



The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors

Third Edition

Leigh Ryan

University of Maryland, College Park

BEDFORD/ST. MARTIN'S

BOSTON ♦ NEW YORK

2007

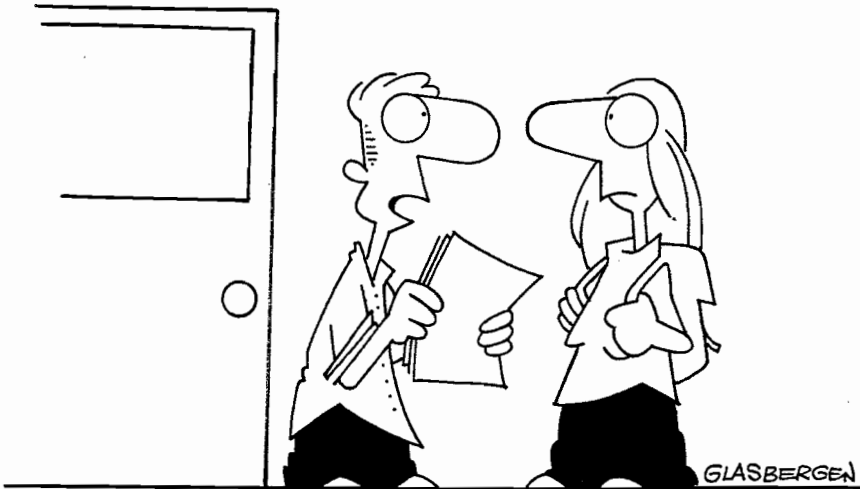
CHAPTER 1

Being Professional

Tutoring students in writing can be an exciting, enjoyable, and rewarding experience. It is also a professional activity involving both responsibility and trust; therefore, tutors must observe certain principles of conduct in their relationships with students, teachers, and other tutors. Because you may begin tutoring at the same time that you start reading this book, you should be familiar with these principles at the outset.

As a tutor, you will help many friendly, hardworking, conscientious students become better writers. But you may occasionally encounter some difficult situations: One student may want you to do some of the work on a paper; another may want you to agree that a teacher has unreasonable expectations; still another may want you to predict a grade. The following principles will help you handle such situations.

1. *Teachers need to be sure they are evaluating a student's own work; therefore, never write any part of a student's paper.* Instead of writing sections of students' papers for them, use guiding questions and comments to help them recognize their difficulties and come up with their own solutions. Though you may sometimes recast a sentence or two as an example, be very careful about how much of the students' work you revise. If you need more examples, make up some or find an exercise in a grammar handbook or guide to writing. If you find yourself tempted to revise too much of a student's work, put your pencil away.
2. *Never comment negatively to students about a teacher's teaching methods, assignments, personality, or grading policies.* As a tutor, you will hear students' comments about instructors, assignments, and grading policies. Recognize, however, that you cannot know what actually transpires in a classroom; even if you did, it is simply not professional to pass judgment. Keep in mind that students are relating their impressions or interpretations, and these may be incomplete or even inaccurate. More often than not, there are valid explanations for what may appear to be a problem. What seems to be an incomplete or imperfect description of an assignment, for example, may be based on previous assignments or may have been elaborated in class. If you truly cannot understand an assignment or grading policy, send the student back to the teacher.



“I used a \$3,000 computer, a \$1200 laser printer and a \$300 word-processing program—and I still got a D on my term paper!”

© 1996 Randy Glasbergen. Reprinted with permission from www.glasbergen.com.

3. *Never suggest a grade for a paper.* Some students may ask a question like “Do you think this paper’s good enough for a B?” Other students may pressure you to suggest a grade, but assigning grades is the teacher’s job, not the tutor’s. Evaluating writing is a subjective matter, and your assessment may not be someone else’s. Remember, too, that you cannot know all that has been discussed or explained in class, so you may have incomplete information about the assignment. Sometimes teachers outline criteria for papers on early assignment sheets. They may not repeat these criteria on later descriptions of assignments but may nonetheless hold students accountable for them. Even if a paper seems well written, it is wise to be judicious with your praise. A student may interpret your comment that this is a “good paper” to mean that it deserves an A.

Suggesting a grade can lead only to trouble. A student’s receiving a lower grade than you mentioned could create conflicts among the teacher, the student, and the writing center. A student who receives a higher grade than predicted by a tutor might come to doubt the writing center’s judgment.

4. *Never criticize the grade a teacher has given a paper.* Just as suggesting a grade for a paper can lead to trouble, so too can acknowledging to the student your disagreement with a grade. Sometimes a student unhappy about a grade will actively seek support from a tutor for his or her dissatisfaction. Even if you agree with the student, do not say so. Recognize that you may

not be aware of all the factors that led to the grade. Students should first try to resolve concerns about grades with the teacher, then, if necessary, talk with other appropriate people.

5. *Honor the confidentiality of the tutoring relationship.* Idle comments — whether praise or complaint — made about a student to others may get back to the student. Or the comments may be overheard by others who visit the writing center, making them wonder what will be said about them when they leave.

Being engaged in a professional activity has other implications for your behavior with students, and it also influences how you conduct yourself as part of a group, how you relate to other tutors, and how you function as a representative of the writing center to the rest of the campus. To make apprehensive students feel more comfortable, writing centers tend deliberately to project a cordial, inviting, relaxed atmosphere. Tutors reflect this ambience through their casual friendliness. Occasionally, however, they may be tempted to behave in too casual a manner, forgetting for the moment the professional nature of tutoring.

When students arrive, be pleasant and courteous. They may feel uneasy about showing their writing to a tutor, and those coming in for the first time may be unsure about writing center procedures. Make sure everyone feels welcome. Although you may intend it as a gesture of goodwill, being flippant or sarcastic may put some students off.

Even if you are tired or under stress from school or job responsibilities, show a willingness to work with each student who comes in. Do not argue with other tutors about whose turn it is or throw a student up for grabs with a comment like “Who wants to work with this one?” Such behavior might well make a student wonder what kind of help a grudging tutor will deliver.

It is fine to be relaxed at the writing center, but excessively casual behavior — conducting intensely personal conversations, for instance — may offend students, especially those who come from different cultural backgrounds. You should also be considerate of other tutors. Delinquency or carelessness on your part might make someone else’s job more difficult. Being professional means reporting for work on time or calling beforehand if something prevents you from being there as scheduled.

Tutors and students often work in close quarters, so be considerate and keep your voice down. If you have a few idle moments, take the initiative to engage in a helpful task. Beyond tutoring, there are often many odd jobs that need doing to keep the writing center running smoothly.

To the students you encounter, you represent the writing center. They judge the writing center not only by the competency of your tutoring but also by the attitudes, courtesy, and respect you display toward them and your co-workers.

This is the website for Martyn Bedford award-winning novelist and creative writing tutor. My first novel for young adults is Flip. Find out about me and my work. It was nominated for the 2017 CILIP Carnegie Medal, was selected for The Guardian's Best New Children's Books Guide for 2016, won the 13+ category in the Coventry Inspiration Book Awards and was a top-three YA download on [loveread4kids](#). Sneak preview . . . to hear me read an exclusive extract please scroll to the link on the Teenage Novels page.