



The

WRITER'S BLOCK:

Puzzling out the Writing Craft

VOLUME 2, ISSUE 1

SPRING 2012

THE WRITING CENTER

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How to Self-Edit By Michael Schmersahl

The clock on the wall says it's 2:30 in the morning, but you know it must be later. For the past four hours, you've sat dismally before a monitor, so dejected, typing away with one eye fixed on the word count at the bottom of the screen. You've written 800 words. The rubric requires 1,000, so after a few brief calculations, you deduce that at this rate, you will need to continue typing for about one more hour. And then sleep – sweet, elusive sleep – will finally be yours.

3:30 a.m. arrives at a sloth's pace and as the minute hand strikes "6," you push down the period key for the final time. Though exhausted, you

beam wildly because your paper has nearly reached completion. Editing remains as the sole obstacle between you and slumber, and so you run a spelling and grammar check on the word document. iVoila! Your ugly duckling of rough draft has magically transformed into a swan of a final copy. With that, you save, print, and fly from the computer lab with reckless abandon: Another paper conquered, another deadline met, and another day gone by in the life of a college student.

If you have ever written an academic paper in college, or any piece with a deadline for that matter, then you have undoubtedly had at least one

experience like the one I just described. The fact is, writing takes an insane amount of energy even for the most gifted writers, and when we reach our required word count, many of us consider a paper complete. However, after four years of college spent writing countless papers on countless nights and receiving countless graded copies back with countless comments from professors, I can confidently declare that good writing (and therefore good editing) demands a much greater effort than the execution of a simple spelling and grammar check. With the following five tools for better self-editing, you will undoubtedly improve the

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A Striking Correlation By John Ripollone

The medical school-bound Writing tutor will inevitably conclude that a subtle, though compelling, correlation exists between the role of the Writing tutor and the role of the medical doctor. The parallelism is subtle insofar as it is initially obscure--most would not be quick to relate the role of the Writing tutor to the role of the medical doctor simply because the respective fields are perceived as totally dis-

parate. Yet, this preconceived distinction is, at best, perfunctory. The compelling aspect of the relationship between the role of the Writing tutor and the role of the medical doctor is that this relationship, once realized, is substantial. The connections between the purportedly different realms are truly worth noting, and it is appropriate that I, as a pre-medical student working at the Writing Center, have

come to appreciate these connections. These connections are best elucidated in the context of the general relationship between the Writing tutor and the client.

All who work at the Writing Center must follow a particular protocol when preparing for and undertaking a tutoring session. In the first place, the tutor is trained to value the privacy of his or her clients. A per-

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How to Self-Edit continued from Pg. 1

quality of your papers, and as you do so, you will progress in your own abilities as a writer.

Organize First

One of the toughest tasks for a writer is *invention*, which is a really just a fancy term for “coming up with something to write about.” I can remember numerous times when I, as a younger student, would sit staring at a blinking cursor, desper-

ately trying to both invent and organize at the same time. Unfortunately, it took me a few years and a couple dozen papers to realize that this strategy simply does not work. So outline your thoughts first, make sure they flow logically, and determine whether or not you have a point worth making. This outline, no matter how basic, will serve you well as you flesh out your ideas in paper form, giving

you both substance and structure and making the editing process a great deal less painful.

Allow Yourself to Make Mistakes

Try to do away with the idea that only bad writers write poorly. It’s a detrimental myth, and by believing it you’ll only delay your own maturation as a writer. Often, writers will attempt to edit mistakes as they

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“Try to do away with the idea that only bad writers write poorly. It’s a detrimental myth.”



Photo: Kinley Zook

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sonal history file is created for every client who enters the Writing Center, and this file is accessible only to tutors. Every tutoring session is performed in a private cubicle. No client is ever referred to by name among fellow tutors, and any correspondence shared among the tutor, his or her client, and the client’s professor is kept under priority headings labeled “for your eyes only.” I am forced to admit that this emphasis on privacy and client protection is no different than what is witnessed in the medical realm (although the situation in the Writing Center is microcosmic in comparison). The doctor must also worry about protecting his or her patient’s privacy. Stringent records of the patient’s health history must be kept for proper future diagnoses, etc. The doctor-patient interaction must take place in a private setting.

A patient’s history, by law, may not be frivolously discussed among medical colleagues. Although these connections may seem gross, given the more “pressing” nature of the medical field, they have certainly helped me to appreciate the importance that I, as a doctor, will be required to place on the protection of my patients.

