



*The Bedford Guide
for Writing Tutors*

Third Edition

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CHAPTER 8

Coping with Difficult Tutoring Situations

While tutoring, you will occasionally encounter some difficult situations. A student may come at the last minute, desperate for help. Or a student may come only at the insistence of a teacher and be difficult to work with. This chapter offers some specific guidelines for dealing with situations like these.



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The Writer Who Comes at the Last Minute

You will sometimes encounter students who come for help just before their paper is due. Perhaps the paper is due in two hours and the student has only an incomplete draft with significant problems. Or the paper is due tomorrow morning and the student hasn't a clue as to what to write about. Such students may come to you in a guilty state of panic. How do you handle them?

Do

Help the student sort through options and figure out what he or she can reasonably do in the time left. Be kind and sympathetic.

Help the student consider other options. If it is not possible for a student to complete an acceptable paper by the deadline, is an extension possible? Is there a penalty for turning in a late paper?

DON'T

Scold or lecture the student about the need to write papers in a timely manner; you may mean well, but the student already knows what he or she has done wrong. Now he or she needs to think clearly and, with your help, figure out the best way to cope with the situation.

The Unresponsive Writer

Teachers sometimes require students to use the writing center, and occasionally such students bring with them an attitude of resistance. They may refuse to answer your questions, give halfhearted answers, or otherwise indicate that they do not wish to be there. Often even their body language is telling. They may slump in their seats, avoid eye contact, or avoid facing you. How do you help these students?

Do

Be patient and polite.

Remind the student that you are there to help and that the suggestions you offer are just that — suggestions that he or she may choose to follow or not.

Make sure the tutoring session is short but helpful. If you can improve one aspect of a resistant student's paper, he or she will see that coming to the writing center is not a waste of time.

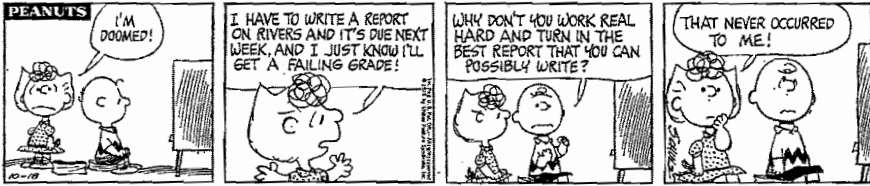
Recognize that even your best efforts may not change students' attitudes, at least in the initial tutoring session. With hindsight, resistant students may realize that getting help with a paper is not altogether unpleasant. Another day, they may return of their own volition.

Don't

Lecture students about your role or their unresponsiveness.

Lose your cool and become angry.

The Antagonistic Writer



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For some students, writing a paper looms as an extremely frustrating — perhaps even impossible — task. They may be apprehensive about writing in general or upset about demands placed on them by a particular assignment or teacher. Often they view meeting these demands as beyond their control. If someone could only tell them exactly how to “fix” things, all would be well. Finding themselves in an impossible position, these students may become verbally aggressive, projecting their anger and frustration onto you, or they may show little interest in the suggestions you offer.

Do

Be patient, polite, and supportive.

Allow students to vent their feelings and tell you what is so upsetting.

Acknowledge students' anger and frustration with an “I” statement like “I hear how frustrated you are.”

Using an “I” statement, rephrase what students are saying in order to help identify their emotions and problems.

You might say, for example, “What I’m hearing is that you’re frustrated because you can’t figure out how to begin this paper.”

If noises or other distractions are interfering with the session, move to a quieter place.

If students become verbally aggressive, politely tell them you are not willing to accept such behavior, but do so

(Continued)

DON'T

Lecture students about your role or their behavior.

Get into an argument or shouting match.

Become hostile or punitive with statements like “You can’t talk to me like that!”

Look away and refuse to deal with the situation.

using an “I” statement. For example, you might say, “When you yell at me that way, I find it difficult [impossible] to listen.”

Remind students that you are there to help and that the suggestions you offer are just that — suggestions that they may choose to follow or not.

The Writer Who Selects an Inappropriate Topic or Uses Offensive Language

Occasionally, you may work with students whose papers are laced inappropriately with offensive language, such as racist or sexist terms. Or you may have difficulty helping with a paper that inappropriately takes an extreme and offensive position. What can you do in situations like these?

