

1-1-1988

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Susan M. Hubbuch

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Recommended Citation

Hubbuch, Susan M. (1988) "A Tutor Needs to Know the Subject Matter to Help a Student with a Paper: _Agree _Disagree _Not Sure," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2, Article 5.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1133>

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A Tutor Needs to Know the Subject Matter to Help a Student with a Paper: ___Agree ___Disagree ___Not Sure

Susan M. Hubbuck

It should be fairly apparent that this essay was inspired by a questionnaire. I can't promise that my title reproduces exactly the wording of my source; by the time this paper began germinating in my mind, the original had long since been mailed back to the university that was seeking help in designing a writing center for its campus. But I remember very clearly coming to this item, at first checking "disagree," and then scribbling all sorts of qualifications in the margin. What follows is the way I would have liked to respond to the question "Do tutors need to know the subject matter to help students with papers?"

Those of us in charge of writing centers, especially writing centers that serve students across the curriculum, are forced to answer this question in some fashion in order to get on with practical, everyday matters like hiring and training tutors. But exploring the advantages and disadvantages of "knowledgeable" and "ignorant" tutors soon leads us to broader, more theoretical issues about the nature and purpose of our operations—issues such as our perception of writing as product and writing as process; our perceptions of the role of the tutor (and, by extension, the writing teacher); and finally, our perception of the relationships between thinking and writing, specifically, relationships between specific modes of discourse and the academic disciplines in which they are used. For reasons both practical and theoretical, therefore, I believe it is worthwhile to play out the ramifications

of novice writers working with tutors who are knowledgeable in the subject matter and with those who are not.

My views are the product of ten years of experience in the Writing Center of Lewis and Clark College, a liberal arts college with an undergraduate enrollment of about 1,600 students and about 600 students enrolled in several masters' level programs. The Center was established in 1977 with two goals: to serve students directly by providing one-to-one conferences on writing and to develop faculty members' skills in working with student writing. In 1985 we formalized our efforts to integrate writing throughout the curriculum by establishing writing-emphasis (W) courses. Subject to approval of the Writing Committee, these W courses are regular classes in the college's twenty-two departments that require a minimum of 15-20 pages of writing in the eleven-week term, and in which instructors provide feedback on this writing throughout the term. There are, of course, classes that are not designated as W courses that also require written work.

During the past ten years I have spent about seventeen hours a week each academic year working with students on papers from a variety of departments and on assignments that range from those that ask students to respond to course material in an informal, personal way to those that require students to write in the formal modes used by scholars in a particular field or discipline. I work with students in various stages of the writing process—from the preliminary stage of figuring out how they want to approach an assignment to close, final editing of a draft. I may begin a hypothetical work day helping a student who is wrestling with a series of study questions for an ethics class, then have a conference with a student who is putting together a research paper on the etiology of warts for a microbiology class, followed by a conference with a student who is finishing up a case analysis for a business class. This hypothetical day might end with a student who is collecting data for a study of gender differences in communication styles and one who is doing a critique of a piece of Baroque sculpture for art history. Needless to say, I hardly consider myself an expert in any of these fields.

But ignorant as I may be in these academic disciplines, one thing my experience has taught me is that I cannot afford to be ignorant of the fact that, even within the restricted world of academic discourse, there are many modes of writing, each with an attendant style and rhetorical conventions. Thus I will begin my exploration of the ignorant and knowledgeable tutor with this caveat: regardless of the level of knowledge a tutor has of an academic discipline, he or she must be aware that the universe of discourse has a varied and diverse terrain. I believe, for example, that all tutors must be aware that different fields have different styles of documenting sources, even if they don't know the particulars of all these styles. Tutors need to be

aware that, in addition to more generic critical papers and library research papers, academic writing includes more specialized genres like primary data reports, reviews of the literature, ethnographic studies, and case studies. They also need to be aware that such genres carry expectations of authorial stance, organizational patterns, and written conventions that may well vary from field to field. Moreover, tutors must recognize that there is a meaningful relationship between surface characteristics of a discourse mode and the epistemology that defines that field. To put it another way, a tutor cannot afford to be parochial, entering a session with a student with an inflexible, monolithic concept of “good” writing.

