

Writing Tutor Tips: The Local and the Global

The goal of a tutoring session is to empower the student to revise her/his own papers. A tutor/instructor may wish to read a student's entire paper before working with the student. However, workshopping the whole paper with the student is not necessary. Rather, the student will benefit most in the long term by workshopping only a small section (or even a paragraph) of the paper.

The tutor/instructor should encourage the student writer to see the relationship between global purpose and local detail. Many times the student is most interested in editing and correction before the student's ideas are clearly formulated. However, as Dana Ferris notes in *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*, "getting students obsessed with grammar problems at early stages of the draft is to distract them from developing their ideas in relation to their purpose and audience" (50). It is up to the tutor/instructor, then, to encourage the student to look first at her/his ideas and the overall content and organization of the essay. In the primary stages of paper development, the distinction to make during the tutoring session is that of "global errors—those that interfere with the overall message of the text—and local errors, which do not inhibit a readers' comprehension" (Ferris, 57-58). The following tutoring tips allow students and tutor/instructor to focus on the global errors that prevent the student's clear explanation of their intended meanings, errors that stop the student from achieving her/his purpose of communicating with the reader.

1) Establishing Roles

Before commencing a revision of a paragraph, the tutor/instructor asks the student to describe her purpose in the essay and invites her/him to read a section of/the entire essay aloud. These two activities establish the tutor/instructor as a questioner/listener (see *Writing Tutor Tips: Conference Interaction*) and the student as an active participant/talker.

2) Identifying a Purpose

Once a conversation about the global purpose has commenced, the tutor/instructor asks the writer to select a paragraph to examine closely. The student then rereads the paragraph in question and explains how it advances the global purpose. For example, the tutor/instructor might ask:

Which aspect of your theory does this paragraph relate to?

What is the purpose of this paragraph?

What key words from your theory or other parts of your paper do you want to highlight in this paragraph?

Questions along these lines encourage the student to see that the local is dependent upon the global project and, vice versa, that the global purpose is dependent upon the work done at the local level. Therefore, this conversation establishes both the primacy of the global purpose and the interdependency of the global ideas and accurate, detailed support. As the tutor asks questions, the student should write down notes describing her/his purpose.

3) Delineating Support

The initial discussion establishes the importance of seeing how the details in sentences function in the entire paragraph and how paragraphs function with the theory. The pair then slowly examine each sentence in the paragraph. The student writer explains how each sentence relates to the purpose of the paragraph by answering such questions:

What is the purpose of the first sentence? (i.e. Is it a topic sentence, introducing the purpose of the paragraph? Does the sentence provide a transition from the idea(s) of the preceding paragraph?)

What aspect of the first sentence does your second sentence build on? (What can your second sentence build on?)

Does your second sentence explain some aspect of the first sentence?

Does your (next) sentence begin to introduce an example or a text that advances your purpose of this paragraph?

Does your (next) sentence include specific information or a quote?

Does your (next) sentence explain specific language in the quoted material/example?

Does your (next) sentence explain the relevance of the quoted material/example?

Does your (next) sentence relate the relevance of the quoted material/example to the global purpose?

What words can you repeat throughout the paragraph to keep clear the purpose of the paragraph?

While the discussion about how local details advance paragraph purpose (which in turn advances global purpose) develops, attention is also given to language that highlights the progression of ideas.

Does this conclusion in this sentence result from the idea advanced in the previous one?

What word(s) can you include to emphasize the cause/effect relationship of ideas?

4) The Role of Grammar

Clearly, the work of the conference is to help the writer find the language and structures that best allow her to express her intended meaning. Ferris describes this goal as “negotiating from a range of available options to represent the writers’ identities, values, and interests in the most satisfactory manner possible” (52). It may be that when determining the linguistic structures most appropriate for the student to achieve her purpose, the need to address grammar arises. Or, it may be that the student expects to discuss grammar and the tutor/instructor needs to address this expectation. For, if a student arrives at a conference expecting a grammar lesson, Cherry Campbell notes in *Teaching Second-Language Writing: Interacting with Text* that “flatly refusing to discuss grammar ‘before its time’ works badly, if at all” (63). Denying the student any opportunity to discuss grammar may be as distracting as focusing exclusively on grammar, and prevents the opportunity to discuss the ideas which comprise the paper’s content. Instead, Campbell suggests

[W]hen students ask about sentence-level issues on early drafts [...] enter into a brief conversation with them—in fact, [conduct] a mini-lesson—and then [...] turn the tables back to content or approach, promising that improving grammar will be the most important thing to do once the ideas are in better shape. (63)

Briefly addressing issues of grammar may allow the tutor/instructor to redirect the student’s attention on purpose more efficiently.

When workshopping later drafts of a paper, the amount of time devoted to grammar will increase. In addition to ensuring that the grammar is used to support the writer’s purpose (as determined in the manner described above), Ferris and Hedgcock note the need to prioritize the types of errors addressed:

Errors that should receive the greatest attention should include **serious** (“global”) errors that interfere with the comprehensibility of the text, **stigmatizing** errors that most disturb NES (native English Speaking audiences, and the students’ most **frequent** errors” (qtd. in Ferris, 48-49).

Thus, the tutor/instructor can make the most of any time given over to correction. Finally, the tutor/instructor should keep in mind that the student can continue to play an active role in regard to grammar correction, using indirect feedback techniques in which the tutor/instructor points out the location or type of error but require the student to follow up with her/his own revisions. As Ferris describes:

Indirect feedback [...] focuses students to be more reflective and analytical about their errors [...] Since students are required by indirect feedback to take more responsibility for their errors, they are likely to learn more from the process [...] (63)

Such feedback supports the ultimate goal of empowering the student by encouraging her/him to take an active role in the session.

Bibliography

Campbell, Cherry. *Teaching Second-Language Writing: Interacting with Text*. Pacific Grove, CA: Heinle & Heinle, 1998.

Ferris, Dana R. *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2002.