The second major aspect of the Writing tutor’s general protocol that may be likened to the medical doctor’s general protocol is the way an actual tutoring session functions. A Writing tutor is granted between thirty minutes and one hour to sit down with a client to attend to his needs in terms of the difficulties he may be facing with the construction of his paper, to observe the physical situation of the paper in order to draw thorough conclusions concerning the current position of the

paper and to construct a final set of guidelines that he should follow in order to augment the state of his paper. The link here is truly fascinating. A doctor is also granted a small amount of time to meet privately with a patient, to learn of her health-related problems, to perform a physical examination in order to draw thorough conclusions concerning the current health of the patient and to construct a final guideline that she should follow in order to augment the state of her health (e.g. lifestyle change, intake of a certain prescription, etc.). Given these similarities I imagine that what I experience as a Writing tutor in terms of my relationship with clients is, to a certain degree, equivalent to what I will experience as a doctor in terms of my relationship with patients.

Although the na-

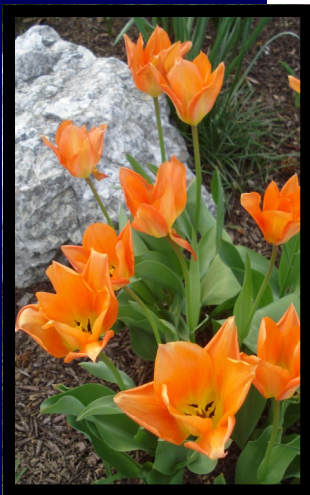
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What We've Learned as Tutors

By Michael Schmersahl



“A writer should be allowed to bring his or her own unique style and voice to a page.”



As a Writing Center tutor, I have read papers on what has seemed like every possible topic, from the diagnosis and treatment of brain disorders to the definition of true love, which, now that I think of it, could be considered a variety of the former subject. Our tutors come from a multitude of majors, but that does not restrict the disciplines or majors from which our clients come, and so each writing center tutor has necessarily stepped out of his or her comfort zone over the past few semesters in order to help a client with a paper. Additionally, each of those papers brought with it a distinctly different student, and each of these students brought with them a unique personality, worldview, and approach to writing.

Though challenging, I can confidently say that personally, this variety in both my clients and their writing has served as the most rewarding aspect of my involvement in the writing center. I have taught many lessons to students regarding ways to enhance their writing, but I have learned twice as many from those very same students in regard to communication, writing, and people in general. With this idea in mind, three senior writing center tutors have offered their response to the following question:

As a senior tutor leaving the writing center

after this semester, what is an important lesson you have learned about writing, writers, students, tutoring, or communication in general?

Ben Hepler:

There is no one "correct" way to write. Of course, there are rules of grammar, punctuation, and basic organization that one should follow. Besides these, however, a writer should be allowed to bring his or her own unique style and voice to a page. As a tutor, I need to remind myself continually that a student's writing style is not bad simply because it is different from mine or from other students with whom I have worked. It is often the "different" styles that end up standing out in a positive way.

Writers of every skill level can help you improve your own writing. When we write, we ultimately conjure up our own worldview – the experiences we have had, the words and phrases we use, etc. I can't count how many times I have read over a first-year student's paper and thought to myself "huh, what an excellent way to say that! I never would have thought of that."

John Ripollone:

The most important aspect of my experience as a writing tutor is that this experience developed my ability to listen

effectively to others and, consequently, to communicate properly with others.

When I applied for a position at the Writing Center, I was primarily interested in exercising and sharing my love for writing and literature. I was not aware of the difficulty that I would face attempting to communicate effectively with students seeking assistance. After my first session, however, I knew that I needed to augment my ability to listen effectively to students in order to conduct tutoring sessions legitimately focused on the needs of students.

I struggled in and out of the Writing Center to correct my poor listening habits using my own observations and the advice of friends. So far, my efforts have paid off to the extent that I usually receive great feedback from students concerning my helpfulness during sessions.

Jenna Sweitzer:

The best answer I can give regarding "what I've learned" is mostly the extent to which writing is a challenge both cognitively and emotionally. Through my courses at Messiah, particularly English courses, I came to the realization that writing is a highly-academic art and takes a lot of deep thought, realization, and often research.