Clearly, a tutor who is working with a student in a Social Theory class cannot approach the session with the attitude that sociological jargon is destroying the English language. In the short run, such an attitude would be detrimental to the student’s effort to produce an effective sociology paper. But the issue is not simply pragmatic. The attitude that there is only one way to write effectively, whether it is adopted by a literature major or a biology major or a communications major, simply ignores the pluralism of the world of existing written texts; it points up an ignorance that a person who works every day with writing cannot afford to be guilty of. Even if a writing center staff were divided into cadres of tutors with expertise in certain academic disciplines, each tutor must not only recognize that across disciplines there are many modes of writing but also must respect the integrity of the formal writing done in different fields. My thinking along these lines will become clearer as I pursue this exploration into the advantages and disadvantages of the ignorant and knowledgeable tutor.

I don’t think I have to belabor the advantages a tutor has if he or she knows the technical issues related to writing in a given field or discipline. Sessions are more effective if a tutor can quickly give a student the basics of the APA documentation system or explain the divisions of a primary data report to a novice in the natural sciences. Moreover, if a student does not have to continually define technical terms for a tutor or explain procedures that are basic in a particular field, the session will focus more directly on the specific problems a student is having with a particular paper.

The major advantage, however, that the knowledgeable tutor has is that he or she knows the appropriate questions to ask. A field of study is defined not only by the object of study of a community of scholars but also by the type of questions these scholars ask in order to elicit and to evaluate information about that subject. Thus a tutor who is knowledgeable in a field can be especially helpful to a student by guiding that student to ask questions of his/her subject that are appropriate to the field and by helping the student develop answers to such questions that are in line with the accepted methodologies of that field.

I become very aware of these advantages in those sessions where students are working on papers for literature classes, the field in which I was formally trained. The draft of an analysis of *Henry IV, Part I* by a senior psychology major may seem flatfooted to me, but experience has taught me that the problems I have with her draft could be traced back to her inexperience with or ignorance of the premises, methods and aims of literary criticism. In a session with such a student my approach will be to help her generate the type of study her literature professor expects by talking with her directly about the assumptions and aims of the literary critic and by guiding her to ask of the text the kinds of questions an expert in Shakespeare would ask.

This issue of asking questions appropriate to the discipline quickly leads to the larger issue of the role of tutors in a writing center—and, perhaps, by extension, the role of the writing teacher. A tutor's expertise can become a two-edged sword. Not only is the knowledgeable tutor able to provide a student with necessary technical information about written conventions but also to evaluate the quality of the work the student is doing. The disadvantages of this fact were brought home to me several weeks ago in a conversation I had with a recent graduate in International Affairs who was acting as a T.A., helping this year's seniors with the theses they are required to write. Tony's inclinations in sessions with these students was to tell them what to do. It is a logical response; when an expert is asked a question for which he has an answer, it is natural for him to give that answer. But direct answers, while they can be beneficial to the student as a novice in a particular field, may be detrimental to the student's development as a writer and active learner. For example, a knowledgeable tutor like Tony may encourage students to pursue certain topics based on his own particular scholarly interests or biases and may discourage other lines of inquiry, even though these other topics are potentially viable and are really what the student wants to investigate.

What I worry about in such sessions are the general effects an authoritative stance can have on novices who, by definition, are tentative and groping. I worry that, in the presence of a knowledgeable tutor, students may perceive that they are being told what to do—and welcome that fact. Black and white answers given to questions surrounding a writing assignment can too easily reinforce students' perceptions of writing itself as a series of rights and wrongs and can drive students further into a passive stance toward the whole writing process.

