Good evening—as you can see from the title, I’ll be talking about the ethics of addressing grammar in the writing center. Before we begin, I want to take a quick poll. How many of you find that grammar is a big concern among the writers who come to your writing center?

In our writing center, tutors frequently comment that international students always request grammar help....and that they end up going line-by-line through the document with these writers...and that often they worry about whether or not they should do this. We have an interesting situation: 75% of our clients are international students and few of our tutors are trained specifically for working with L2 writers. Having that many second language writers raises questions about the ethics of what we say and do with respect to grammar in the Writing lab.

Are tutors obligated to provide the sort of help that is being requested? Is it ethical (or unethical) to address (or to ignore) grammar in a tutorial? In order to answer these questions, I want to begin by talking briefly about two factors that come into play when we consider how to work with grammar in writing centers and then to discuss how these can result in a disconnect between writer, tutor, and paper that leads to our ethical quandary. From there, I will share some early results from an ongoing pilot study I’ve been conducting in the Purdue Writing Lab over the last six months. And I want to end with some useful suggestions about how to address grammar as a writing center.
The first question to ask, when looking at the grammar problem in writing centers, is this: What is legitimately allowed or prohibited by the scholarship on which we base our practical work with writers?

There are 3 categories to examine here: tutor training materials, tutoring literature (especially that related to L2 writers), and stated writing center policy (as per websites and paperwork). In the interest of time, I have chosen only a small sampling of representative material for each.

So—if we look at what tutor training materials say, we find that tutors should not just correct but also explain, and they should not focus only on grammatical errors.

Similarly, L2 literature suggests that tutors should deal with rhetorical matters, educate rather than edit, and resist their impulse to offer too much “help” in the form of proofreading.

Such literature reminds tutors they are not grammar teachers and instructs them that L2 writers can learn to edit on their own when given the necessary instruction.

And, as one writing center director points out, grammar seems to be the only item consistently stressed in the negative, as a prohibition, when it comes to how tutors work with students.

All of this scholarship has made its way into stated writing center policy. To look at just 3 examples:

The Purdue Writing Lab won’t proofread or edit or fix a writer’s mistakes for them, but will address sentence-level errors.

The Univ. of Mich. Center is happy to work on sentence-level concerns but avoids proofreading or correcting papers.

And, in a nod to our hosts today, the Univ. of Notre Dame tutors do not write or edit papers for students.
And, finally, let’s look at writing center paperwork. Our Writing lab uses a form called “Post-Tutorial Notes” to track what tutors cover in a session and to notify instructors about the visit if the writer wishes. This document includes, among other things, a list of topics that could be covered in a tutorial.

As part of my research project, I took a quick survey of writing centers to see whether they used any sort of similar paperwork. Out of 7 schools that responded, 4 of them indicated they had such a list. I realize this is a tiny sample, so I won’t make any sweeping claims. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that 100% of those who had such a list included “grammar” as an item on that list.

So, to summarize what is prohibited and what is allowed by tutor training materials, writing center and L2 literature, and writing center publicity:

- we find distinctions that writers themselves don’t understand (proofreading vs. addressing grammar);
- Apparent contradictions (tutors are not grammar teachers, but writers need to learn);
- and fine shades of meaning that tutors struggle with (don’t prioritize grammar but it is a legitimate request).

These problems with what is offered in literature and policy lead to our second factor: how tutors interpret and use this training.

In our writing lab, where 75% of writers are international students, tutors regularly talk about how much L2 writers ask for grammar help or request editing or proofreading. At the same time, the “no proofreading” mandate has somehow morphed in their minds into “no grammar help”, with the result that tutors (especially new ones) tend to express a lot of angst about whether or not they have been proofreading too much.

The end result is that they are troubled if they address grammar (because it seems to be anti-writing center policy), and they are troubled if they avoid grammar (because it seems to be anti-writer).

