for us to have a meaningful and driven discussion on what Ramone wanted to improve. I believe it was the errors that we were able to find, circle, and work through that put Ramone on a course of improvement. I believed firmly in the importance of a printed, tangible essay.

As you can imagine, it was a discomfoting adjustment when I came to work at the Utah State Writing Center where students are not required to print off their essays. I was so accustomed to people sliding their papers along the table that I was shocked when someone produced a laptop in my very first session. I almost asked them if they forgot to print it off. I did not know if this would be acceptable, I knew that there was a printer in the Writing Center, so why not use it? But I could not remember a single instance in the *Handbook of Policies and Procedures* where it was stated that printed essays were required. So, I swallowed my perceived tradition, and the session went normally.

I have since tutored several digital essays (digital assignments/papers/essays referring to works not printed out), and I have adapted. Truthfully, I see more digital works than I do paper works. I find great value in digital sessions especially when students are working on assignments that ask them to go beyond the traditional methods of writing an essay. I have seen blog posts, Prezis, and PowerPoints that utilize just a small tip of the rhetorical methods iceberg. In all of this technology I still find myself longing for the printed papers and with good reason.

Returning to Ramone for explanation: Ramone's papers were in their final stages of development. He had his content and organization on the page. What he needed was grammatical and syntactical direction from someone who spoke English as a first language. That may be the value of printed essays. The marks that Ramone recorded on his paper served as examples that he could look at as he internalized the principles he learned at the Writing Center.

This may very well apply to any individual who comes to a writing center, and this is one of the reasons why I *was* such an adamant defender of written over digital. In a digital session, there is a shift from learning principles to addressing the problem right away, and that is due to the ease of pushing the backspace key a few times. Perhaps this requires a change in tutoring

technique; I am far, far, far away from being a perfect tutor. But even still, perhaps this is a problem inherent in the nature of rapid technology. Fix fast, move on, next problem please. A hard, printed copy once corrected becomes a resource for the student to refer back to. I like to call it a footprint of learning. Looking back allows the writer to see where they have been.

But what I *am* now is a believer in the importance and value of both.

Working on printed essays has great value in the development of grammatical, organizational, and analytical skills. It is looking at the trees that make up the forest. Each sentence can be examined. Proper and incorrect grammatical principles can be addressed with direct reference to the paper. Then the tutor can use this as a teaching model. Writers can learn to recognize patterns in their own writing rather than some abstract example found online. They can then take this proofread paper and save it as a reference guide. Concerns of organization can be underlined, traced, and connected visually on written paper, thus creating a web to address the vague student problem of “flow.”

Equally, there is a lot to be explored and appreciated with digital sessions. Easily at the fingertips of the writer, and by extension the tutor, is the bountiful boon of online resources. Tutors and students can access reference guides, library resources, writing instructions, even YouTube videos that can help students become better writers. These could be invaluable during the research phase of the writing process. They are also useful in brainstorming sessions; people typically write faster than they type. They are convenient, portable, and they are “better” for the environment.

With features like the document history in Google Docs, maybe it is only a matter of time until word processing software has sentence-by-sentence tracking that will allow writers to go back and review the development of their essays thusly invalidating one of my arguments. Maybe. But there is something deeply validating about seeing an essay that has been crossed out, rewritten,

rewritten, with filled margins of notes, arrows indicating organizational changes, the underlining of points of emphasis, question marks indicating absolute confusion, and the ominous circles to draw attention. It is as if this is the physical record of the brain at work, and with something so beautiful, people should be remiss to lose it.

Despite my protests, the writing world, and the world of writing that tutors have to tutor in, is leaning away from traditional forms of writing. One assignment that I encountered did not have any writing in it! Instead, this assignment required from me as a tutor an analysis of how well the student used different mediums of rhetoric. I watched their short documentary focusing on the presentation of their argument, the way pathos was employed through music and sound, the ethos of their interview, and the logos of the way their points progressed. No “writing,” yet this fell in the scope of the Writing Center.

Perhaps, ultimately, what it boils down to is printed paper finding a place in the world and in writing and in the tutoring process. Not to be forgotten, certainly, but not to be over-valued in the increasing mediums of writing. And as the world of written language diversifies, as we turn to more and more digital means of expression, as we argue and voice opinions through unique mediums, let us always remember the series of twenty-six letters that, digital or printed, remain at the core and foundation of writing.