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Utah State University

Let Me Write That Down: Tutoring Session Notes

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ENGL 4910

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Abstract: This essay reviews the importance of tutor session notes. It examines different note-taking styles, the purpose behind each, and how those factors are correlated. It also investigates session notes as organizational narratives, wherein the appointment is recorded for the benefit of students, tutors, and administrators.

Keywords: session notes; tutor notes; note-taking styles; tutoring audiences

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Let Me Write That Down: Tutor Notes

After a full thirty minutes of discussion and revision, you sit back and breathe in a sigh of relief. You've gone over every imaginable writing rule, from commas to conjunctions, and your mind is buzzing, still in fight-or-flight mode. Now, imagine how the student you've just tutored feels: they've walked away with all sorts of new information, ideas, and revisions to make. This flash flood of information can be overwhelming for both parties, and that is exactly where session notes come into play.

At surface-level, tutor notes appear to be just a simple summary of a session, perhaps with a few key takeaways and basic advice. However, they serve a much deeper purpose, and cater to an extensively varied audience. In their study of note styles and purposes, Bugdal et al observed that tutors are catering to three separate audiences: students, fellow tutors, and administrators (including instructors and writing center directors). This creates an interesting "rhetorical situation" in which the notes must fulfill different purposes (Malencyk, 88). In her analysis of sample tutor reports from her writing center employees, professor and director Rita Malencyk notes an important similarity between most all of them: each contains the basic structure of an organizational narrative capable of catering to many. Noting the "storytelling" elements of the typical session report, she analyzes the purpose behind this style, and its rhetorical effectiveness on its several audiences (82). Each narrative contains a sequence of events, and gives more than a simple overview of the session, but is tailored to meet the needs of

the readers. She emphasizes that this variety of audiences has required notes to serve a “community-building function.” The notes serve as communication between these groups, something that we don’t always consider when writing them. This realization hit Malenczyk as she was assessing her tutors’ reports, and discovered one unexpectedly addressed to her. This is a perfect example of an easily-overlooked characteristic: sessions extend beyond the actual meeting. Though not all members are necessarily physically present, sessions serve more than just the tutor and tutee. Session notes, therefore, serve a wider purpose as well: they are a story from the workplace and classroom, a record of discussion, thoughts, and interactions.

For students, they provide a “recap of key points and ideally help scaffold their revision” (Bugdal et al, 16). They function as a reference for further editing, almost like a grocery-store shopping list, an inventory of suggestions and ideas, easily accessible for review.

For other tutors, these notes provide a record of past conversations and appointments, allowing them to effectively build a framework that will invite continuing progression. Rather than wasting precious minutes reviewing previous sessions, tutors can plan ahead for a productive appointment, ready to cover new topics and concerns. For administrators and faculty, these notes are a condensed record of appointments, and can be used to review tutoring quality, as well as to monitor student progression. These brief summaries can provide essential information that allow for improvement of tutoring practices, as well as learning opportunities for directors and staff members alike. The content of each may vary, as may the style, but the idea is the same: each is structured to provide details and insight into the session, as though the tutor is writing for all audiences at the same time.

Having determined our target audiences, we can now examine the methods behind effective note-taking. It is important to recognize that there is no single “correct” method for this practice, as each appointment is simply as unique as the students we see coming in. Effective note-taking varies significantly depending on the situation: some students come with specific requests for help, others are simply looking for a chance to brainstorm, and still others simply attend to fulfill an assignment. As such, it is important to tailor session notes to the specific appointment and student involved. When writing out these notes, it might be helpful to consider the following factors: length, content, purpose, and style. In a 2016 study, the efficacy of notes based on these factors was measured, and the following categories of note style were created based on investigation of previous writing center sessions (Bugdal et al).

The “Reporter Note” is a traditional third-person model which serves as a basic report of the appointment. The tutor simply “reports” the session activities, discussions, and plans for further action. The “Bro Note” is more colloquial in style, and includes a more informal, peer-like element, addressed directly to the student. The “Coach Note” is a detailed “game-plan” style for the revision process, while the “Cheerleader Note” features extra encouragement and positivity. The final style, termed the “Quick Note”, is a brief three-sentence summary of the session, accessible and easy to review. Having categorized these note-taking styles, Bugdal and her team surveyed both students and tutors to “better understand how and why they found these notes helpful, to assess what professors saw in the notes they received, and to... consider how to best write notes for multiple audiences” (15). Based on their responses, it was determined that a Frankenstein-like combination of all styles was ideal, with elements of each playing an important role in the creation of an effective note. This optimal style includes both detail and length, as well as a diagnosis of needs and structured plan for revision, but is set in a friendlier,

second-person perspective, almost as a letter from tutor to tutee. These elements will certainly vary based on tutor preference and session irregularities, but the framework is notable: details and tone are key. It is also interesting to note, based on the study's findings, that tutors serve a dual role to their students: as both mentors and peers, providing instruction while simultaneously acting as friend and fellow student.

For the first few months of my own tutoring, I found myself struggling with note-taking. I spent so much time trying to create an effective summary, trying to remember every little detail. Sometimes, writing the post-session report took longer than the session itself! Through trial and error, I've come to find that notes are a wonderful tool for tutors as well as students, and are not something to be afraid of. Now, I look forward to submitting my notes: neatly wrapped packages of encouragement, advice, and details, written as brief stories. So, the next time you sit down to submit yet another set of notes, take a few seconds to reflect. You know exactly who the recipients will be: have you met the needs of each? What details and advice should you provide? Think about the story you are telling, and how you're communicating the necessary intricacies of it. The reach and importance of these session notes is further than you might think.

Works Cited

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