In fact, if we place everything on the continuum that tutors appear to have internalized, it would look like this:
On the one side, we have the definite “NO”—things that writing centers do not do, like editing and proofreading. On the opposite side, we have the definite “YES”—things tutors address on a regular basis and are told they should address first. The problem with this continuum is that no one really knows how far to the left to place grammar.

Should it be a NO because we don’t do that in the writing center? Should it be a YES because all the paperwork and web presence allow the possibility? Is it up to the individual tutor to determine for any particular tutorial whether or not grammar is a YES?

The confusions here, and the apparent contradictions in the earlier scholarship we looked at lead to the dilemma tutors face: to correct or not to correct?

We can summarize the ethical dilemma this way: Clients want grammar help and ask for it, writing center documents and websites allow it, instructors often mandate it BUT tutors are hesitant or feel guilty when they “Give in.” The conflict results in a disconnect between what the writer wants, what the paper needs, and what the tutor gives.

It would be easy to say “ethically, if we allow it and clients want it then tutors should automatically give it”. But what really happens in tutorials? Does it match with what tutors say happens?

The research I have been conducting over the last year has shown some startling results.

It turns out that what really happens in tutorials does not necessarily match what tutors think is happening. In the study, I found the following:

First, native speakers ask for grammar help as much as or more than non-Native speakers:
• 7 out of 8 NSs and 6 out of 9 NNS asked for help at the level of mechanics (grammar, sentence spelling)
• 62% of the time, what writers asked for did not match what a paper needed (with writers prioritizing grammar)

Second, if a writer asks for grammar, tutors may not go beyond that, regardless of what the paper needs
• 81% of writers received what they wanted;
• 75% asked for grammar/sentence help
• Only about 50% of tutors provided what the paper itself needed (beyond grammar)
Third, stated tutor agendas and the order of carrying out the agenda may not correspond, with grammar being prioritized in actual fact

- In 2 out of 8 tutorials which had a stated tutor agenda, the tutorial covered completely different topics than what the tutor stated in the agenda;
- In 3 more out of the 8 tutorials the topics were covered in a different order than what was stated in the agenda
- In other words, ½ the time grammar trumps a stated agenda in some manner

- What I found was that addressing/prioritizing grammar tends to happen naturally when the default starting point for working with the document is to read aloud from the beginning—this was true no matter what the stated agenda was. Reading a document aloud from the beginning defaults to a line-by-line editing style.

Overall, what I found in looking at this data was that there are disconnects between writers, tutors, and documents, and at least some of this appears to be fueled by the two factors I spoke of earlier: the allowances and prohibitions and the ways in which tutors internalize these.

Slide 12

Given the disconnects between what is allowed and what happens and between what tutors think happens and what really happens—how should we ethically address grammar in writing center tutorials?

I would like to offer 4 solutions suggested by what I have seen in this research project.
First, it is important to adjust the tutoring continuum that I spoke of earlier. Writer engagement should be what defines a good tutorial rather than the false dichotomy between higher and lower order concerns. It is possible for a tutorial on organization to be problematic (if the writer wants the tutor to just provide the answer for how to organize), just as it is possible for a tutorial focused entirely on grammar to be beneficial to the writer as well as the paper (if the writer is doing most of the work and learning from it).

The question tutors can then ask themselves is not “am I allowed to address grammar”, but rather “is the writer currently engaged in what we are doing” (no matter what that is)?

Second, if we want engaged writers, we must educate them. They should learn to come to the writing center early and often. As one of our graduate tutors put it: “You can’t be too early, but you can be too late.”

Writers need to learn to come for a tutorial days rather than hours before the due date. They need to learn to prioritize the type of work based on which draft they have brought in. And, they need to learn what is possible.

Third, we need to educate tutors specifically about how to avoid the default proofreading of a document. This sort of education should include methods for skipping grammar in order to focus on other concerns AND methods to address grammar usefully when it is warranted (and not just because we are reading the document straight through). I’ll have more to say about how to usefully address grammar in a moment.
And fourth, writing centers need to educate instructors whenever possible. In many universities, instructors have had to suddenly cope with large numbers of L2 writers (and the unique grammar difficulties they bring) with very little advance preparation for doing so. In addition, instructors in various disciplines may know little about how to teach or evaluate writing beyond whatever they have cobbled together over their years of experience.

