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## 7

## Looking at the Whole Text

Jennifer Staben and Kathryn Dempsey Nordhaus

A student walks into the writing center, sits down in the chair next to you, and pulls out a paper, announcing, "I'm a terrible writer. Can you read this and tell me if I did it right?" Another student comes in, sits down, pushes a paper across the table, and says, "My English is terrible. Can you help me with it?" Both students offer their papers with an unvoiced disclaimer: my work isn't necessarily a reflection of my *self* or my *knowledge*. Both students offer their papers with an unvoiced request: please help me without judging me. But only one of these students speaks English as a second language (ESL). Can you guess which?

The answer lies at the heart of these students' requests. The native English-speaking (NES) student has invited you to critique her writing—the whole text; whereas, the ESL student has invited you to critique his English—the language. Although this may at first appear to be a small semantic difference, it's a difference that looms large in a writing conference. The goals of most writing centers today reflect Stephen North's "idea" of writing centers: "to produce better writers, not better writing."<sup>1</sup> To achieve this goal, tutors are trained to look beyond the language—to look at the text as a whole; to look at the text within the context for which it is created; and to look at the writer's relationship with the text and with the audience the text will reach.

That's the goal, but it can be a challenge to meet it when working with an ESL writer. Language difficulties may be the first things you notice as you read a given piece or the student's main reason for coming to the writing center in the first place. Some ESL writers use the request "Can you check my grammar?" in a very general sense to mean "Could you look this over for me?" Others definitely mean what they say; they want help with their English and they ask for it directly.

Because writing centers strive to be student-centered, writing conferences with ESL students often make tutors feel that they are faced with a difficult choice: comply with the ESL students' invitations to focus on grammar and

other surface errors or ignore the ESL students' requests and focus on the whole text. Opting for the former often leaves tutors feeling like traitors to the cause: they have helped contribute to the perpetuation of the image of a writing center as a "skills center, a fix-it shop."<sup>2</sup> Opting for the latter, however, sometimes leaves tutors feeling more like *intruders* than *collaborators*; they have forced their way into students' ideas—their minds—without an invitation and may be rebuffed for doing so.

What's a tutor to do? Though there are no easy solutions to the tension this apparent dichotomy produces, the dichotomy itself is false: Tutoring objectives are rarely as simple as *either* grammar *or* the whole text. Yet even in situations when the student and the text pull you toward focusing solely on grammar, we believe that you should resist. ESL students, like their NES counterparts, have much to gain from looking at the whole text.

### Some Background

At first glance, the texts produced by ESL students and by NES students sometimes appear strikingly similar. For instance, you may notice that both ESL and NES students produce texts with a number of surface errors: misplaced or missing punctuation, shifting verb tenses, or spelling errors. Regardless of these similarities in the *texts*, you sense that the needs of the *writers* are different, calling for different strategies in a writing conference. Both research and anecdotal evidence support tutor intuition: ESL students' needs *are* unique. Before reviewing some strategies you might apply to meet these unique needs, it might be helpful to look at some of the ways ESL writers differ from NES writers.

Many students, regardless of their linguistic background, are challenged by the demands of writing for academic audiences. Academic writing requires students to analyze and synthesize materials from a variety of sources, to draw conclusions based on these analyses, and to support these conclusions with objective and subjective evidence. For many NES students, meeting the expectations of the academy involves adopting a new writing style, while relying on the fundamental skills—language, grammar, and structure—they learned in elementary and secondary school. For ESL students, the challenges of writing in the academy include all of these issues and more.

Why is this so? First, ESL students face the obvious challenge of language. Although NES students may struggle with punctuation or spelling, for instance, most can rely on their native ear to make appropriate word choices and cogent sentence patterns. ESL students, on the other hand, lack that ear. Although they may have extensive English vocabularies and a sound understanding of grammar rules—knowledge often superior, in fact, to their NES counterparts—they often lack the ability to hear their mistakes, to sense when something is not quite right. ESL students often turn to writing center tutors to provide the ear they lack. Tutors, in turn, are often overwhelmed by the

linguistic issues on the page. As Muriel Harris and Tony Silva remind us, "To the untrained tutor's eye what is most immediately noticeable is that a draft written by an ESL student looks so different."<sup>3</sup> In short, the surface errors, when combined with ESL students' hesitancy, accent, and uncertainty, can make language issues appear more urgent than they really are—to tutors and students alike. In response to this perceived urgency, tutors tend to try to provide the ear with a sentence-level approach; they assume the role of linguistic informant on issues like sentence structure and word choice.

Sentence-level assistance can be helpful to ESL students (see Chapter 8 for helpful strategies). These strategies can help put to rest some of the students' linguistic anxiety. However, it does not address far less obvious challenges ESL students face as academic writers: cultural differences. Although tutors and ESL students are aware that cultural differences exist, both tend to underestimate their significance and scope.

