

Talk to Me: Engaging Reluctant Writers

Muriel Harris

Every tutor, no matter how dazzlingly effective he or she is, will meet up with a student who responds—or fails to respond—like the one in this all-too-familiar dialogue:

Tutor: Hi, Alisa, how are you doin' today?

Alisa: (Nods silently and briefly, begins searching in her backpack for her paper, and then settles far back into her seat, hands in her lap.)

Tutor: Were you at the game this weekend? I knew we were going to lose, but it was a good game to watch.

Alisa: (Shakes her head slightly, to indicate she didn't go.)

Tutor: Well, what do you want to work on today?

Alisa: Here's my paper. (Alisa looks down, avoiding eye contact.)

Tutor: Why don't you tell me a bit about it. . . . What your main point is, what the assignment is . . . you know, all that stuff that we'll need to know to work on it.

Alisa: It's about cloning. For my Ethics class. It's due in a couple of days.

Tutor: OK, interesting subject. That's a hot topic, and there's lots to say about it. What do you want to work on?

Alisa: Could you see if it's OK?

Tutor: OK, let's start with the main point. Why don't you just tell me first what your main point is. (Waits while the silence grows and expands around them.) Is cloning ethical? Are there ethical problems we should consider before going ahead? Should scientists try to do it?

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Alisa: It's OK, I guess.

Tutor: Are you supposed to discuss the ethical implications? Or argue a point of view? Are you writing to people who think cloning should be stopped? Or to people who think it's important to do, like for possible medical uses?

Alisa: It really doesn't much affect me. I don't know. (Alisa shrugs, slumps farther down in her chair, and stares at the people at the next tutorial table.)

Tutor: Did you have a hard time writing this paper? If so, let's talk about that for a bit.

Alisa: (No response.)

And so it goes with the unresponsive student. You try to coax, nudge, or invite the student to get involved in a discussion about the paper. But the student resists and continues to sit there refusing to make eye contact or lean closer to the table. Nothing seems to engage the writer into the conversation you'd like to have about that paper lying limp and forlorn on the table between you and the student. You recognize the student's sense of being withdrawn from the tutorial by the student's body language, voice tone, the long silences that meet your attempts to chat, the monosyllables that pass as answers, and the shrugs that follow.

Some Background

The reasons for students' unresponsive behavior range widely, and clues as to why a student is not responding to the tutor's efforts are usually inadequate. Some possibilities to consider:

- *The student is forced to be there.*

When we are required to do something, some people react negatively. They may blame whoever required their attendance or whomever they meet in the process of fulfilling what was required of them. Psychologists who prepare therapists and counselors explain that it's not unusual for clients to become angry at whomever they have to meet with, even if that person is not involved in setting the requirement. Similarly, when an unwilling student is assigned to come to the writing center, the student is likely to resist a tutor's overtures to engage in any conversation. She doesn't want to be there and hopes to be able to leave as soon as possible.

- *Writing is not important to this writer.*

Writing is seen by some students (usually mistakenly, but they don't learn this until they graduate and have to communicate on the job) as a requirement that has little to do with their lives. They envision themselves as engineers in design labs, as programmers of the next generation of cool software, as pharmacists or farmers who will be far from the world of reports and memos. They assume that the business world proceeds via cell phones, not written memos or letters

(which, if needed, secretaries will clean up). And, finally, they see no need for a tutor's help with writing any more than they would attend closely to someone explaining how to build mud huts. It's simply not relevant to their lives, and they most likely came to the writing center because it was required, because they thought they'd earn extra points with the teacher, or because they want the tutor to fix the paper so they can get a higher grade.

- *The writer may be anxious about revealing ignorance or poor writing to anyone and nervous about being critiqued.*

For a study I conducted to learn about students' concerns in writing tutorials ("Talking in the Middle"), I read hundreds of student responses on anonymous evaluations filled out at the end of tutorials in our Writing Lab. Over and over, they commented how relieved they were that they weren't "slammed" or "laughed at" or "ripped" by the tutor. They were surprised that the tutor didn't talk down to them. They announced that the tutorial was successful because they now felt more confident, though it was usually not clear if they meant more confident about themselves or their writing—or perhaps both. From comments like these, we become more aware of how apprehensive students are when they come to writing centers. Under such emotional strains, they may be very likely to shut up, to wonder what they're supposed to do, and finally, to be as unengaged as any tutor might be in a strange situation. When we have no idea what's expected of us and we feel shaky about whether we are going to be ridiculed or asked to demonstrate what we don't know, we do sometimes respond by withdrawing until we can get a better handle on what's happening or figure out how we can retreat from the situation with minimal embarrassment.

