



Moeller Writing Center

Instructions for Consultations

Compiled by Mr. Eble



Introduction

As a part of the AP Language and Composition class, you'll serve your school community as a writing tutor / consultant (we'll use those terms interchangeably) in the Moeller Writing Center (MWC). In this position, you'll be expected to

- serve a mentor group (or two... if you'd like more credit and prestige) as its tutor / consultant, conducting **at least 10** consultations a quarter at school during M-block or before or after school (per appointment)
- speak to that mentor group to introduce yourself and to present your services to the men of that group
- conduct respectful conversations on writing in a one-on-one consultations (we'll also experiment with group writing conferences)
- schedule these tutorials via email or conversation with the guys in your mentor group
- complete the tutorial / consultation form (see the Moeller Writing Center website for this resource) for each meeting you have
- complete an analysis blog of your quarterly Writing Center work (see MWC website for more information)

Not only will you have formal blog writing and MWC projects each quarter, but your grade will also be affected if you do not complete the requisite number of tutorials. Not completing your required number of tutorials will result in a 3% drop in your final quarter grade.

What is a Writing Center? Why a Writing Center?

A writing center is a space (or, as is the case this year, many spaces) where students can come for writing help ***for any stage in the composition process***: planning, outlining, drafting, publishing, or revising. Whereas English teachers serve as a means for direct instruction and rubric-based feedback on composition, studies and time-tested methods have shown that people in high school and college hone their writing skills in **process-based conversations** with **peers**.

Thus, a writing center serves to advance the writing culture of a school through individual conversations between competent, kind, open consultants and their peers. This dynamic fits particularly well in our House system's semi-egalitarian structure that breaks down borders of the typical high school created by grade level and age. Likewise, in the writing center, you'll serve unknowing freshmen as often as you'll converse with seasoned senior peers; while both groups and all those in between have different needs and skill levels, your presence and work will aid them in improving their writing, both in terms of quality and self-efficacy.

Why Senior AP Language & Composition Students?

Again, you're serving your school community with your talents, which have been fostered by your time in the Honors English track at Moeller. Thus, while you may not consider yourself to be a writing expert, your academic acumen and ability to persevere through Mr. Girard, Mr. Minnick, and Mr. Rose certainly give you the qualifications to serve your peers.

Also, our class will focus particularly on the process of writing in order to help you gain a better understanding of the composition of effective texts that convey messages to distinct audiences. Besides our in-depth study of a variety of texts and their rhetorical situations, your work in the MWC will help you to grasp the skills and concepts necessary to succeed in this class and as a writer beyond this classroom.

Overall, this aspect of the class will benefit you not only as a writer and a reader, but it will also help you to develop various skills that will aid you in the workplace and in your various relationships, most notably listening intently, asking purposeful questions, and creating community with people you may not know well, as well as feeling empathetic for others in their shortcomings and helping them to revel in their successes.

Time for some logistics...

The Socratic Method / Dialogue

Even though he was sentenced to death for corrupting the youth of Athens, Socrates (470-399 B.C.) is hailed today as one of the greatest philosophers in the Western tradition. As the University of Chicago Law School tells its prospective students,

“Socrates engaged in questioning of his students in an unending search for truth. He sought to get to the foundations of his students' and colleagues' views by asking continual questions until a contradiction was exposed, thus proving the fallacy of the initial assumption” (“The Socratic Method”).

While common views of education center on the primacy of the teacher as the main vehicle for conveying ideas and practices, this model places the student at the center, with the teacher serving as a guide through probing questions that help the student reach a conclusion.

Thus, you will serve in this capacity: Asking probing questions to your peers to help them improve their writing.

You may be thinking, “Gee, Mr. Eble, why would I ask a question when I could just tell a kid where to put a comma?” Well, Billy, here’s my answer: We learn best when we have agency and feelings of self-efficacy. In writing in particular, discussing writing helps to improve composition. As Matthew Capdevielle wrote in [a 2012 blog about the role of questioning](#) in his work as director of the University of Notre Dame writing center,

“Our primary purpose in the Writing Center is to engage writers in conversation. And this is not just a means of achieving something through the session—it is in fact the goal. More than anything else, the tutors are working to encourage writers to talk about their writing” (Capdevielle)

In your work as a tutor, then, you should seek to ask open-ended questions that will help the writer reach a conclusion about his writing or his ideas.

What kinds of questions do I ask?

