

What a Writer Wants: Assessing Fulfillment of Student Goals in Writing Center Tutoring Sessions

by Laurel Raymond and Zarah Quinn

About the Authors

Laurel Raymond is an English Literature and Brain and Cognitive Sciences double major at the University of Rochester. She has worked in the writing center as a peer tutor, student-elected program coordinator, and training mentor since January 2011. Her future plans likely include attending graduate school in cognitive linguistics.

Zarah Quinn attends the University of Rochester, where she majors in English Literature with a Creative Writing concentration. She began training to be a peer tutor in Fall 2010 and has been tutoring since Winter 2011. She is interested in doing post-graduate work in American literature.

Writing centers offer support and feedback to student writers who bring in specific concerns about papers and writing. The writing center of our home institution offers walk-in sessions with peer tutors who have taken an extensive preparatory course, which, according to the official course description, helps the tutor to become a “successful reader, listener and responder in peer-tutoring situations.” This training emphasizes our center’s goal of facilitating students’ long-term development as writers. Therefore, tutors in our center are trained to shift the impetus and focus of the session to the writer—over issues just focused on the paper—in order to enhance the writer’s control over his/her own writing processes and writing.

The writing center where we were trained and currently work thus emphasizes the model of non-directive, writer-based peer tutoring in which, as Jeff Brooks puts it, tutors “make the student the

primary agent in the writing center session” (2). As a peer tutor in our center states, “we try not to give directive or prescriptive advice—tutors are merely sounding boards and facilitators that help students find the writing voice that they already have” (Link). Far from unique to our institution, this preference for giving more non-directive than directive feedback in tutoring sessions is “now so well-established that it has been characterized as a writing center ‘bible’” (Clark 34). However, while the goal of many writing centers calls for a focus on the development of the writer, the writer’s concerns often focus more on the assignment that brings him or her to the writing center (Harris 34). As undergraduate peer tutors, we recognize that some students come into our writing center with goals for the session that may not fit with our long-term goals for them as writers. Nonetheless, if we ignore goals that we deem shortsighted, we risk robbing students of their authority over their papers, isolating them from their own writing processes and inhibiting our ability to connect with them. For a tutorial to produce better writers, the tutor must honor the writer’s concerns and allow him/her to direct the session.

Muriel Harris states that “Our success in achieving our goals is likely to increase in direct proportion to our ability to recognize the student’s goals” (33). If we wish to focus on writer development, it is essential that we allow students’ ownership of their own writing and over any discussion of their writing. Thus, tutors are often faced with the difficult task of integrating tutor and writer goals; they must focus their sessions in ways that fulfill the students’ requests for the paper at hand while maintaining an emphasis on facilitating the long-term development of the writer. As undergraduate peer tutors ourselves, we wondered how well sessions conducted by our fellow peer tutors honored writers’ requests. The purpose of this study was to analyze the fulfillment of students’ initial concerns in writing center peer tutorials. Furthermore, the study examines which concerns are most common among students when they come to the writing center and which concerns tutors most commonly focus on. Specifically, the study answers the following questions:

- What writing concerns do writers bring to tutoring sessions?
- What writing concerns do tutors address?

- How do common writer concerns and common tutor concerns differ in distribution?
- When writers ask for help with a writing concern, to what extent does the tutor address this concern in the tutorial? That is, how often is the writer's specific concern fulfilled? Partially fulfilled? Not fulfilled?

We addressed these questions by examining records of peer-tutoring sessions and comparing the tutors' records of the writers' initial concerns with the recorded focus of the session. Our results primarily indicate that tutors in our center at least partially, often times wholly, fulfill students' goals for the session, though they often shift the session to focus on other concerns as well. We also discovered a mismatch in top writer and tutor goals.

Method

To discover how well writers' concerns matched up with the concerns tutors addressed, we analyzed session records from the writing center of a small, private, undergraduate, four-year research university. Session records are the tutors' written accounts of the tutoring session, which they record after the session is over and which are kept in an electronic database accessible only to employees of the writing center. From the session records we used two components: session goals and session summary. Session goals contain the tutor's record of the writer's initial concerns. Session summary contains the tutor's account of what took place in the session: addressed concerns, strategies used, and any other comments. We used the former to identify writers' initial concerns and the latter to identify the concerns addressed by the tutors.

We obtained 90 session records spanning from October 31, 2010 to November 11, 2010 and included all undergraduate tutoring sessions from this period of time. In each of the session records we separately coded the session goals for the writers' initial concerns and the session summary for the concerns tutors addressed and then compared our decisions. We employed this double-coding method in order to minimize error. Where there were discrepancies, we discussed and then came to conclusions upon which we both agreed.