Do

Be patient and polite.

Remind students that they are writing for an academic community, and ask them to consider how their audience will react to the language or topic.

Respond as a reader and suggest, for example, “Some people might be disturbed by what you say here. I know I am.”

Show students how to make language more acceptable. For example, you can explain options for avoiding sexist language and suggest alternative terms or ways of rephrasing (many handbooks and guides to writing include sections on avoiding and eliminating sexist language, and you might want to refer students to such discussions).

Don't

Get angry or hostile.

Take students' viewpoints or language personally.

Refuse to deal with the situation.

Occasionally, students may insist on their right to say what they wish and decline to make any changes. You might suggest to such students that they check with their teacher about the topic (or use of language) before continuing work on the paper.

EXERCISE 8A

Read through each of the following three scenarios twice. (If you are using this guide as part of a tutoring class, you and other tutors may want to act out the different parts.) As you go through the scenarios the first time, consider the following questions.

1. How is the tutor probably feeling? How do you know? What verbal and nonverbal clues indicate his or her feelings?
2. How is the student probably feeling? How do you know? What verbal and nonverbal clues can you find?

As you go through the scenarios the second time, consider the following questions.

1. What are the tutor's expectations?
2. What are the student's expectations?
3. What are some other ways the tutor might have handled the situation?

These scenarios provide excellent material for group discussion, and you can use the preceding questions as departure points.

Scenario 1

Tutor: Hi! [Smiles.] My name's Terry. We can just sit over here. Grab that chair. [They sit.] What can I do for you?

Student: Well, I'm Pat, and I have this paper [hands it to tutor], and, uh, my teacher said, I had to come here and, uh, get some help 'cause my last paper . . . [looks down] was a D.

Tutor: Then maybe we should just begin by reading through it. Do you want to read, or would you rather I did?

Student: [Motions to tutor and mutters "You," then folds arms across chest and gazes off into space.]

Tutor: [Begins reading but is clearly having trouble. Stumbles over words and stops several times to clarify a word. As tutor reads, student occasionally sighs, taps fingers on desk and feet on floor.] Listen, I'm really having trouble reading your handwriting. It would probably be easier if you read your paper to me. Would you mind?

Student: [Hesitates.] Naw, I guess not. [Reads about halfway down page, suddenly stops and slams hand down on desk and looks at tutor.] I really don't see the point of this.

Tutor: Well, it's just easier for me to tutor, to help you with your paper, if I hear what you've written.

Student: [Waits a few moments, then tosses paper in front of tutor and speaks in a demanding way.] Can't you just check it and fix it?

Tutor: When you come here and ask to have a paper proofread, the receptionist will tell you that the writing center isn't a proofreading service. It's a tutoring service. You can have a tutor look at your paper with you and discuss your problems, and the tutor will try and show you how to correct them. We don't just correct students' papers!

Student: [Annoyed.] Well, I was told that you did! My friend said I could just have a tutor correct my grammar.

Tutor: [Firmly.] Well, I'm sorry. I don't tutor that way.

[Silence.]

Tutor: If you want me to continue reading through . . .

Student: [Cuts tutor off, snatches paper away from tutor, looks quickly at watch.] I just don't have time for this. Nothing against you, but I just don't have time for this. [Collects papers quickly and gets up.]

Tutor: [Stares in disbelief.] I'm really sorry. I just don't tutor that way.

Student: That's okay. It's nothing against you. [Walks out.]

Scenario 2

[The tutor and student take seats at a table.]

Tutor: Hi! I'm Pat. What can I do to help you?

Student: I don't know if you can. My teacher sent me here. And, well, I have this paper and I've sort of got a draft, well, at least a start of one I think, but I'm not really sure what to do. I wrote some stuff down anyway, but parts of it just don't sound right. [Puts book and paper on table.]

Tutor: What's your assignment?

Student: I have to write a book review for history. And there's no specific thing we have to write on — it's just, like, a review. And the book's *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, you know, by what's his name [reads name off book], Garry Wills.

Tutor: [Cheerfully.] Great! Have you ever written a book review before? Do you know what you're supposed to include?

Student: Sort of. I think I'm supposed to give my opinion.