- *The student is overwhelmed by other concerns.*

The student who doesn't want to engage in tutorial conversation may have just heard that he's running out of student financial aid, that there was a major quiz in the chem lecture he missed, or that his girlfriend has dumped him. Students bring with them a variety of other problems and worries and disappointments that affect their ability (or inability) to attend to what's going on in the writing tutorial. Issues that can affect students' writing are categorized by Leigh Ryan as academic (grades, study skills, test anxiety), social (separation from family and friends, peer pressure, roommates), and lifestyle (finances, independence, job responsibilities).¹

- *The writer doesn't have the language to talk about his or her writing.*

Researchers on cognitive processes involved in writing and revising (Flower, et al.) have explained that like other problem-solving tasks, effective revision requires the ability to detect problems in the draft of a paper and to find strategies to use to solve those problems. Without such abilities, which are often lacking in beginning writers, they don't know how to explain to someone else

what they want to work on or what their problem is. Such students are likely to come in flustered, ill-at-ease, and unable to say more than "my paper's too short," "the paper doesn't flow," or "I just don't like it," or "it's not what I wanted to say" and hope that the tutor somehow understands what they mean. They lapse into silence because they don't know what to say or how to say it. Like the patient in a doctor's office, they hope that by sitting quietly while the doctor examines them, the doctor will diagnose their problem and prescribe a treatment.

- *The writer is simply a very quiet person.*

Much research on personality type has helped us to define personality preferences, those ways of interacting with the world that are neither right nor wrong, simply ways that people differ. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), one of the most useful and most well-researched ways to sort out personality preferences, has stimulated a great deal of research on how personality types interact with writing and tutoring. A particularly helpful collection of essays about this is Thomas C. Thompson's *Most Excellent Differences: Using Type Theory in the Composition Classroom*. In the introduction to type theory Thompson defines one of the MBTI dimensions as Extraversion and Introversion, noting that introverts prefer to "play out potential actions mentally before deciding whether they actually wanted to follow through with them."² A further picture of how introverts prefer to deal with the world shows us how we might interpret their unresponsiveness as not being engaged when, in fact, they are simply taking things in to reflect on them quietly—on their own at a later time. Here's Thompson's picture:

Because [introverts] like to rehearse their answers before speaking, they may be slow to respond to questions about new material. Introverts often choose to sit near the edge of the classroom, where they can observe class activities without being caught in the middle of them.³

And, of course, some people are just naturally shy or quiet, not given to a lot of chatter. Some of us love to pour out words; others use them sparingly. Some find silence in a conversation awkward; others appreciate it as time for reflection.

- *The student knows that if he or she shuts up, the tutor (or teacher) will do all the work.*

Some students who have been in school for a number of years learn how to play the teacher/tutor game to their advantage. In lectures, large classrooms, and even small ones, they've learned that they are expected to shut up, be passive, and wait for the teacher to answer her own questions. This role is all too familiar. Less familiar is the one that tutors are trying to get the student to play—to be active learners who take charge of their own learning. So they wait for the tutor to tell them what to write, how to fix the paper, or maybe—if they sit quietly long enough—even do the rewriting.

What to Do

While it's not always clear which of the possibilities listed above looms largest in keeping the student withdrawn from the situation, here are some strategies to try:

- ***Empathize about being forced to do something.***

When you ask the student if her visit is required and she indicates morosely that she's there because she has to be and her actions indicate that she has no interest in doing anything much beyond sitting there until the time is up and she can leave, you can try talking openly and honestly about her not wanting to be there. Empathize, let her know that you too have been in situations you were forced into and that you too felt as she does. After all, it isn't the worst trait in the world to be an independent person who isn't exactly pleased when others tell them what to do. Try to help the student see that as long as he's bothered to come to the lab, you'd like to help him make good use of his time. If your center sends notes to teachers, explain—after you've managed to get the student to see that you are interested in his welfare—that you have to report on what was worked on and if nothing was talked about, the teacher isn't likely to consider the requirement fulfilled. Have the student help you write the note (or let him write it himself). If none of this mobilizes the student into some minimal conversation, you have probably done what you could. You need to let the student leave, but you've warned him (in friendly terms) that sitting there won't satisfy the instructor. Just as we encourage students to make their own decisions about what they want to write, letting them make the decision to leave without really satisfying the requirement at least keeps students in the driver's seat. Some tutors find that these students return later, on their own, when it's not required and after they've realized that tutors aren't there to force them to do anything.