The categories we used in coding needed to cleanly define and

categorize an often blurred set of writing concerns and produce valid, consistent information. Ideally, two people familiar with our terms would be able to read the same session goal and produce the same list of initial writer concerns or read the same session summary and produce the same list of discussed concerns. We based our list of concerns on our experiences as undergraduate writing tutors as well as knowledge from reading the literature in the field. Coding the session records forced us to add some concerns, discard others, and to constantly sharpen our definitions.

As undergraduate peer tutors conducting research on our own writing center, we recognize that we may be biased to conclude that we are successfully fulfilling all of the writers' needs. We also recognize that the data we collected was written by tutors rather than writers. In discerning the writer's initial goals we therefore cannot be certain we are getting the writer's exact words or that the tutor completely understood the writer's questions. However, these session records were the most readily available sources for us to pursue our research questions.

Writing Concern Definitions

In this section we aim to make our decisions about coding session records as transparent as possible.

No Stated Concerns

This concern applies solely to session goals. We coded session goals as "no stated concern" if the tutor failed to specify in the session record what the writer wanted, the tutor failed to question the writer about his/her goals, or the writer failed to produce a specific writing concern. As an example, a session goal might read "Writer wanted to get the paper peer reviewed." While this sentence does state the writer's goal—to obtain a peer review—it does not state any specific writing concern or give the writer any guidance as to what to focus on in the tutorial.

Grammar

The session goal states that the student asked to work on grammar, or the session summary mentions addressing grammar or specific grammatical concepts. For example, a session goal coded as grammar could read “writer wanted to improve grammar.” Session summaries could include “we spoke about grammar” or a reference to a concept such as subject-verb agreement.

Clarity

The session goal states that the student either asked to work on clarity by name or asked if his/her paper was understandable, or the session summary either mentions working on clarity or the development of reader-based prose by name, or implies it through strategy or less direct language. During the course of our research, we found that “clarity” or “clear” were recurring terms in both session goals and session summaries. We quickly ascertained that the term represents a common concern for writers. However, as the word appeared in conjunction with a variety of issues and in a variety of contexts, the meaning of “clarity” or a “clear” paper remained elusive. For example, the following are similar to descriptions we encountered in our records, all using the word ‘clarity’: “we discussed ways to improve clarity,” “we focused on sentence clarity,” and “we discussed the clarity of the argument.” Although each uses the word “clarity,” the first assumes a general (though unspecified) definition of clarity, the second focuses on sentence-level concerns, and the third focuses on the overall argument of the paper.

We ultimately arrived upon a definition of clarity that fits in all of these contexts: “clear” prose refers to prose that effectively communicates the writer’s ideas to the reader—in other words, reader-based writing. Therefore, “working on clarity” is working towards the transformation of writer-based prose into reader-based prose (Flower 36). In cases where the term is intimately conflated with other concerns, we coded for both of the relevant concerns. Thus “clarity of argument” would be coded for both clarity and argument.

Argument

The session goal states that the writer asked to go over the argument, counter-argument, thesis, evidence, or analysis or a session summary mentions working on the paper's argument, counter-argument, thesis, evidence, or analysis. For example, the session goals might state, "Writer wanted to make sure the thesis was argued throughout," while a session summary could read "we talked about adding more analysis as evidence" or "we discussed if the thesis was arguable."

Often we were forced to extricate argument—which is all-pervasive—from our other coded issues. Although every aspect of a paper can be said to construct the argument, coding argument in every session would not help us answer our research question. Although argument could be (for example) sharpened by enhancing clarity or by manipulating the structure of the paper, we coded based on the specificity of what was addressed. We would not code argument for a session that worked on, say, the organization of the paper, even though it ultimately improved the argument. However, in cases where the session summary intimately conflated argument and another concern such that it was difficult to see where one ended and the other began, we would code both argument and the other concern. For example, "organization and structure of the argument" would be coded for both organization and for argument while "we worked on restructuring the paragraphs" (which would presumably help the argument) would be coded for organization only.

Assignment Fit

The session goal states that the writer asked to go over the paper and whether it addressed the assignment, or the session summary mentions breaking down the prompt and parsing out its meaning or discussing whether the paper is appropriate under the assignment's criteria. For example, a session goal could say "the writer wanted to discuss the assignment's requirements." A session summary might mention that "the writer had a lot of questions on the assignment so we discussed the prompt."