Most writing tasks in U.S. colleges and universities are based on cultural conceptions about clear writing and effective argumentation—ideas that may not be shared by ESL writers. In *Listening to the World*, Helen Fox tells countless stories about how upper-level undergraduate and graduate students, proficient and sometimes professional writers in their first language, struggle less with the linguistic aspects of English and more with U.S. academic expectations of how writers construct arguments, utilize outside authorities, and even incorporate personal experience and viewpoints into academic texts. Fox suggests that this struggle is not simply an issue of adopting a different style of writing; U.S. academic texts require students to assume different ways of viewing the world and their place in it.<sup>4</sup> For example, when Fan Shen discusses his own experiences as a writer moving from a Chinese academic culture to a U.S. context, he explains that making the transition was not as simple as switching pronouns—from *we* to *I*. Instead, he had to learn to create a more individualistic stance for himself when he wrote essays in his English composition course—one that not only used the pronoun *I* but valued it in a different way.<sup>5</sup>

Contrastive rhetoric studies suggest that "not simply rhetorical style but also purpose, task, topic, and audience are culturally informed."<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it seems clear that ESL writers may need resources—"cultural informants"—to help them understand the assumptions and expectations of a U.S. academic audience, assumptions that are not usually directly addressed on the assignment sheet.

This role of cultural informant would appear ideal for writing center tutors. It is, in many respects, an extension of the facilitator role tutors play with NES writers—questioning the students about the needs of the audience and how the text might change to meet those needs. However, with ESL students, this role as facilitator is complicated by issues of language and culture. With many NES students, tutors can use Socratic questioning techniques to elicit knowledge from the writer that the writer may, in turn, incorporate into the text. In contrast, for ESL students as well as inexperienced NES writers, these same techniques may be doomed to fail because no amount of Socratic questioning can elicit

language or cultural knowledge the writer doesn't possess. These writers need an informant to provide them with the background they need to successfully negotiate these new writing contexts.

To complicate matters further, even the experts don't always agree on how a tutor can successfully perform the informant role. For instance, Susan Blau and John Hall believe that interweaving discussions of language and vocabulary throughout a tutoring session may be more appropriate with ESL writers, particularly those with less experience writing in English.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, Carol Severino,<sup>8</sup> as well as Muriel Harris and Tony Silva,<sup>9</sup> maintain that higher order, rhetorical concerns should still come before linguistic concerns. Similarly, many tutor guidebooks, such as *The Allyn & Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring*, encourage writers to put higher-order concerns first.<sup>10</sup>

Acting as a cultural informant about U.S. academic expectations—rhetorical or otherwise—can be difficult because no matter what the background of the ESL writer, language is a concern. Some ESL students have spent time in high school or middle school in the United States. These students may seem to be familiar with aspects of American culture and language, everything from customs to idioms, but they often lack knowledge of U.S. academic culture, just like any inexperienced writer. And because English is not their first language, students may assume that good writing is the same as correct writing. At the same time, other ESL students may become overwhelmed while trying to write because of the cognitive complexity of the task.<sup>11</sup> These are the students who often literally cannot see the forest for the trees: They are so focused on the language—on trying to wrestle their complicated thoughts onto paper using language abilities that are not yet sufficient to the task—that they may not realize that the change in language and in culture necessitates a different approach to communicating those thoughts to others. For both sets of students, language concerns can overshadow rhetorical ones and important conversations about academic culture and expectations may not take place. This is where you and the whole text come in.

### What to Do

Tutoring sessions are as individual as fingerprints: they may progress along a familiar pattern only to whorl suddenly off into new and unexpected directions. Therefore, we don't have specific procedures for you to follow, but instead, we offer some thoughts, some suggestions, and even some anecdotes, in the hope that one or more of these approaches may suggest approach(es) appropriate for your ESL tutoring situations.

#### *Talk Before Text*

One of the strengths of writing center conferences has always been the interactive talk between tutor and tutee. Although questions may not work in the same

way with ESL writers as they do when working with an NES student, we would argue that they can still play a critical role in the writing center conference. One of the ways to incorporate questioning into conferences with ESL students is to talk with the writer *before* turning your attention to the text.