Tutor: Something like that. What you're supposed to do is evaluate the book and use evidence from the book — like quotes and examples and references — to back up what you say. So tell me some of your ideas. What did you like about the book?

Student: Well, I don't really know. [*Hesitates.*] It's, uh, you know . . . What do you think about it?

Tutor: I don't know. I haven't read the book. But I can hear that you're a little confused. Why don't you just tell me some of your ideas, though, and we can talk about them.

Student: If you haven't read the book, I don't see how you can help me.

Tutor: Oh, but I can. In fact, it's probably better that I haven't read it. You'll have to explain things to me, and that'll help you sort out your ideas. If you just tell me what some of your ideas are, we can talk about them and I can help you think them through a bit. I do that all the time here.

Student: I just don't see how that will work. [*Frowns.*] I mean, if you haven't read the book . . .

Tutor: Yes, but *you* have, so it's really not a problem. I can tell that this is frustrating for you, but I *can* help.

Student: [*Hesitates.*] Well, uh, I, uh . . .

Tutor: You have read the book, haven't you?

Student: Oh, yeah. Well [*pause*], most of it. I mean, it's really long, and I don't know. . . . I can't get into it.

Tutor: Well, maybe you could tell me about the parts you have read, and we can at least start working from there. You said you wrote some things down. Tell me. . . .

Scenario 3

[*The tutor is sitting. The student sits down beside the tutor.*]

Tutor: [*Cheerfully.*] Hi! I'm Lee. What are you working on?

Student: I have to do a five-page paper analyzing this poem. It's due tomorrow morning — early. I don't know. It's really hard to do that stuff, don't you think? Why do teachers give assignments like this, anyway?

Tutor: Well, they do. And, I know, sometimes it's just not easy.

Student: [Hesitates.] Uh, I haven't really started it yet. Because I can't figure out what I'm supposed to do. Here's the poem and here's the assignment sheet. *[Hands poem and assignment sheet to tutor.]* What should I do? I really don't understand what the teacher wants.

Tutor: [Glances at papers.] Oh, I know that poem. *[Looks up.]* Did the teacher explain anything about the paper in class?

Student: Yeah, we're supposed to read the poem and analyze it, but I just don't know what she wants. *[Looks baffled.]* How do you analyze a poem?

Tutor: Well, let's see what the assignment sheet says.

Student: [Sighs.] I can't figure out the assignment sheet. It's so confusing to read. Can you read it and tell me what I'm supposed to do?

Tutor: [Hesitates, glances at it, and then smiles.] Sure, let me read it. It's short. *[Reads it over.]* Oh, here it is! At the bottom it tells you what to do.

Student: Oh, I didn't read that far. I got confused by the beginning stuff, with all those terms. The teacher never really explains anything to us. I hate that.

Tutor: Well, let's see if we can sort it out. The poem . . .

Student: [Interrupts.] Don't you just hate when teachers don't tell you what they want? If they just would tell me, I think I would be able to write it. *[Pauses and grins.]* So, you figured out the assignment? What am I supposed to do?

Tutor: [Pauses.] You know, what I'm hearing is that you're frustrated because you don't know what to do and the paper's due tomorrow. Let's look at the assignment sheet together. You can tell me which parts confuse you, and I can try to explain . . .

Student: [Angrily.] Look, I have to pass this class and I have to do the paper to pass it. Just tell me what to do! You know the poem and you know what I'm supposed to do . . .

Tutor: [Firmly but politely.] Yes, but I can't do the paper for you. I can help you, but it's your paper.

Student: I know, I know, I know, but what am I supposed to do? It's due tomorrow! *[Emphatically.]* I hate poetry!

Tutor: Well, I'm trying to help, but . . .

Student: Yeah, but it's so late. Just tell me what to say! Aren't you supposed to help me?

Tutor: I can help you, but if you don't want to do your share of the work, there's not much I can do.

Student: [Grabs the papers.] Yeah, well, thanks for nothing. I should have figured you tutors would be just like the teacher.

EXERCISE 8B

Think about a tutoring session in which you were not satisfied with the outcome. What made the situation so unpleasant, both for you and the student? How did you handle the situation? What are some other ways you might have handled it?