Citations

The session goal states that the writer asked to go over citations, or the session summary mentions going over citations or a specific citation format (such as MLA). For example, a session summary might mention “the writer did not cite sources, so we briefly talked about how and when to cite.”

Organization

The session goal states that the writer asked to discuss the organization or structure of his/her paper, or the session summary mentions discussing or working on the organization or structure of his/her paper. For example, the session goal might say “the writer wanted to work on the structure of his draft,” or the session summary could say “we discussed possible rearranging the paragraphs.”

Textual Flow

The session goal states that the writer asked to work on the flow of his/her paper, or the session summary mentions working on the flow of the paper. We defined flow as concerned with the text itself rather than the cohesion of global argument ideas. For example, a session summary that mentions addressing the paper’s “global flow of ideas” would not qualify as textual flow. Instead, we followed the principles of given-new (which stresses that new information in a text should be stated after a context has previously and recently been established) and the principle of relevance (which stresses that when one makes a claim, it should have evident relevance to what has previously followed) as a base (Vande Kopple 182, Rossen-Knill 1, Grice 27). Thus, our definition of flow is anchored in the necessity for explicit textual relationships (such as meta-discourse) and grounding the text in context. Under these parameters, a writer’s concerns categorized under textual flow could include paragraph transitions (which require establishing new information in a context), or sentence-to-sentence transitions (which also inherently require noting the sentence’s relationship with the previous one). A session summary might state that “we worked on how the writer’s sentences transitioned into one

another.” Or a session summary could state that “we used the given-new technique to alleviate the jumpy feel.”

Generating Content

The session goal mentions that the writer wants to brainstorm ideas, or the session summary mentions the writer developing new content for his/her paper with the tutor’s guidance. For example, a session goal may mention “the writer wanted to brainstorm” while a session summary may mention “the writer talked about all of their ideas and from there we constructed a good working thesis.”

Although generating content typically encompasses brainstorming, we differentiated between brainstorming as a strategy to address a different writing concern and the actual brainstorming of new content. As a result, a session summary reading “we brainstormed transitions the writer could use” would not count as generating content, as the tutor and writer are using the tactic to address issues of textual flow, not to add content to the paper.

Focus

The session goal mentions that the writer wants to either focus the paper or cut it down, or the session summary mentions the tutor and the writer worked on focusing the paper or cutting it down. For example, focus could be coded for in a session goal reading “the writer was concerned that their paper had too many topics” while a session summary might read, “we used the highlighter method to condense two paragraphs.”

Data and Discussion

Based on our analysis of the double-coded sessions, we hierarchically distributed the concerns of the writer (based on the frequency of the writer’s stated concerns) and the concerns of the tutor (based on the frequency of specific concerns the tutor and writer discussed in the session). As seen in Table 1, there was both a mismatch of concerns and some surprising overlap. According to our analysis, the student writers’ top initial concern was grammar, with 34% of tutor-

recorded sessions beginning with writers expressing the desire to check or improve the grammar of their papers. Thus, the majority of students who entered the writing center listed grammar as a concern. Following close behind grammar were clarity and textual flow with each cited as goals in 33% of sessions. Argument was next with 22% of session goals indicating the paper’s argument as an initial concern. However, while, according to the tutors’ records, the top initial concern of student writers was grammar, for tutors it was argument, as an impressive 49% of sessions focused on this issue. Other top concerns of tutors include grammar and textual flow—high-ranking concerns of writers—with 37% and 34% of sessions discussing these concerns respectively. It should also be noted that this data suggests that very often writers receive more from sessions than they request. For example, grammar was the top concern for writers, and only the second highest focus of tutors, yet the number of sessions in which it was addressed exceeds those in which it was initially requested. Despite this, we analyzed this data based on the general hierarchy, as based on this table. We cannot draw causal relations between the numbers themselves, and for our purposes the general rankings appear more enlightening than the numbers.

Ranking of Writer’s Session Focus (Based on Initial Concerns)	Ranking of Tutor’s Session Focus (Based on Concerns Addressed)
Grammar (34%)	Argument (49%)
Clarity (33%)	Grammar (37%)
Textual Flow (33%)	Textual Flow (34%)
Argument (22%)	Organization (27%)
Organization (18%)	Clarity (26%)
Assignment Fit (16%)	Generating Content (17%)
Generating Content (7 %)	Assignment Fit (12%)
Focus (6%)	Focus (11%)
Citations (2%)	Citations (4%)

Table 1: Writer and Tutor Rankings for Session Focus. Because each tutorial often had more than one initial goal and more than one focus, these percentages exceed the number of tutorials (90).

