

Where Writing Meets Humanity ©

MMS

12/10/2025

What is tutoring? I hardly know myself and I'm about to write a whole philosophy about it. But what I do know is that tutoring is a fundamentally human, relational experience built on empathy, respect, and shared effort. As a basic understanding, tutoring is an experience between two people (typically), one being the tutor and the other being the tutee, in which the tutor assists the tutee with whatever subject the tutee brought to the table (in this essay, our primary subject is writing). And as ordinary as this process sounds, it is deeply personal and precious. As a tutee, to ask for someone's input and opinion on your writing is a responsibility for the tutor not to tread lightly with because you quite literally hold power over "what is correct". While yes, there are ways to be "correct," a lot of writing is not technically correct but still is excellent writing. So, it is a difficult line as a tutor because lots of writing is subjective, and you don't want to dismiss the tutee's writing, but you do want to help guide and mold the structure of their writing. Which leads me to the main goals of tutoring: build an understanding of what the tutee needs help with, create a structured and easily approachable outline (if they have content, reading that and molding a structure to enforce their writing), and above all, do not diminish the tutee's writing confidence, only try to add.

If I could create a perfect tutor—well, I suppose they tried and ended up with unintelligent AI, and that goes further to show that AI isn't perfect either. So, let's go down one step and shoot for the ideal tutor. In my head the ideal tutor is someone who genuinely likes to write, first and foremost. Following that, I believe the tutor should have most of these qualities: empathy, patience, kindness, being non-judgmental, open-

minded, a sense of confidentiality, the ability to cater to one's needs, and not being afraid to admit their own faults.

Empathy is a crucial quality which is a basis to a lot of these other qualities. But it is the root which spreads to each branch. Don't be foolish to mix this up with sympathy either. Sympathy is when you feel "for" someone, you can take an outside lens into that person's life and feel pity. Empathy is truly feeling and understanding someone's situation as if it were your own. And I don't mean that you have to get this tutee's whole life story, just that when you read a piece from them, to understand that the tutee trusts you enough to be vulnerable and show their writing to you (another peer). That can feel terrifying, let alone imagine the content in their paper is deeply personal. And what if that person is an overthinker? They might immediately conclude that you will share their paper with others or talk behind their back. To rephrase and put you in that perspective: what if you came into a session as a tutee with a personal essay, would you want your tutor talking about it outside your session? Probably not, so putting yourself in their shoes and leading with empathy is the foundation of my ideal tutor.

All of the other qualities, like patience, kindness, being non-judgmental, open-minded, having a sense of confidentiality, the ability to cater to one's needs, and not being afraid to admit their own faults, stem from empathy. Patience, you need to understand that everyone is at a different level in writing abilities, and that some people need more or less time being helped. Being kind, I mean this more in the way you speak, the way you say things matter; would you want your tutor giving blunt and rude feedback. Maybe yes to blunt, but you can be blunt and kind. Being non-judgmental and open-minded are similar, another understanding that everyone is different and has

different views than you, so don't be so quick to judge without listening and hearing the person out. A sense of confidentiality, what is talked about in session stays between the tutor and tutee (except in cases where the tutee states or writes they are actively causing harm to themselves or others). The ability to cater to one's needs, which inherently is attached to being a tutor, but meaning that you can work with the tutee with whatever they might bring to the table. And last, but not least, not being afraid to admit your faults; you are human, you are not perfect. Some days the workload will feel overwhelming, other days it might feel like a breeze in the wind. It is okay to ask for help when those days feel like boulders being stacked on your shoulders. So, do not be afraid to admit, because anyone that says you don't have faults, is screaming on the inside for someone to notice. So, before you explode, ask another tutor if they could cover you for 5-10 minutes, and do what you need to do to calm down.

With this focus on empathy, it leads me into the shared responsibilities of both the tutor and tutee. I believe the tutor and tutee have overlapping duties that they are responsible for during their blocked off session time. So, to kill two birds with one stone, for the tutor and tutee: you should always be on time to your appointment, and you know what they say, "On time is late, early is on time" (Vince Lombardi). Respect is a two-way street, whether it's valuing each other's time committed to the session or the way you communicate a point to one another, it is a subconscious understanding which will affect the session, in a positive way, if both parties are on board. Being prepared, for the tutor that may look like having a doc open and ready to write down ideas/topics to then share with the tutee. And the tutee should go into the session knowing what they want to accomplish and the context of their assignment.