If space were not limited, I'd elaborate further on this point, but for now let me simply say that my work with students in the Writing Center over the past ten years has convinced me that the greatest barriers most students face in their quest to be effective writers is their own passivity. The more they get the message of "rights" and "wrongs" in the context of writing, the stronger

becomes their notion that stylistic issues are simply a matter of formulas and the less likely they are to see that conventions are in reality rhetorical strategies chosen and manipulated for given purposes. Moreover, obsessed with the idea of right and wrong answers, they are inclined to put a brake on their own thinking. In the face of an expert, they are inclined to shrink into passive sheep.

And it is in this context that I see the clear advantages of the ignorant tutor. Whereas the knowledgeable tutor is always tempted to jump to an evaluation of a proposed thesis or hypothesis in light of the tutor's knowledge of the field, inadvertently sending all sorts of negative messages to the student about her ignorance or incompetence, an ignorant tutor's major objective must necessarily be simply to comprehend the student's ideas. Because the tutor has little more than a cursory knowledge of the field, her focus in the session must be on attempting to understand the argument the student is making.

There are, of course, potential problems here. It is possible that the session could be wasted as the student tries to give the tutor a crash course in the subject matter. While the tutor will have to elicit information about the class material in the course of a session, it need not be in the form of "background material." In fact, if the tutor keeps the session focused on the assignment or the paper, his "need to know" will function directly as an advantage in the student's efforts to write the type of paper his instructor wants—and, at the same time, will act as a very positive lesson in the student's education as a writer. First of all, because the ignorant tutor has no expertise in the subject matter, the tutor has no choice but to focus on the intrinsic logic of the student's ideas. In his efforts to comprehend the argument the student is making, the tutor must have the student spell out for him all of the student's immediate premises; he must ask for the student's definitions of key terms; he needs to have the connections the student is making between parts of the argument explicitly stated.

Often the student will balk at such demands, insisting either that such information is "obvious" or that "the prof already knows this." But, for academic writing, the instructor's knowledge is really a moot point. Regardless of whether the paper is a critical study for a history class or a research write-up in biology, one of the basic characteristics of scholarly writing in all disciplines is that a paper will be self-contained. It is a convention in all fields that the author will give readers her immediate premises, that she will explicitly indicate the significance of the work she is doing, and that she will lay out her argument in full detail, including all evidence that she is considering and all the connections she is making among ideas. Having no choice but to insist that the student provide him with all of this material, the ignorant tutor is enabling the student to see precisely what every instructor expects to see spelled out in a paper.

So, if we accept the premise that, in academic writing, a paper sinks or swims on the coherence and completeness of the argument it makes, the ignorant tutor, by virtue of her ignorance, is just as likely—perhaps even more likely—than the expert to help the student recognize what must be stated in the text. In fact, a reader's close acquaintance with the material may impede a student's development in recognizing the demands of expository writing. Occasionally students will bring in papers that have already been graded by the instructor. I have seen instances where an instructor has given a high grade to an argument that appeals to me as being too general and disconnected. The differences in our evaluations can be explained, I think, by the instructor's knowledge of the subject matter and my lack of it. Especially if a paper follows closely the instructor's own thinking—and her lectures—on the material, it is easy to see how she has unconsciously supplied information that the student left out or how she has inferred relationships which I cannot see because I don't know the subject. I have certainly noted this phenomenon in re-reading papers that were written for literature courses I taught years ago.

In looking at papers that have already been graded by course instructors, I also see instances where comments cease to be comments and turn into revision. All of us are aware of the fine line that exists between responding to the ideas embodied in a text and actually changing the ideas in a text, between enabling students to write their own papers and appropriating their papers. Anyone who works with student writers is always coping with the problem of responsibility: where does the tutor's responsibility begin and end? It is a question we discuss constantly in our staff meetings. Over and over I tell my tutors that the responsibility for the papers lies with the author. The writer must take responsibility, finally, for having done the necessary research, for knowing the relevant theories and methodologies, for determining what she is going to say. It is the instructor of the course, not my tutors, whose job it is to evaluate the work the writer has done in light of the field itself. It is the student, not my tutors, who must bear responsibility for a paper that, logical as the argument may seem, has missed the mark. Students must take responsibility for their own writing.