Through peer-editing, especially in the context of the Writing

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A Striking Correlation

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ture of the similarities between my role as a Writing tutor and my future role as a medical doctor was not immediate (I was also initially prone to separate the two realms), I can reflect on my experiences as a Writing tutor with the understanding that these experiences have necessarily contributed to the development of skills that I will, no doubt, rely on as a medical doctor. And this is the most important point: aside from the fact that my role as a

Writing tutor is a means by which I can help others while I am an undergraduate student, it is also a means by which I may develop proper interpersonal adeptness, which, no doubt, will be vital to my properly functioning as a medical doctor. We may, then, be cordially reminded that what we do at this point in our academic career will, in some way, contribute to our overall success and fulfillment at future points.

A Writer's Review of Zotero

By Xu Ren

“...my role as a Writing tutor is a means by which I can help others while I am an undergraduate student...”

I have always been a big fan of *free* software, especially ones that help me to manage and simplify my life such as Mint (personal finance), Evernote (note-taking), desktop gadgets, and browser plugins. Yet, as a student who has to write a ton of research papers every semester, I desperately needed a program that manages my bibliographies.

And so enters Zotero, the newly added number one program on my list of free and life-simplifying software. Zotero is a Firefox extension that collects, manages, and cites your research sources. While Zotero can help you with many tasks in life (such as archiving pictures and videos, helping you compare and buy books, taking notes, etc.), I will focus specifically here on how to use Zotero to manage research papers.

The real beauty of Zotero is its automatic ability to recognize formats and collect virtually any source in cyberspace. Got

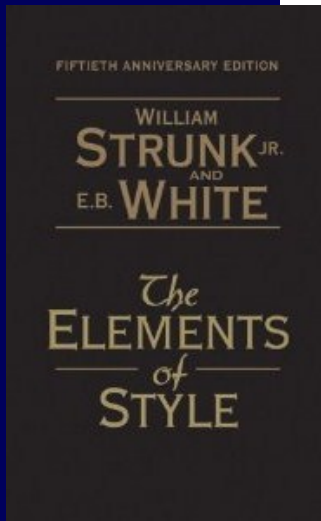
an article you need to cite from Jstor? Simple, just click on the Zotero icon, and it automatically recognizes it as a journal and extracts all of the bibliographic information. Same goes for books found on Google Books, Barnes and Noble, or Amazon. It even recognizes videos from Youtube and Wikipedia articles (but of course, you won't be using these sources in your research paper).

If you write research papers like I do, then by this point, you probably have 20 or more sources saved in your Zotero extension. But have no fear, Zotero allows you to drag-and-drop, so you can categorize your sources into different folders. It also allows you to tag your sources for easy organizing, and there's plenty of sorting options. Trust me, this is way better than in my high school days when I wrote my research sources on index cards and then wrote each citation on index cards!

Last but not least, all of these features would be rather useless if Zotero did not make it simple to cite your sources in your actual paper. Just drag-and-drop your sources from Zotero into your word processor. Voila! Of course, as a writing center tutor, I must ask you – no, beg you – to look over your bibliography page to make sure that you are citing correctly in style. Sure, Zotero comes integrated with all of the major styles (MLA, APA, Chicago), but even I will admit that Information Technology (IT) is rarely 100% fool-proof.

Lastly, you may be wondering whether Zotero works on Mac – or for all two of you out there, Linux. Of course! It is an extension for the browser Firefox, so as long as you can use Firefox on your computer, you can use Zotero. Now, we can all be excited to be called academic Firefox users (A hint for those of you still stuck in IE or have “progressed” to Chrome).

Elements of Style By: Benjamin Hepler



“With only forty-three pages at its first publication, the little book is tangible proof that Strunk firmly believed in his most central dogma: ‘Omit needless words.’”

Imagine if a book’s size determined its worth and appeal. Every living room in the world would have a well-dusted copy of *War and Peace* sitting on its coffee table. Working men and women would spend their breaks immersed in *Les Miserables* and *Shogun*. Children would cry and complain until their parents consented to read to them from *Webster’s Dictionary*. Forests would soon disappear in an attempt to supply pages for the newest releases. And just think of all the books that would be ignored! Teachers everywhere would discard *Heart of Darkness*. Every old man would smoke cigars wrapped in pages torn from *A River Runs Through It* while reveling in a worn copy of *Gone with the Wind*. Numerous classics would soon be lost to humanity forever. One little book that writers everywhere certainly would miss is William Strunk Jr.’s *The Elements of Style*.