Clearly there is a slight mismatch in main concerns among tutors and writers. While the top concern for writers was grammar, an arguably more local concern grounded in the mechanics of the text, the top concern for tutors was argument, a global concern closely related to the thought processes of the writer. We should here note that this ranking roughly corresponds to the values of our center; as an interviewed peer tutor explained, our center views writing as “a universal skill that is all about translating ideas from person to person or discipline or discipline” (Link). It is therefore logical that sessions in our center tend to focus on the writer’s ideas and how best to convey them. Deborah Rossen-Knill, the director of our center and professor of our peer-tutor training class, explains: “most generally, the tutor’s role is to help the writer discover, test out, and clearly communicate his or her own ideas.” Although improving a local concern such as grammar is not, by any means, mutually exclusive with addressing a writer’s thought processes, our writing center believes that probing more global concerns, like argument, allows tutors to work more closely with the analytical thinking patterns of the writer. Ultimately, the tutoring context is an opportunity for the tutor and the writer to “engage in a discussion about which choices most effectively convey the writer’s meaning. This kind of discussion typically proceeds from a global, essay level to a sentence level. This hierarchy of issues should not, however, be imposed rigidly, as global meaning shapes local choices just as local choices reveal global meanings” (Rossen-Knill). As these comments from our director reveal, tutors in our center tend to focus their attention first on the idea level of the essay, though they are not opposed to addressing more sentence-level components, such as grammar or textual flow.

The difference in the top concerns of writers and tutors reveals that while writers visiting our center tended to request attention to more sentence-level concerns, tutors tended to direct attention to argument, a larger-level concern. Yet despite this mismatch in top concerns, tutors still addressed other top concerns of writers. The most frequently stated concern of writers (grammar) ranked second among tutors’ top concerns, where a substantial 37% of sessions discussed grammar-related concerns. Tutors in our center are also counseled that “whatever the goals [writer’s or tutor’s] of a particular

session might be, they should emerge organically from the writer’s aims and needs” (Rossen-Knill). With our focus on writers in mind, it makes sense that a common writer concern is a high-ranking session focus. Tutors discussed other top, initially stated concerns as well. For example, tutors addressed textual flow in 34% of sessions, organization in 27% of sessions, and clarity in 26% of sessions. These same three concerns—textual flow, organization, and clarity—follow right behind grammar in writers’ top concerns (see Table 1). It appears that, although sessions are frequently oriented toward the the center’s goal of addressing global concerns related to the writer’s ideas, tutors still attempt to honor writers’ initially stated concerns—even in the case of a more local concern like grammar. According to our analysis, tutors are, for the most part, honoring the student-centered ideology of our writing center.

Further evidence of this general fulfillment of the writers’ initial concerns is also seen in Figure 1. According to our analysis, 82% of sessions addressed at least one of the writer’s initial concerns, while 48% of tutorials (included within the 82%) addressed all of the writer’s initial concerns. Thus, almost half of the sessions discussed all of the writers’ stated concerns, while the majority of sessions addressed at least one of the writers’ initially stated concerns. Only 13% of the 90 sessions did not address at least one of the writer’s initial goals.