Our responsibility, I say, is to enable students to become effective writers—to say clearly, in a manner appropriate to the audience, what they want to say. It is in the area of students' conceptions of writing, in their ability to see and manipulate the language and rhetorical strategies to certain ends, in their ability to think logically, that our concern lies. But the line is a fine one, and one that can perhaps be drawn by distinguishing between writing as product and writing as process.

Of course the end of any writing process is a final product; we write to produce a text. But the more preoccupied we become with a paper as a

representation of an idea, the more tempted we are to become personally invested with the text *qua* text. I believe that this temptation is stronger for the knowledgeable tutor than for the ignorant one. Because of her involvement with the subject matter and her ability to judge the quality of the ideas that are evolving, the knowledgeable tutor is more inclined, in a session with a student, to think of writing in terms of the final product. But the ignorant tutor is necessarily forced back into process. When a student is working with an ignorant tutor, the tutor is not playing the role of expert/evaluator, but of fellow inquirer. In such sessions it is the student who is really the expert on the subject matter; the tutor's role is that of sounding board or critical reader, and in her attempts to comprehend what the student is saying, she is serving the student's development as a writer in several ways. Rather than automatically ruling out certain lines of inquiry, for example, the tutor can encourage the student to explore all sorts of potential approaches to the topic. The only brakes the ignorant tutor can put on such explorations come from the parameters of the assignment and the basic logic of what the student is saying. In having to explain her argument to an ignorant tutor, the student is not only satisfying the demands of academic writing but also clarifying and honing her own thinking. The process-oriented nature of a session with an ignorant tutor enhances the possibility that the student will see writing as the process of developing his/her own ideas on a topic.

Finally, the very ignorance of the tutor often forces the student to take responsibility for his/her paper. Often I must respond to students' questions with "I don't know." At that point the student and I must discuss together strategies the student could use to find needed evidence, or figure out the appropriate format for a paper, or respond to stylistic questions. As an ignorant tutor, I find that I am in an excellent position to help students see that many of their questions do not have simple right and wrong answers, but raise issues that the student must make decisions about, based on their conception of the purpose, context, and audience of the specific paper they are writing.

At this point it is probably apparent that this ignorant tutor of mine, while she is not an expert in literary criticism or biology or art history, is not so very ignorant after all. In addition to being aware that the style and organizational patterns of a specific paper will be determined by the genre and field in which the student is writing, she is an individual with a logical, inquiring mind who cultivates intellectual skepticism that I usually characterize as the "Emperor's New Clothes" approach to ideas and papers. The student may insist that he knows what he is talking about; he may quarrel that the instructor will know what he means; but in a session with a student my ignorant tutor's basic concern is that *she* comprehend the argument the student is making.

If I were asked to summarize in a word what I consider the best qualification for a tutor, I would respond by saying that he or she should be literate in a way that the ideal liberal arts education defines literacy. Of course it is no accident that I myself received a liberal arts education or that I am working with students in a liberal arts college. My biases are evident. But this liberal arts education has served me well as a writing tutor working with students on papers that investigate the etiology of warts, analyze business cases, critique a piece of Baroque sculpture, report on data gathered on gender differences in communication styles. . . .

Susan M. Hubbuch has taught writing for twenty years. In 1977 she established the Writing Center at Lewis and Clark College, a program she continues to direct. She has also helped to develop the writing-across-the-curriculum at Lewis and Clark and has written a process-oriented guide entitled *Writing Research Papers Across the Curriculum* (Holt, Rinehart, and Winston).