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Changing the Narrative: Proofreading at the Writing Center

Claire Atwood

Abstract: Writing Centers have a golden rule against proofreading. It gives student's the impression that they can send their paper in to a tutor and they'll correct all the grammar and semantics errors for them. This does not facilitate learning on the part of the student, and diminishes a tutor's purpose, to tutor on writing. There needs to be a switch in how we approach a proofreading request, so we don't refuse services to any students. Tutors can find grammatical errors and use them to teach basic principles.

Keywords: Grammar, Proofreading, Tutoring, Principles, Teaching, Learning, Appointments, Techniques, Mistakes, Semantics, Syntax

As writing center tutors, our job is to take in writers from across campuses, address their concerns and send them on their way with new writing skills to develop their writing by themselves. It's a common thought for a student that they can just get a quick check on their paper and be on their way. Sometimes tutors will do the quick grammar check. To combat these expectations for a quick revision check, many writing centers train their tutors to deny any request made about grammar entirely. Why? Grammar is still a vital part of writing and we don't want to overlook a student's needs. Good grammar or a lack of can make or break a piece of writing. We need to face grammar in the same way we face any other writing issue, by tutoring.

A writing center's purpose remains the same wherever you go. Utah State's University Writing Center's mission statement goals includes the following: "Building on writers' strengths and empowering them to express their ideas... Facilitating growth and development throughout all stages of the writing process. Promoting academic inquiry, critical thinking, and the expression of diversity" (USU Writing Center). Juni Kim of Miami University performed a study about student responses to the refusal of a grammar check. In their study, they said that a tutor's job while reviewing a student's paper is to shift focus "from the 'product-focused' instruction to the 'process-focused', conversation based, writing instruction" (Kim 23). Proofreading has been named a "forbidden request" in many writing centers in the past. The major complaint of most writing centers is that students view them as a fix it shops where they can go to get their paper corrected and leave like it never happened. This practice goes against the mission of the Writing Center. As stated by the USU Writing Center, their goals are to facilitate growth, promote academic inquiry and build their strength. No one learns by being hand fed the answers. They learn by seeing the concept in practice and applying it to other situations. The goal is to change the narrative that we can only check grammar. We want to support the writer, not the writing.

On top of not wanting students to leave with a freebie, we want to avoid the label that we are writing experts who will guarantee A's on every essay we look over. Many writing centers encourage their tutors to avoid talking about grades entirely. It's unhealthy for the student and can cause a harmful expectation for the tutor. A student might bring their paper in, not having read it at all but they think their tutor will fix and fine tune everything for them because they're the "expert" and be disappointed if they didn't receive life-changing writing tips. On the other side, the tutor may become overwhelmed with the idea that they need to come into the appointment knowing every rule of grammar and the best writing tips for grade A essays. This mindset is harmful to everyone involved. In an attempt to change the narrative and avoid that situation, Writing Centers everywhere have put rules in place against proofreading and grammar checking sessions. But, according to Kim's study, refusing a student their request, may it be honest or not, may cause animosity for the Writing Center or embarrassment that can cause a student to not return. The question remains: What is the solution for providing proofreading and grammar checks at a Writing Center?

It's the job of the Writing Center to help improve the writing of everyone who walks in the office. If we deny a service to someone, for example a proofreading request, their chances of them returning are slim. They might feel attacked or that they were made to feel unworthy. Instead, we accept their request but drive the conversation in a different way. Instead of completely shutting down the request for a grammar check, we tweak the words by "rejecting the 'proofreading request' and offering to 'discuss and talk about grammar issues'" (Kim 34). Turn the grammar mistakes into examples for them to learn. With a lot of Writing Center appointments being online due to COVID-19, there's a way to go about this issue with a little more ease than in person.

Say a student makes an appointment and submits their paper ahead of time. Their requests include checking for grammar, proper structure and other semantic issues. The tutor agrees to look through the grammar in their essay. Instead of simply checking and correcting any of the mistakes, they highlight the issues and make comments next to them, explaining the issue and how to fix it. For example, the tutor runs across a run on sentence. The tutor might bring it to their attention and ask them how they'd like to fix it, whether that be separating the ideas into multiple sentences or condensing the information. For issues of passive voice, the tutor might point out an area of passive voice and explain how using active voice will make the sentence flow better and be less wordy. Maybe the tutor is already in the appointment and the student requests a grammar check at the end of a session. The tutor might invite the student to read their paper aloud to themselves on their own time. This trick will help them catch sentences with awkward phrasing, natural pauses in the text that need commas or any other sentence level issues that they might not have seen in the initial write up. The idea is to find problem areas and use them to teach basic grammar principles.

For in-person sessions, this can be done on the spot, which may be trickier because the tutor may not be able to get through the entire paper. In these cases, it may be beneficial to the tutor to inquire of the student a specific paragraph that they feel like needs the most help. Typically, if there's real grammar issues that need to be addressed, they will occur multiple times throughout the paper. If a tutor notices any reoccurring problems, they can address it and let the student know to look out for it. This is a great way for them to then revise and apply the grammar principles for themselves. According to an essay written by Megan Chromik at the University of Connecticut, she highlights some proofreading suggestions by stating, "Young then gives these other proofreading techniques: read the paper to someone else, look at the paper

slowly, read backward, word by word to check for spelling mistakes and typographical errors, and keep a list of frequent mistakes to specifically check for in each new assignment” (Young 121-22 qtd in Chromik 11). This is a similar strategy to reading it aloud, but just as beneficial. She also suggests that “The student should learn how to identify this error, what the rule for it is, and how to best correct it” (Chromik 11). Tutors working in Writing Centers everywhere can benefit from teaching instead of correcting so to accept grammar-hungry students and still provide them with a wholesome meeting.

It's important to note that tutors don't need to be grammar experts to pull this off. Tutors should understand that it's okay to have to look up specific grammar rules either before, during or after a session to best answer any questions or make corrections. Although everyone will know if a sentence sounds awkward or a word isn't used correctly in a sentence. Tutors may look up rule specifics to better explain the concept to a student, but they don't need to feel bad if they don't know each and every rule. However, it is good for a tutor to have a handful of useful grammar resources to reference or provide a student with. This will show the student that the tutor is prepared and willing to find and give the student the right information. This will combat the expert stereotype and will hopefully ease some tension for nervous tutors.

How can we incorporate grammar into our sessions in the most beneficial manner possible? By encouraging learning so the student can walk away knowing what mistakes they're making and understanding how to fix them now and in the future. Not only does it benefit the student, but it also sets the standard for a Writing Center that we aren't only a “fix-it” shop. It relieves tutors of the pressure to be experts, having the knowledge that they have resources ready to answer any unknown questions. A Writing Center's purpose is to empower student writing and develop an environment to facilitate growth in writing skills and communication. Sometimes

all a student needs are a confidence boost that their writing is on the right track and offering helpful insight to proofreading requests can improve the writer's desire to keep writing.

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