

Principles in Academic Writing Peer Tutoring

1. Show examples of better writing.

Edit your tutee's draft according to your sound judgement such as identifying sections (or paragraphs) in the draft that need editing for language and grammar, showing alternative ways of writing and organising ideas in those paragraphs, and transforming these paragraphs into models of effective writing. The principle is: Do not do something for the tutees that they can do for themselves.

2. Provide learning advice, not psychological counsel.

For any suspected psychological issues, please inform Learning Centre immediately. The learning advisors are aware of the proper mechanism to respond to tutees with suspected psychological needs. However, you can counsel your tutees about learning or academic issues that they are experiencing, e.g., how to study effectively, how to turn procrastination into a meaningful habit, how to prepare for exams, how to get motivated, or how to manage their time wisely.

3. Read and understand your tutees' drafts before giving your feedback.

Spend time reading the drafts of your tutees. This helps give you a clearer sense of their writing, thinking process and reasoning. Reading your tutees' assessment tasks and rubrics will also help you understand what is expected of them.

4. Suspend criticism by acknowledging the strengths of the draft first.

In giving feedback, start by acknowledging the strengths of your tutee's paper; suspend criticism towards the end of the feedback loop. From a communication perspective, this is called constructive feedback in which you acknowledge how focused is the tutee with the task, how relevant is the main idea being conveyed, and how you feel about the writing. Then, you can proceed by sharing an alternative action, example, or viewpoint to guide the tutee in accomplishing assignments in the future (Dwyer, 2020).

5. Use a global-to-local approach in giving feedback.

This means having a holistic view of the draft. You begin by exploring problems on “meaning” (e.g., Does the key idea in paragraph 3 support the thesis statement? Does paragraph 4 make sense in relation to the main idea of the essay?) and move towards identifying specific issues (e.g., subject-verb agreement, use of tenses, sentence structures, tone, or the use of active voice vs passive voice) that you want your tutee to address and resolve. “Meaning” refers to the logical flow of ideas, having a valid argument, relevance of topic and writing to the discipline, as well as coherence and clarity of writing.

6. Address key grammatical errors.

Address key grammatical problems in a draft using exemplars to illustrate those key problems. Showing models of better writing is highly advised instead of correcting all the student’s grammatical errors, e.g., choose one or two paragraphs from the draft, ask the tutee to pay attention to key grammatical errors in those paragraphs, and discuss ways to correct them. Please refer to item #1.

7. Attend to subject content with care and caution.

By “content”, we mean understanding subject knowledge. If a statement is ambiguous or ambivalent, ask the tutees to clarify such ambiguity by checking their lecture notes, doing further research, or clarifying concepts with their lecturer. However, if you have completed the same subject (e.g., AN1001, BU1105) that your tutee is undertaking and in which he/she is seeking help, feel free to share your understanding of concepts or theories. Your goal is to help your tutees expand their understanding and make informed choices as they continue writing their assignment. You don’t decide for them; they must make informed decisions by themselves.

8. Be mindful that assignments are generally discipline specific.

You can talk about common knowledge (e.g., Singapore is part of ASEAN) by referring to available evidence or data from credible sources, but you must remember that many of the assignments in the University require discipline-specific knowledge or specialist content. When you are not sure about a concept or subject knowledge, do not deal with it. Advise your tutees to refer to their lecture notes or talk to their lecturer. Please refer to item #7.

9. Listen actively and be curious to learn.

It is important that you know how to listen attentively to your tutees to understand their intentions and goals for their assignments. Be more open to learn and provide suggestions when necessary, instead of imploring them what to do or imposing your own interpretation on them. There is no end-all and be-all of learning. When we listen and engage in dialogue, we make meaning and deepen our understanding.

10. Help your tutees achieve clarity of purpose.

The essence of learning is meaningful discussion where meaning-making and meaning-negotiation take place. You can help your tutees to figure out what is faulty or distorted in their reasoning, to pin down the intention or thesis of their paper, to eliminate irrelevant ideas from their essay, or to discuss ways to change their poor study habits. However, be reminded that you cannot provide solutions to their own academic problems. The key is to walk with them and show them ways of making their journey in the University more meaningful, impactful, and enjoyable.

11. Ask the right questions.

Questions are designed to help your tutees achieve a clear direction in accomplishing their assignments, not to confuse or demotivate them. Therefore, learn to ask questions that clarify ideas, probe assumptions, investigate reason or evidence, explore other perspectives, discuss implications, and question the question. These are the types of questions that enable your tutees to be engaged with learning. We call these questions Socratic questions. In giving our comments face-to-face, email or via a shared drive, remind yourself that you are helping your tutees by asking the right questions.

12. Augment your tutees' use of language.

Knowing the parts of speech (English language knowledge/*usage*) is one thing; using the linguistic knowledge to write effectively and convey a message in a compelling way is another (English language literacy/*use*). Talk about effective ways in making writing more forceful and ensure that you do not change your tutee's writing identity by forcing them to embrace your own writing style. Each of us have a unique writing style.

13. Encourage learning autonomy.

Attend to a maximum of three (3) different assignment drafts per one (1) tutee in one study period or trimester. If you think they are already asking too much, be honest to tell them that you have given them sufficient feedback and it's time for them to do things on their own. This is to prevent the tutees from developing dependency on you. We always aim for self-regulated, independent learning.

14. Remind your tutees to own their work.

Your goal is to guide your tutees, not to own their drafts by injecting your personal biases or other personal agenda into their assignments. While helping your tutees to produce an original work, always be mindful that their assignments is their responsibility and accountability. You can offer another way of looking at the problem, or encourage your tutee to evaluate multiple perspectives, but always remember that your tutees must take ownership of their assignments and their learning. Refer to items #1, #12 and #13

15. Engage your tutees in meaningful discussion.

Discussion, or from a Foucauldian sense, discourse is the system of possibilities for the creation of knowledge. Through discourse, we share and create meaning systems that allow us to gain truths, and to define and organise both ourselves and our social world (Pinkus, 1996). Engage your tutees in meaningful conversations that expand those spaces for meaning making, meaning negotiation, assertive communication, curiosity, and co-discovery of knowledge. A meaningful discourse helps you create honest and authentic relationships with your tutees allowing them to reflect deeply on their contexts, and to grow personally and professionally.

16. Remember our philosophy: Give people a bowl of rice and they will eat for a day; teach them how to grow rice and they will eat for a lifetime (an ancient Chinese proverb).

Continue making a difference in the lives of other students. Maintain the gold standard of peer tutoring captured in our very philosophy.

For questions, email learningcentre-singapore@jcu.edu.au