Going in-depth, being on time is crucial because it sets the precedent of how you value the tutee's time but also your own. Giving yourself a few minutes to prepare yourself, mentally, physically, or whatnot, sets the tone. Imagine you are late for a session and you are struggling to get things together; the session is going to feel like chaos because you will try to rush everything else in the time remaining. It then turns into a lack of being prepared. Since you were late, you did not have time to prepare, which leaves you not being respectful to your tutee. In all, respect is the most important "responsibility", even if that's not a typical sounding one. It is your job to respect the time that you said you would commit to the tutee. But I am not saying it is only your responsibility, again respect is a two-way street.

But respect can only get you so far, you of course have to be prepared. And not just headspace prepared—tutoring approach prepared. How and why will you use certain techniques. A method that stood out to me was the non-care/care approach, more thoroughly explained by Peter Elbow's "The Need for Care: Easy Speaking onto the Page Is Never Enough". The "non-care" (freewriting) is about producing language freely and spontaneously without the immediate concern for correctness, structure, or quality. It can look like following tangents to explore ideas organically, turning off the inner editor, and engaging in a more intuitive and creative way of thinking. The "care" (revising/editing) is when the conscious control, scrutiny, and careful decision making is up to bat. This involves stepping back from the writing to evaluate objectively, using logical, critical thinking to add shape, organizing the text into a coherent piece, and cutting off any "dead weight" or filler words/phrases. The core of this method is that both mental processes are essential for effective writing, but that they must be separate

during the writing process for it to truly work. This practice aligns with my belief that writers need both freedom and structure—just as tutors must balance care with guidance.

I know that I fall short and don't typically use this method myself, due to deadlines and because of the normalized student mindset of "I have to do this now and submit it right away". But when I do write using this method, I notice I allow myself to be more creative while still having an objective point drawn throughout my writing. Which is why I would incorporate this method into my tutoring sessions, especially if the student is first starting their paper. This approach offers a creative outlet where students are allowed to write freely but then are able to turn their thoughts and ideas into tangible academic discourse. And the academic half of this does not need to be a solo process, I think working with tutee with what they have from the "creative outlet" can be extremely beneficial to then help them structure it in a way that will work in the academic setting.

Another way of being prepared is understanding that you will work with many different people with language barriers. And you don't want to silence their voice or writing, but in the academic setting there needs to be a particular threshold to maintain dominant academic discourse. In "Why I insist on standard English in my classroom" by Qamar Shafiq, his defense of teaching standard English insists that correction does not erase identity. He frames standard English as a tool that expands opportunity (especially for multilingual or working-class students), and his narrative shows that one can retain home language and dialect while gaining access to dominant discourse through explicit instruction. The challenge that appears is balancing that access with

respect. I understand the critiques of enforcing academic English, especially its ties to power. However, my goal as a tutor is to prepare students for the systems they will navigate, while still affirming the value of their own linguistic identity. Reinforcing standard English costs the risk of fortifying linguistic hierarchies and shaming cultural identity. But to ignore academic convention, would be rather inappropriate as a tutor because it risks leaving students unprepared for systems that gatekeep through language. When students understand the mechanics and the politics of language, they gain literacy and agency.

An ethical approach to assist multilingual tutees would be using Elbow's method of writing. Again, it allows the student to write the way they want or how it comes naturally to them, and with a tutor we can help the tutee understand why particular phrasing works and doesn't work in academic writing.

That does not mean I am against writers using their "own language" while writing, I just believe there is a time and place. For instance, I would expect a research paper to be informational to get facts and analysis from the writer. But in free writing I would encourage writers to be creative and not be bound to their academic voice. Just like any space or the type of people you are with, code switching should be relevant in the sense of knowing how and when to use your academic voice.

Each academic voice will and should sound different. That is one thing that never struck me right; if everyone is different then why do we expect them to have a similar academic voice. I believe that everyone has a unique academic writing style and voice. When I think of academic writing, I have a simple "formula" in my head. Your claim (something you think is true) plus evidence (that is relevant to some aspect of your

claim) plus your analysis (describing in your words how the evidence you provided proves your claim) forms the basis of academic writing. If you can prove your claim with relevant evidence and thoughtful analysis, I consider that effective academic writing.

Academic writing should sound different from one another because we all explain topics in different ways. As for your audience, academic writing should always be aimed towards as if you were describing everything to your professor, because that is who is reading and grading your academic writing.