That’s a good question, Billy. In [an excellent article for *Writing Center Journal*](#), researchers Isabelle Thompson and Jo Mackiewicz identify five types of questions typical of a consultation:

1. **Knowledge Deficit:** Questions obtaining information that [tutor] and [student] genuinely does not know.

EXAMPLE: The student may ask “Is this right?” ; the tutor may ask a question to gain information to be sure that his own knowledge is correct (“So why did the main character in this novel act in this way?”)

2. **Common Ground:** [Tutor] questions ascertaining what [student] needs, wants, knows, and understands about an assignment.

EXAMPLE: To assess what the student knows about writing (“Do you know what a noun is?”) or the topic of writing (“How does Lennie die in *Of Mice and Men*?) or to assess what the student knows about the assignment (“What did your teacher suggest for topics for this essay?”)

3. **Social Coordination:** Questions relating to the action of [student] and [tutor] during the conference.

EXAMPLE: “Would you read your paper aloud?” “Would you have your teacher review this and then come back later this week?” “Do you mind if I interrupt you?”

4. **Conversation Control:** Questions relating to the flow of the [tutor-student] dialogue and to their attention.

EXAMPLE: “How are you today?” “How long do you have for this tutorial today?” “Now, how about your thesis statement? Can we look at that?”

5. **Leading and Scaffolding:** Questions leading [student] to an answer, one that the [tutor] already seems to have in mind (typically yes or no answers)...

EXAMPLE: “Do you think you should write about Gatsby’s death here?”

or questions pushing [student] forward in revising or brainstorming. The answer is not “yes” or “no,” but in some incidences [tutor] may have an answer in mind.

EXAMPLE: “How can you strengthen this paragraph?” or “What’s the problem with what you’ve written here?” (Thompson and Mackewicz)

There’s no prescription here for a successful tutorial about when you should ask certain types of questions. However, you should seek to focus on the student’s comments and ideas about his essay while using your own knowledge about writing and the topic to help him craft a better, more communicative essay.

On what parts of writing should I focus?

Another excellent question.

To the right, you’ll see the Composition Pyramid, explained in greater detail in [a handout from the University of Wisconsin Writing Center](#). In short, this model “sets forth the elements of writing in a prioritized structure” (Monta). Notice the elements at the base: voice, purpose, focus, and audience. Each of these elements form the basis of any assignment for a number of different types of texts.

Your most important priority is being sure that the student understands the assignment and has fulfilled its requirements. That fits largely with purpose and audience.

Then, you should consider focus on the ideas level—does the student focus on the appropriate details with a clear thesis?

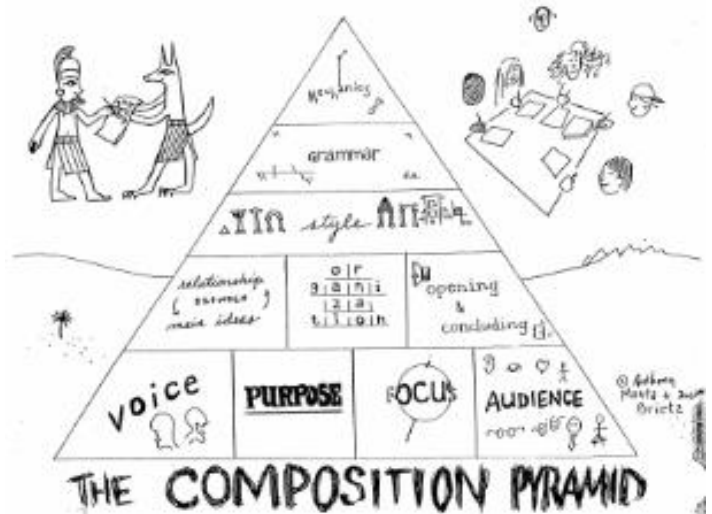
From there, you can work your way up the pyramid, focusing on the student’s relationship between main ideas, organization, opening and closing, MLA documentation, and, finally, style, grammar, and mechanics.

Thus, while you may want to suggest that the student fix that comma, you may have to read through some of the draft to ensure that he actually has a cogent, organized thesis. Remember that writing is a process; as writer Anne Lamott says in her lovely essay “Shitty First Drafts,” “Almost all good writing begins with terrible first efforts” (Lamott).

How is a tutorial structured?