- ***Acknowledge the lack of interest in writing and try for a small success.***

For writers who admit that they have little interest in writing and say that it isn't relevant to them, you can start by acknowledging this attitude as something many students share. But then try talking about when the student might need writing skills—in classes (exams, reports) or for that person's career (job applications, memos). Harold Hackney and Sherilyn Cormier, in their book on how counselors can help clients, warn us that “unless clients can determine some personal goals for counseling, the probability of change is minimal.”⁴ You won't win over everyone because some students will remain unconvinced that being a better writer is a personal goal of theirs, and they will continue to expend as little effort as possible. Then, it's time to try for a minimal bit of success. The student has some piece of writing to work on or she wouldn't be there. What can be done with that one paper? One tutor in our Writing Lab, when backed into such corners by students who merely wanted to pass the course and

not worry about writing any more, would explain that he realized the student's time was valuable and didn't want to waste it. What could they do together in the few remaining minutes of the tutorial to make it useful for the student? Sometimes that might result in little more than helping the student set up his two citations in MLA format or learn the difference between “it's” and “its,” but at least the time together was not a total waste.

- ***Help the student talk about his or her fears.***

If you sense the student is quiet because he is overcome by anxiety or fears of some kind related to meeting you and talking about his writing, try to establish an atmosphere of trust, perhaps by being friendly, by explaining that you're not a teacher and that your job is to help and to listen. Then invite the student to talk about his or her anxieties. In their suggestions to counselors who work with fearful clients, psychotherapists Randolph Pipes and Donna Davenport (see Further Reading) tell us that such clients often cannot overcome their resistance to getting involved until the underlying fears are expressed. Then, it is important to empathize and to reassure the student that such fears are not uncommon and can be overcome. The core of such a conversation might sound like this:

Tutor: You don't seem to want to talk about your paper. Would you like me to read it instead, or would that bother you? When I was in freshman comp, I hated having my paper read by anyone, especially out loud in class and in front of others. I wouldn't even let my roommate read my papers.

Writer: I'm not a good writer. My teachers hate my writing. I'll never be good at it.

Tutor: I honestly don't know a whole lot of people who think they're great writers. Writing takes work, and you probably aren't happy with what you write. That's pretty usual. And we can work on your writing together. I bet there's lots of good stuff here to work with.

Writer: I hate when someone criticizes my writing. I won't show it to anyone except my teacher.

Tutor: Hey, I'm not going to criticize. Really. My job is to help you. In fact, I like the first paragraph here, especially when you start out with that good question in your first sentence. Talking about your writing with someone else usually helps a lot.

- ***Reschedule for a better time or listen and move on.***

For students who seem withdrawn or remain unengaged because there might be other, more pressing problems on their minds, you can ask if they want to come back some other time. Or if the student starts to talk about what's worrying her, listen. Give the student a few minutes to vent or explain what's really on her mind, and really listen. Pipes and Davenport distinguish between “social listening,” which is often largely a matter of not interrupting, maybe nodding from time to time, or thinking of what you're going to say next, and “therapeutic

listening,” which requires much more. The therapeutic listener attends closely, really hears what the client is saying and both processes cognitively what the client is saying while empathizing closely with what is being said. A few minutes of such conversation is likely to help clear the air, but if you sense that the person starts bringing up other problems, having found a listening ear, it’s probably clear that the student is deciding to use the time as a support session for his life, his troubles, his frustration with his roommate. One strategy to get back to work is first to acknowledge that you’ve heard the student and that it’s time to move on. You can show that you were listening by reflecting back to the student what she said: “Yeah, getting a speeding ticket really upsets you. But now let’s focus on something positive, like getting that paper revised.” Or “You sound like you’re fearful about what’s happening with your mom, but I’m not trained to help you with that. There’s a good psych services here on campus. It’s free, and a couple of my friends went there and were glad they did. I can help you make an appointment. But, for now, since we only have about 20 minutes left, what can we do in that time to help you revise this paper?”