Writing centers can offer support for instructors in this area, sharing information about the realities of second language acquisition, the realities of all students learning discipline-specific conventions for the first time, best practices for assessing writing in these circumstances, and options for how to deal with grammar in both assignments and assessments.

In my pilot study, the most common reason writers gave for seeking grammar help from the writing center fit the category of “my professor won’t grade anything with grammar errors.” This reason was stated more often than what we commonly presume is the reason, namely, “English is my second language.”

So, now that I’ve told you the problems and the general solutions, let me suggest a mnemonic for addressing grammar within a tutorial that will help tutors avoid simply proofreading while still offering writers the help they request.

First, Evaluate the errors. In a 30-minute tutorial, only a small amount can be covered. By taking time to evaluate the errors first, a tutor can limit the focus (to errors that affect comprehensibility, to patterns of error, or even to errors that concern the writer the most.) Ask writers which sentences they had trouble with or what sort of errors other people (e.g., instructors) have told them they make most often. Start there.

Second, Decide on a method. Will it work to read aloud letting the particular writer hear his or her own mistakes? Would it be better to mark errors with a circle or check and then let the writer correct all that he or she is able to? Can the tutor point out a particular error, talk about how to fix it, demonstrate the fix, and ask the writer to find the next instance of the same type of error?

Third, Involve the writer. At no time should the tutor be doing the majority of the work. There are some exceptions—anything without a rule to follow (e.g., prepositions) must just be memorized. Provide the answer and move on to focus on things the writer can work on. Let the writer fix what he or she is able to. You’ll notice that all of those methods I mentioned included the words “the writer” in them.
Fourth, Teach proofreading strategies. Once tutors have identified a problem area, they should teach the writers how to find that problem on their own. For instance, if the problem is with subject verb agreement, suggest to the writers that they underline all verbs and then go back and check each one against its corresponding subject. Tedious? Yes. Effective for that particular problem? Also Yes. I should note here that it is also important to explain to writers that you are teaching them proofreading strategies so that they will be able to proofread on their own. In other words, be sure the writers not only know how to do what you are teaching them, but also what to call it.

And lastly, Specify further work. Send the writer off with ways to continue the work begun in the tutorial. Perhaps you covered how to find and correct those subject verb agreement problems. Don’t spend the whole tutorial combing through the paper to find every problem verb. Once the writer has understood how to find the problem areas and make the corrections, add that to the list of “things to do on your own” and move on in the tutorial. When the writer leaves, remind him or her to finish going through the paper to make that particular type of correction.

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With increasing international student enrollment in many American universities and colleges, the issue of grammar in the Writing Center will not be going away anytime soon. Rather than fear it, ignore it, circle cautiously around it, or leave it for individual tutors to grapple with on their own, it would behoove us to address it squarely....and to do so, as much as possible, with all the stakeholders involved.

Thank you.
Slide 19  
3 slides following with details/charts of pilot study information in case anyone asks.

Slide 20  
Limited number of graduate tutors.

Slide 21  
50% of the time the pre-consultation reflection and the stated client agenda do not match, with stated agenda prioritizing grammar.

81% of the time the writer receives some version of the sort of help requested (sometimes with a different order and fewer or more topics addressed (Next Slide details this)

What the tutor says in the agenda does not always match what the tutor does in the tutorial (some complete differences, some differences in order or amount of topics)

Writers generally do NOT know what a paper needs (other than grammar)

50% of the time tutors did not address a paper’s actual needs beyond grammar either (although this could be due to timing of tutorials with respect to due dates—I have not yet addressed this variable).

Slide 22  
All 4 bars on the left mean that the tutor provided some version of what a writer asked for, with the majority covering more topics than asked for and in a different order. The right-most bar shows the number that addressed different topics entirely.