While you should watch the [Indiana University Writing Center Sample Consultation](#), here’s our general structure of steps for MWC consultations:

1. **Introduce yourself to the student:** Younger students may feel uncomfortable, especially if they don’t know you or if they don’t feel confident about their assignment. Not all of you work with your own mentor group (or even your own house), so be sure to be as cordial as possible.



2. Ask the student about the assignment: To help the student, you must know what the heck the teacher asked him to write about; in some cases, students may bring in college essays or pieces of fiction that aren't for a particular class. Either way, find out why the student wants to meet with you so that you can...
3. Ask the student what he'd like to do or set goals: Let the student set the course of the tutorial; while many may not have an idea of what they'd like to discuss, a number of them may have goals for this meeting, so you can thus provide explicit avenues for them to improve their writing.
4. Inform the student that he'll read his essay aloud: This seems odd, but, again, this fits the Socratic Dialogue. Some students will even correct themselves. Also inform the student that...
5. "When appropriate, I'll interrupt!": In the Socratic Dialogue, you have to stop and provide a question or comment for the student. Thus, the best places to stop are at the end of paragraphs so that you can give a student an opportunity to flesh out an idea. For small-level changes, let the student finish the sentence. When you do discuss a constructive change to the essay, ...
6. Let the student do the writing: Again, having the tutor mark comments on the essay would certainly expedite the process of reviewing the writing, but it would diminish the student's agency in the process. Thus, whenever you and the student discuss a change, have the student write it on the draft. In fact, **explicitly mention to the student that he should write the idea on the essay**. Often, a student will say something brilliant that isn't written on the paper; thus, suggest that he repeat it aloud and write it on the essay.
7. Summarize your conversation and complete the consultation form: As part of your duties, you'll document the conversation you have with each student. The form includes an explicit checklist of potential subjects of conversation, but you should **always provide two-three "big level" comments for the student**. Write these on the tutorial form and review them with the student aloud before you...
8. Email form to the student his teacher, and Mr. Eble: Yeah, pretty simple. Then, ...
9. Thank him for meeting and suggest that he schedule future meetings with you: If you have a positive experience with a student (and, hopefully, if his writing and grade reflect your help), you can count on that student emailing you for help again.

Pretty simple, eh? We'll practice in class and review throughout the year.

See the next page for other questions about the MWC.

Other questions you may have

How will students know about the MWC?

A few answers:

1. Mr. Eble has disseminated the information about the MWC structure to the teachers; thus, if a student is struggling with writing, a teacher may refer the student to you.
2. Mr. Eble will send an email every so often about the MWC; he'll also post the MWC page URL in classrooms.
3. Finally, you'll visit your assigned MG at the start of the year to introduce yourself and to describe your services. You should remind students periodically throughout the quarter that you're available

How do I get my ten tutorials a quarter?

Simple: Be a presence in your assigned mentor group, and provide quality help so that students seek you out. Otherwise, you can also email teachers if you're desperate, as they'll provide you with students who need help.

What if I go above and beyond the call of duty by working with more guys?

Nice work! Not only will you win my adulation, but if you work with 20 or more guys in one quarter, you'll earn 1% extra credit on your final quarter grade.

How long should a tutorial last?

While every essay takes its own designated amount of time to read from start to finish, you shouldn't work with a student longer than an hour. Likewise, you shouldn't work with any student any less than twenty minutes.

What if I've already completed my ten tutorials and a student asks me to work with him, or I'm too busy to work with a student at the end of the quarter?

This is simple; while you should certainly seek to help any student who needs it, don't risk your own academic well-being by working with someone who may not have planned ahead of time by contacting you sooner. Just remember: Not completing your required number of tutorials will result in a 3% drop in your final quarter grade.

What if I am overwhelmed with scheduling tutorials from working with one (or two) mentor groups?

Contact Mr. Eble; he'll send an email out to class informing them that extra tutorials are available. Other guys may not have the heavy volume of your mentor group(s).

What if a student just wants me to review his paper via email or tries to drop it off?

Don't do it. Discuss with the student the importance of the conversation and the process. If he persists and gives you guff, please have the student contact Mr. Eble.

Other questions? Please consult the MWC website or Mr. Eble.

This concludes the training document. You'll find a list of the works consulted on the next page.

Works Cited

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- Thompson, Isabelle, and Mackiewicz, Jo. "Questioning in Writing Center Conferences." *The Writing Center Journal*. Fall/Winter 2014: 37-70. Web. 6 August 2014.