- *Offer the student some questions she can ask herself.*

When a student can’t offer much beyond general unease about the paper (not liking it, thinking it doesn’t flow, etc.) and you suspect that the student is quiet because he has nothing else to say, try giving the student some possible questions to ask himself:

“Could you tell me if part of the problem is that what you wanted to do in this paper—what’s in your head—doesn’t match with what’s here on the page?”
(or)

“Do you think the lack of flow is because there aren’t words to tie the sentences and paragraphs together? Or maybe you think it doesn’t flow because it jumps from topic to topic? Sometimes, people get that ‘lack of flow’ feeling when the order is jumbled or when they’re not sure whether the different parts are in some kind of logical order?”
(or)

“Are you wondering if the paper doesn’t meet the assignment? Or the kind of paper it’s supposed to be, like a persuasion paper or a definition paper?”

If this helps the student to start talking, you can remind him that these are good questions to ask himself when he’s working on a draft and wants to improve it. You may have to keep listing questions and problems the student’s paper might have until something strikes a responsive chord. When he hears something that begins to sound right, he will begin—probably hesitantly—to talk more easily about what he wants to work on.

- *Give the student some quiet time to think and write.*

If you meet up with a truly quiet person who has little to say, you don’t have to fill the silence with talk. Let that person process what is being said and leave some quiet time for her to think about your question. Ask if she’d prefer to try

writing about it herself while you work with another student, assuring her that you’ll come back to continue working together. Try to set a specific task for her to work on:

Tutor: “If you’re having difficulties making the paper longer, why not try the journalist’s questions—who, what, where, why, when, how? Maybe who’s going to benefit from more student parking on campus; where such parking would be; why the administration should consider your proposal; what the administration might bring up as arguments against your proposal. Want to write down those question words to think about? I’ll be back in awhile to see how you’re doing, OK?”

In their discussion of how to use personality preferences to work with writing, Sharon Cramer and Tom Reigstad found that for those who score highly as extraverts on the MBTI scale “an opportunity to brainstorm with fellow writers would be welcome [while] . . . individuals with the ‘introverted’ preference . . . would more likely benefit from independent brooding in private and would write best in a sanctuary, like a study carrel.”⁵

- *Try minimalist tutoring.*

When the writer keeps looking to you to do all the work and is willing to sit there silently and out-wait you, you can try Jeff Brooks’ “defensive minimalist tutoring.” Drawing on his experience in tutoring such students, he recommends mimicking the student’s body language. If the student slouches back in his chair, getting as far away as possible, the tutor can also physically move away, also slouching back into her chair. Jane Wilson, another tutor who has encountered such students, seconds this strategy: “If the student acts tired out and disinterested, the tutor can lay back in his chair and wait for something to happen. In this case, the pressure is now on the student to do something.”⁶ Even if being a defensive minimalist tutor is not your style, too over the top for you, try to ask questions that indicate you are interested in the student’s answers, refrain from answering your own questions, and give the student plenty of wait time to answer. Eventually, most students get involved, at least minimally.

Complicating Matters

The strategies offered here come with a number of caveats. They may not work, but if they do, they may work in ways you don’t want them to. For example, if you are successful in helping a writer talk through her fears or anxieties, she may become overly dependent on you. You begin to suspect that some of her visits to the center are mainly to talk with you as a comforting listening ear or to have you look over the paper because she has come to depend on you to approve every paper before handing it in. Then, you have to think about how to help her become independent. It’s also possible that by talking to you, the writer is not seeking the kinds of professional help she ought to be getting. You

can prepare for this by learning more about the professional resources on your campus. Perhaps professionals from those services can visit your staff meetings and help you to recognize symptoms. Similarly, if you are successful in turning to off-topic conversation, you may find it hard to get the student back to work. By offering an escape valve for what he doesn't want to do, you may have let him continue to avoid working on his writing. His teacher will be equally disappointed, especially if the teacher hears that he went to see a tutor and had a good discussion about changing his major. The teacher will be less likely to refer students to a place where the required work wasn't done. This is also a possible outcome when you tried and tried to get the writer to become engaged in a tutorial and finally had to let him go because he wouldn't or couldn't focus on his writing. Teachers who aren't familiar with tutorial principles and assume the tutor will take control of the session and tell the student what he needs to know will consider the tutor—and the writing center—ineffective.