The goal of this is not to explain academic writing though, I mean it is a bit but moving on to focus on more of what the tutors can do in the writing center to create a place that feels comfortable, approachable, and my main life philosophy: empathy.

I touched on this earlier on, and just to reiterate, empathy is a main background quality that I would prefer all tutors leading with it. Being able to sit down with a person regardless of background, language, or where they are with writing, already shows a level of empathy that not everyone has. But to go beyond that and create a dynamic that the tutee feels comfortable to expand on discourse, to keep on seeking you out as a resource, and trusts you and your words is such a profound feeling and experience. I can't even begin to describe the way I feel after I have a tutoring session (I mean I can and I am explaining that, but it's just a phrase). After every session I have felt nothing but connection, purpose, and meaning. And that's what makes the tutoring experience so worth it, and so human.

After one of my first solo tutoring sessions, I remember how bonded I was with the person and their essay outline, and how heartfelt it was to hear "thank you". Oh, how simple it is but so very powerful the human connection is.

Which raises an important question about the role of AI in tutoring (as I said earlier about AI being dense). In a peer reviewed article, “Generative AI vs. instructor vs. peer assessments: a comparison of grading and feedback in higher education” by Maya Usher, she assesses the significance of the integration of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) in providing feedback to student projects. The students who engaged in this study were in a group project which involved three phases: questionnaire development, peer assessment, and chat-bot based assessment. The results indicated that AI chatbots consistently assigned higher grades and generally provided higher-quality feedback. Whereas peer and instructor grades were notable lower and closely aligned, and peer feedback was more personalized and content sensitive. Which highlights the importance of human judgment, and how AI is more likely to be a kiss-up and give you higher grades in assessments. Because if you think about it, it is how AI keeps getting you to use it, it's a type of positive reinforcement.

Yes, AI may offer efficiency, but it cannot offer empathy, presence, or human understanding (the very foundation of my tutoring philosophy). I just think if you want to go through the trouble of that, just make an appointment with a tutor, because they are more likely to be real and give individualized feedback.

Now, as for the use of AI in tutoring sessions, or the use of it in writing, I am against the use, due to environmental factors and frankly because people are not using their brains to exercise the ideas they have. And in the long run, after not exercising that muscle, you will lose it (you won't lose your brain, but I mean the ability— “if you don't use it, you lose it”). In this day and age, we are so consumed by social media, and our attention spans are shrinking more by each short media clip we consume. People have

stopped having a genuine interest in thinking, and that's the most damaging part of AI. Because once people fully surrender to it, it's arduous to climb back out.

So, tutoring at its core, is not about perfect papers, flawless grammar, or mastering the politics of academic discourse. It is about people—two humans sitting together, thinking together, and trusting that the exchange matters. Everything I have discussed, from empathy to preparation to the tensions of language standards and the rise of AI, circles back to this simple truth: writing is human work. And because writing is human work, tutoring must be human work too. A tutor's role is not to "fix" another person's writing, but to help them discover the clarity, confidence, and capability already inside them. Techniques like Elbow's care/non-care, expectations of respect, and conversations about academic voice are tools, but empathy is the philosophy that guides how and why we use them.

I believe tutoring is most meaningful when both people leave the session feeling more connected—to the writing, to the process, and to one another. That's something AI cannot replicate and something even experienced writers cannot do alone. In the end, the writing center is not a place where papers are improved; it is a place where people grow. And if I can help someone feel heard, capable, and braver in their writing, then I have done what tutoring is meant to do. That is why this work matters, and why it will always remain profoundly, beautifully human.

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. "The Need for Care: Easy Speaking onto the Page Is Never Enough."

Oxford University Press, 2012.

Shafiq, Qamar. "Why I Insist on Standard English in My Classroom." *TES Magazine*, 13

Sept. 2020.

Usher, Maya. "Generative AI vs. instructor vs. peer assessments: a comparison of grading and feedback in higher education." *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 2025,

[https://openurl.ebsco.com/c/szb5qv/EPDB%3Aa9h%3A11%3A2635323/detailv2
?sid=ebsco%3Aplink&id=ebsco%3Aa9h%3A187780104&crl=f&prompt=none&x-cgp-token=szb5qv&link_origin=none](https://openurl.ebsco.com/c/szb5qv/EPDB%3Aa9h%3A11%3A2635323/detailv2?sid=ebsco%3Aplink&id=ebsco%3Aa9h%3A187780104&crl=f&prompt=none&x-cgp-token=szb5qv&link_origin=none)