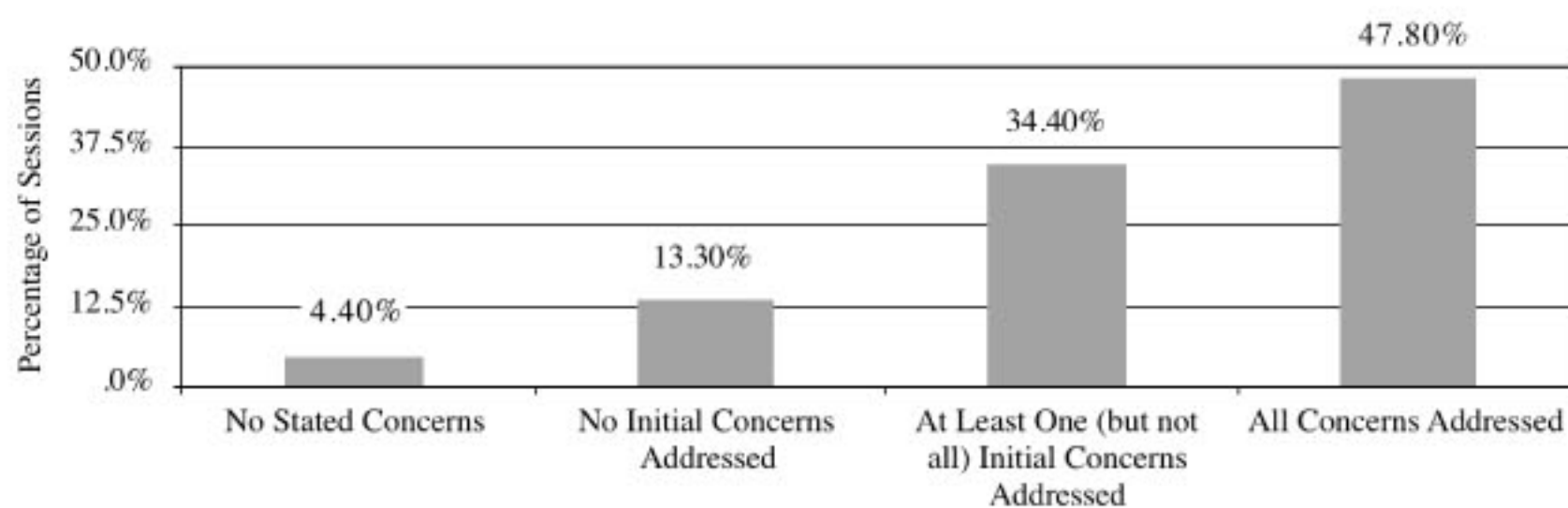


Figure 1: Analysis 2: Distribution of Concerns

A different breakdown of writer-goal fulfillment—with similar goal-fulfillment trends—can be seen in Table 2. We evaluated each individual concern, calculating the percentage of concern fulfillment on a session-by-session basis. As seen in Table 2, there was a high rate of concern fulfillment. Of our nine categorized concerns, seven of them were addressed over 50% of the time. And those concerns

addressed less than 50% of the time were discussed no less than 44% of the time. Argument itself as an individual concern had an 80% rate of fulfillment, while grammar had a 77% rate of fulfillment. From this data, it appears that none of the writers' concerns was disregarded or ignored. The majority of writer-stated concerns are discussed in the session at least half of the time. Thus, the rate of concern-fulfillment is overall a high one.

Concern	Writer's Stated Concern (% of sessions)	Tutor-Addressed Writer's Stated Concern (% of those sessions)
Argument	22%	80%
Grammar	34%	77%
Generating Content	7%	67%
Textual Flow	33%	63%
Focus	6%	60%
Assignment Fit	16%	54%
Citations	2%	50%
Clarity	33%	46%
Organization	18%	44%

Table 2: Distribution of Concerns

Still, considering that tutors in our writing center attempt to let students, and the students' goals for their writing, guide the session and should therefore strive to address all initially stated concerns, clarity and organization have relatively low rates of fulfillment. Clarity was second among writer-stated concerns; perhaps the high frequency of its appearance led to a lower rate of fulfillment comparatively. It is also possible that writers were using "clarity" to ask for help with something outside of our definition of clarity or organization. Another possibility, however, is that the goals were simply not adequately addressed. We can't be sure, and ultimately it is unclear why either had a relatively low rate of fulfillment. This should be investigated further, ideally with a larger sample.

In any writing center and any tutoring context, balancing the writer's goals with the tutor's goals demands a careful approach. If tutors ignore the writer's initial concerns and focus only on their own hierarchy of concerns, they risk forcing writers to forfeit their authority over their papers. Ideally, the goal of tutoring is to guide students towards a greater awareness of their own personal writing processes, leading them to become better writers independently. However, if we fail to allow student writers the power to guide the tutoring session, we perpetuate a model of dependence: "to make writers self-sufficient, able to function on their own, we have to shift the burden to them" (Harris 28). Undergraduate peer tutors are in a unique situation, for our position of "authority" exists only in the setting of the tutorial itself, and even then the hierarchy is tenuous. It is therefore easier for us to step back and encourage the writer to take control, as the student is less likely to view us as "experts" whose advice must be followed. In letting them guide the conference, we move students towards viewing themselves as "participants" in the act of knowledge construction rather than "observers" (Penrose and Geisler 517).

The results of our analysis are therefore encouraging. They show that, for the most part, students who visit our writing center have their goals at least partially honored by their tutors. Maintaining a focus on student-centered, non-directive tutorials is crucial to our writing center, and especially crucial for us peer tutors: if we ignore the benefits afforded by our peer status by failing to encourage initiative in our peer writers, we lose sight of one of our key strengths.

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