It would make tutoring much easier if the strategies I've listed above came with a guarantee that they will work. They don't. Every student is a different human being, and as we all know, we all act differently at different times. Moreover, your tutoring style differs from other tutors'. You may be able to be a minimalist tutor, but you may also not find that a comfortable stance because it strikes you as rude. You may welcome students' personal conversations about their lives and problems, or you may be the kind of person for whom this is awkward. While you know that others on your staff can try these counseling strategies, you recognize that you can't. And some days you start off eager to help, and by the end of your assigned time, you really are exhausted and can't listen as closely as you know you want to. So, while strategies sound useful and easy, they aren't recipes. Sometimes the best we can hope for is a repertoire of strategies to draw upon. When one doesn't seem to be working or doesn't fit the way we tutor, we move on to another one. That's what makes tutoring so challenging and finally, when we're successful, so rewarding. In the Writing Lab I work in, we agree that when you've had a bad tutorial, you should try to reflect on what went wrong and learn from it. When you conclude that part of the problem was the student and there's nothing more you can do, let it go. When you've just had a great tutorial, take a moment to just sit and enjoy the feeling.

Further Reading

Bolander, Becky, and Marcia Harrington. 1996. "Reflectivity: Finding Gold in the Crevices of Tutorials." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 20 (10): 1-5.

The authors of this article note that when a student begins to talk about other problems or frustrations in her life, and when tutors listen attentively, valuable information and insights (the gold in the crevices) about the student and her writing can emerge. Bolander and Harrington explain that such listening helps to remind us that students come to tutorials with experiences that affect their writing.

Parbst, John R. 1994. "Off-topic Conversation and the Tutoring Session." *Writing Lab Newsletter* 19 (1): 1-2, 6.

When meeting with a nervous or shy student, John Parbst recommends that tutors try moving away from a tutorial agenda to off-topic conversation. This can result in relaxing the student and, as a side-benefit, may turn up ideas for writing. Possible clues that Parbst suggests for starting off-topic conversation include a student's name that might lead to conversation about the origins of the name and further conversation about the student's background; a student's athletic clothes or sport logos that may lead to questions about the upcoming sports season; or books in a student's backpack that can lead to conversations about other courses or the student's major and future plans.

Pipes, Randolph B., and Donna S. Davenport. 1990. *Introduction to Psychotherapy: Common Clinical Wisdom*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Because tutors encounter similar problems that therapists or counselors meet with, this book offers suggestions for tutors as well. Topics include fears counselors have, such as the fear of looking foolish and the fear of not being competent to help; fears that clients may have that will influence how clients act; ways to start the first session; levels of listening and signals of poor listening; methods to deal with the client's resistance to help that is being offered; and so on.

Notes

1. Leigh Ryan, *The Bedford Guide for Writing Tutors* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994), 48.
2. Thomas C. Thompson, ed., *Most Excellent Differences: Essays in Using Type Theory in the Composition Classroom* (Gainesville: CAPT, 1996), 5.
3. Thompson, 6.
4. Harold L. Hackney and L. Sherilyn Cormier, *The Professional Counselor: A Process Guide to Helping*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1996), 117.
5. Sharon Cramer and Tom Reigstad, "Using Personality to Teach Writing," *Composition Chronicle* 7 (2) (March 1994): 4.
6. Jane C. Wilson, "Making the Sale: Helping Students to 'Buy' Writing Skills," *Writing Lab Newsletter* 21 (10) (1999): 13.

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5

Telling Tutor Tales

Breaking Down Barriers with Stories

Sandra J. Eckard

The silence is deafening despite the sounds I know are present: the muted conversations between tutors and writers, the hum of the lights, the rhythmic tapping of computer keys. Yet all I hear is silence that hangs between us.

I've asked him to tell me what he notices about this passage; he says he knows what's wrong but doesn't know how to fix it.

We are at an impasse, facing an invisible yet impenetrable wall between us.

I take a deep breath, smile, and try something else. We need to find another space—one that is safe, comfortable, a space we can share. "You know, transitions are always difficult for me, too. I have tons of ideas swimming around, yet when I try to get them all down on paper, they sometimes don't seem to go together or say what I want them to. Do you know what I mean?"

He nods and smiles. There has been a subtle, positive change.

This situation—writer and a tutor at a standstill—happens every day in our writing centers. What can we do when other tutoring strategies fail to break through the wall that stands between you? One option, much like my beginning narrative, is telling a story. Although the concept of story may have you envisioning pajamas and the refrain "Once upon a time," storytelling may be found in many tutoring sessions. Between the words on the page and the talk of revision, a different type of exchange can occur, a story of life or experience. "When I was in Freshman Composition . . ." or "Like you, I always have to watch for . . ." have replaced "Once upon a time," but they are transitions into stories nonetheless. Though overlooked, stories can create a positive tutoring environment when things seem to be going nowhere.

SEE DISCUSSION TOPIC #1 AT THE END OF THIS BOOK