A professor of English at Cornell University, William Strunk Jr. privately published *The Elements of Style* in 1919 and used it as a textbook in one of his composition classes. He wrote the book not to provide a comprehensive summary of every-

thing pertaining to writing, but as a raw guide to the fundamentals. With only forty-three pages at its first publication, the little book is tangible proof that Strunk firmly believed in his most central dogma: “Omit needless words.” Since Strunk first presented it to students at Cornell, the book has undergone several revisions, including the addition of a chapter on style by E.B. White, author of the beloved children’s stories *Charlotte’s Web* and *Stuart Little*. After four editions, Strunk’s book now holds eighty-five pages, not including an introduction by E.B. White and a foreword by Roger Angell. Comparatively, considering its popularity, it is still a remarkably small book. In terms of what it has to say and the way in which it says it, however, it puts to shame many larger books that deal with similar subjects.

The Elements of Style is literally a book of great principles. Within each of its five chapters is a series of points related to the subject of that chapter. These points include technical rules about punctuation and grammar, such as comma usage and subject-verb agreement. The authors also include tips to help strengthen the effectiveness of one’s writing—for example, “Do not take shortcuts at the cost of clari-

ty.” An entire chapter of the book is even dedicated to misused words and phrases. *The Elements of Style* is not merely a list of principles and tips, however. After each point, the authors include an explanation (which is meticulously concise, of course), as well as examples of correct and incorrect usage. Although this may sound dry, the evident skill and wit of the authors makes learning the principles, an otherwise arduous task, quite enjoyable.

I read *The Elements of Style* several months prior to beginning my first year at Messiah. Since then, I have referred to it nearly every time I have a question about punctuation, grammar, structure, or style, which is quite often. One of the benefits of its small size is that it can be taken nearly anywhere, and it has certainly been places with me. I would recommend *The Elements of Style* to the experienced writer, just as I would recommend it to the timid novice. Of course, simply reading it is not enough. In order to learn from it, one has to apply it on the page. So take a stand for the rights of small books everywhere—pick up a copy, read it, and start scribbling!

What We’ve Learned as Tutors Continued from Pg. 3

Center, I was reminded that writing is, at all times, really personal. Regardless of whether you are composing a poem, personal essay, a short story, or even an expository piece, you – the writer – are forced to take ownership of the things that

you say, of whatever you put down on paper. That’s a lot of responsibility and it takes courage to share your written work – a mini-extension of yourself – to other people.

I have great respect for clients who visit the Writing Center and are willing to

subject their writing to potential praise or scrutiny (the latter is never offered disrespectfully of course!). Clients have inspired me to be more humble and open with my own writing and to acknowledge that composition takes character.



How to Self Edit

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make them, and while this may work for obvious errors such as spelling and punctuation, the act of constant in-paper editing will eventually only serve to disrupt your creative process, and trust me – the tone of your writing experience will translate to the tone of the reading experience for your audience. So just let it go, and allow yourself to write a *rough* (read: imperfect) draft. There's a time for writing and there's a time for editing, which leads me to my next point.

Write a Rough Draft AND a Final Draft

As I alluded to in the opening to this article, I know that writers face the frequent temptation to take a rough draft, run a spelling and grammar check, and then print out the result as if it were a finished copy. But if you can find it in yourself to do so, write *two* drafts – a rough draft and a final one. This practice will

result not only in more thorough and careful editing, but also an opportunity to inhabit the perspective of the audience, as you go about reading your rough draft version. Still, even the most deliberately enacted editing will do little good without an investment in the following step.

Be Honest With Yourself

Like I said in Step 2, forget about ever becoming a perfect writer. It's just not going to happen, so accept the fact that you will inevitably produce, for lack of a better term, *total crap*. The true mark of great writers lies in their ability to write poorly and then identify their bad writing before fixing it. However, this will never take place if you do not accept the certainty of mediocrity, because really, mediocrity is undeserving of shame. As many great writers have said, "writing is rewriting," so embrace the imperfections of earlier drafts, and use

the weaknesses you find in them to improve your skills as a writer.

Know When to Call it a Day

That said, every writer needs to know *when to say when*. If you've followed the previous steps and developed a well thought-out outline before writing patiently and deliberately and editing with honesty and effort, then you have done your due diligence as a writer. Not every paper will work, and the approval of others will unfortunately remain out of our control as writers. Still, if we commit ourselves to editing with purpose, then we allow ourselves to engage in a constant process of improvement, while simultaneously making all those late nights just a *little more* worthwhile.

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The Writing Center Staff outside Hoffman, Spring 2012

Feel free to contact us with questions or comments, or just drop by, we'd be happy to chat.