- One way to get the conversation started is to focus first on the assignment. Most tutors have had the experience of discovering at the end of the session that a student had completely misinterpreted the instructor's directions. Oftentimes, this misinterpretation is caused by cultural differences. We forget that the writing assignment itself is cultural; although students might understand the individual words, they still may not have a clear idea of what the instructor expects. Read the assignment. Ask the writer questions about his understanding of the expectations of the assignment and how he tried to meet them. Telling students that they are on the wrong track can be difficult. However, it is even more difficult to tell a student that fact after you've spent forty minutes helping him generate and develop ideas that don't adequately address the assignment. (See Chapter 3.)
- Another way to start a conversation before turning to the text is to ask ESL writers what they chose to write about in response to the assignment and why they chose it as the subject for their papers. The simple request "Tell me what your paper is about" can be useful when working with any ESL writer, but it is especially productive when working with students who are inexperienced writers in both English and their native language. These discussions can help both of you notice differences between what the writer has told you and what is on the page—differences you and the writer can negotiate together.
- A third way to start a conversation is to focus on the writer's process. The text is typically what draws writers into the writing center. As a result, we often focus on the product, neglecting the process altogether. To learn about the writer's process, tutors can ask students questions, such as: "When did you start writing this paper?" "Have you written other drafts?" "Have you received feedback yet?" "What do you plan to do next?" "How can I help you achieve your goals?"

After surveying research on the composing processes of ESL and NES writers, Harris and Silva suggest that:

ESL writers might find it helpful to stretch out the composing process: (1) to include more work on planning—to generate ideas, text structure, and language—so as to make the actual writing more manageable; (2) to have . . . ESL students write in stages, e.g., focusing on content and organization in one draft and focusing on linguistic concerns in another subsequent draft; and (3) to separate their treatments of revising (rhetorical) and editing (linguistic) and provide realistic strategies for each, strategies that do not rely on intuitions ESL writers may not have.<sup>12</sup>

With these ideas in mind, we believe that asking preliminary questions—about the assignment, the topic, and the writer’s process—is a critical step in the writing conference. This approach can help you and the writer prioritize and set goals and it’s also a good way to focus the student’s attention (and yours) on larger textual issues from the very beginning.

### *Read (and Read, and Read) with Purpose*

If your opening questions are meant to help the writer focus on the text as a whole, we believe it is important for your session to begin with the text as a whole as well. That is, in most situations we recommend reading through the entire essay with your tutee before focusing on the parts. Though there are situations where going through an ESL writer’s text paragraph by paragraph or line by line is appropriate, it is difficult to talk about issues of overall focus and organization after reading only the first paragraph or two, especially when the writer may be using different rhetorical strategies than the ones you are used to. It is definitely easier to see patterns—whether they are related to focus, organization, or language—if you approach the paper as a whole first.

Similarly, many tutors find it useful to read through the piece once to get an overall impression, with either tutor or student reading out loud (see Chapter 4 for more on reading student papers aloud), and then to go through the paper a second time to talk specifically about issues both the tutor and the tutee notice. Since some writers, both NES and ESL, write their way to their main points, this strategy can help tutors address issues of thesis and focus much more effectively. Also, if you notice that a writer consistently employs the same unexpected organizational strategy throughout his paper—putting the main point at the end of each paragraph, for instance—then you can more easily explore the idea that this is something the writer is controlling, which can then be negotiated, as opposed to something that is out of control.

### *Be Direct, Not Directive*

When working with ESL writers, and indeed all writers, we believe it is important to understand the difference between being *direct* and being *directive*. That is, you need to negotiate the fine line between being direct by giving the students information they don’t have—about academic expectations, essay conventions, or grammar constructions—and being directive by telling writers what they *have to do* with that information for a specific essay. If you simply tell ESL writers that they need to put a thesis sentence near the beginning of the essay or that they should organize their research paper in a certain manner, you are not helping them understand what you likely know instinctively—the web of assumptions and conventions that shape different writing genres. It is an understanding of genre(s) that will help the ESL writer negotiate future writing tasks. One of the best ways to help the student understand is to explore the

topic together, through interactive discussions where you and the student share your questions and information.

Another reason to be direct, rather than directive, is that it presents opportunities for you to learn. In a truly interactive conference, both the tutor *and* the student learn from each other. When you are directive, the student is forced to be a follower. For example, several years ago a graduate student from Japan was working with an undergraduate tutor on an essay for a course in second language acquisition (SLA). The tutor responded to the writer’s use of the terms *production* and *utterance* in regards to language learning by informing her that these were not the expected ways to say these concepts in English. The writer tried to explain that these words were established vocabulary in the field of SLA, but the undergraduate tutor ignored this explanation. The tutor was unable to see the graduate student across the table from her, an individual with specialized knowledge; instead, she saw an ESL student with a vocabulary problem. Rather than asking the writer why she had used these words and then creating a space in the session for discussion and negotiation, the tutor was directive, closed off conversation on this issue, and lost the chance to learn about an unfamiliar discourse community.

As you work with each student on overall textual issues, it is important to remember that while there frequently is logic behind the choices a writer has made in a given draft, it is difficult to understand those choices without asking the writer. To put it simply, being direct means understanding when questions might *not* be the most effective way to generate knowledge, but being directive means forgetting about times when they *are*.

