



SHOOTIN' THE SHIT

JAIS BROHINSKY

You've got a paper. It's late. You want some advice or an edit. Or maybe you've been working on a murder mystery, or a poem, or you just want to know what this whole self-evaluation thing is all about. Whatever. You come to the Writing Center, get an appointment, sit down, and your tutor starts asking about what you're writing. It's right there, you think. Just read it and mark it up.

But your tutor seems intent on chatting.

What's going on?

You see, conversation is an integral part of tutoring. But no cookie-cutter, fit-all framework governs conversation in a tutoring session at the Writing Center. Rarely will a dialogue focus on the proper use of a semicolon or the difference between MLA and APA citations—we have handouts and books to cover pedagogical regulations. In the Writing Center, every conversation revolves around the intricacies of the individual, of you. Every interchange is honed to the specific combination of tutor, writer, writing process, and piece of writing. These ingredients blend to form the shape and taste of a Writing Center conversation. On the surface this approach seems straightforward. Conversation is talking; a tutor tutors; a writer writes; and the writing process is putting thought down on a page.

Easy. Or so it seems.

Conversation is alive with immediacy. Spoken words are flexible and can be explained, amended, changed, expounded. This flexibility makes talking about writing beneficial at every stage of the writing process. From placing the finishing touches on a final paper to brainstorming without a single written word, discussion can help organize and focus a piece. A tutoring session can revolve around a draft without ever looking at it, yet will still address important aspects like organization and purpose. Conversation is a tool that can be used to chip away at confusion—a tool used to accentuate curves and shadows, to smooth away rough edges and buff a surface until the intended meaning sparkles with clarity.

When we write, we know what we mean to communicate, and sometimes we think our language is clear, when it is, in fact, convoluted or obscure. Talking about a piece of writing helps bridge the translation involved in reading, in writing, in thinking and composing thought into language to

scratch at the core of meaning. Writers are encouraged to think and read out loud and to compare what they say or hear to what is written. A tutor rewords an idea in the form of a question using the writer's own language to key her back into the process and to help to cement understanding.

Questions are essential for elucidating muddled meaning, and something resembling a Socratic dialogue is enacted in a tutoring session. Open-ended questions like "what are you writing about" are effective, because they allow writers to reiterate their ideas. These questions can lead to greater understanding or to completely new angles. Answers will be questioned, and the answers to those questions will be explored, compelling a writer to articulate ideas in different ways, using different language. Question-fueled dialogue encourages a writer to find her own answers and truths organized in her own language, regarding her writing process.

A tutor is both a guide and cartographer in foreign territory. If a writer's process is a jungle, then a tutor is one familiar with jungleness, which is to say that a tutor is familiar with the notion of a writing process, though not necessarily accustomed to an individual's personal procedure. Together, writer and tutor create a map diagramming the writer's language. The straight and narrow trails of grammar and punctuation are avoided. Instead, side trails of tone, audience, and technique are traversed, leading through lush canopies dripping with intent and so thick that substance clings in the dank underbrush where meaning soaks the darkness.

A tutor uses questions like a torch to share these trails and teach a writer to find them again, because once the session is over, writers are alone to choose their own paths, and to set their own cardinal directions. A writer comes to the Writing Center curious, unsure, or perhaps just lost, and is presented with an array of avenues to walk and learn, hopefully discovering an individual path on which to continue. A writer may come for guidance, but ultimately leaves as her own guide.

The writing process applies to everyone, at every moment of every day. It is an evolution of articulation that manifests in written form, yet is not confined to it. This manifestation is a snapshot of fluid thought—a snapshot abandoned to a page. In this sense, everyone is a writer, accumulating information and integrating it into her own writing process. A writing tutor, in our Writing Center, is one who encourages the growth of another's process. And since the writing process involves the translation of perception to language, a tutor actually fans awareness into flares of expression. To help light such blazes of written expression, a tutor must ask the right questions, use the appropriate tone and words fitting each situation. A tutor is a conversationalist—a chameleon of sorts—melting into a writer's perception of reality to help that writer sear a clear and timeless stamp into the world.