### *Tell . . . and Show*

Although questioning is the cornerstone of effective writing conferences, it isn’t always enough. When ESL writers seem to be struggling with an assignment—an assessment based either on what they say when talking to you about it or on what you see happening on the page—don’t hesitate to address this issue directly. Telling students what a teacher might expect to see in response to the assignment and what you as a reader see happening in their papers is one way to begin the discussion.

For example, a situation we see frequently in our writing center is ESL students struggling in their second composition course—a course that focuses on writing about literary texts. Though some instructors spend a great deal of class time helping students develop strategies for analyzing works of poetry, fiction, and nonfiction, others assume all students will understand their request to “write a literary analysis of \_\_\_\_\_.” Students often come to our center with long summaries of the works they’re supposed to analyze and are unsure what the difference is between what they’ve done and what they’re supposed to do. In these kinds of situations, modeling can be a very useful strategy. Try to walk the writer through your own thinking and writing

processes if you were given an assignment similar to this. The key is to focus on the *process* you would go through and not the *content* you would generate. Our sessions with these students often involve going back to the story or poem itself and modeling how to look for patterns or themes and then how to move from these things to thinking about them on paper and in an essay format. In doing this, it is important to keep the session interactive. Unfortunately, it can be all too easy to tell writers what to do rather than to relate to writers what they need to know to perform the task successfully themselves.

Don't underestimate the power of textual models. Sometimes instructors will give students a sample paper or two to help them understand the assignment. In other cases, they will provide these samples if the student writer requests them. If the writer has a sample paper, you might consider going through it with him. Models are only helpful, however, if students notice the parts they are supposed to (see Chapter 2). By asking questions and pointing out textual features, you can help the writer understand the qualities and conventions of the model that she might want to utilize. For instance, if the sample is a

- narrative essay containing rich description and dialogue, you might ask the student to consider why the author used these techniques and why the instructor might value them.
- book review paper from a history class, and the writer keeps the summary of the book separate from the critique, you might highlight and discuss this separation with your tutee.

You can help an ESL writer see a sample as more than a rigid formula to follow. Instead, you can show how it is a specific articulation of larger principles underlying a type of academic writing. These principles may affect every aspect of the piece—from topic selection and organization to the language itself.

### *Respond as a Reader*

Sometimes tutors can get so caught up in what is different about what they see on the page that they forget the most important role they can play with ESL writers—as a reader. Just like their NES counterparts, ESL writers often need feedback on what they're saying—their ideas—and not just on how they're saying it. Some tutors, especially tutors working with older or more experienced students, hesitate to discuss ideas. Sometimes this hesitance stems from a fear of appearing uninformed and thus undermining their credibility or authority. But often tutors shy away from discussing ideas because they don't want to offend the student; grammar is safe, neutral territory, while ideas are potentially explosive minefields filled with personal beliefs and values. (For ideas on how to be a better reader of ESL students' papers, see Chapter 4.)

There are ways to approach ideas with respect and sensitivity:

- Share your own ideas.
- Point out places where an essay suggests connections to your own life or experiences.
- Point out ideas that make you think—or make you think differently.
- Highlight places that are unclear to you; ask the writer to expand her ideas by providing examples or anecdotes that help clarify her thoughts to you.
- Play devil's advocate—help the writer see other sides to his ideas.
- Identify places where the writer could strengthen her argument by acknowledging other opinions, or where she could diffuse counterarguments by addressing them directly.

This is one area where the Socratic approach can serve you particularly well. When you're questioning someone gently and are truly interested in what he has to say, it's hard to offend. In fact, the opposite is often the case. Many writers come to the center blocked by their discomfort with the language. Your questions can reassure the writers that although their language skills may not be perfect, they aren't interfering with their ideas, and their ideas are interesting to others.

### *Use the Power of Paper*

It is vital to know when talk is not enough. The spoken word can be extremely powerful, but when placed on a page, writers tend to think of it as permanent. This perceived permanence of words on paper can be intimidating to writers and can especially block ESL writers. However, there are ways you can harness the power of paper to work for the student's benefit.

One of the simplest things you can do for students is to serve as a scribe. Some ESL students speak fluently and have no problems expressing themselves verbally because they don't stop to translate what they want to say; they simply say it. But when it comes to putting words to a page, the process might be more arduous. (The reverse is true as well: Some students who are not fluent speakers of English may be fluent writers if they learned English mainly through writing and reading.) Initially, they might write their thoughts in their first language and then translate their ideas. Or, they may write their thoughts in a mixture of both languages, planning to "smooth it out" later. Both of these processes can affect the product. If you suspect this may be the case, or if you are having a difficult time understanding what the student has written, ask the student for clarification and write down his response. Although this is a common practice for working with NES writers, it may be even more important for ESL writers who are balancing several complex cognitive tasks at once.

Another way you can use paper to the students' advantage is to get away from words. We regularly use outlines or lists with students in the writing

center—ESL students should not be an exception. You might also consider graphically illustrating the various elements of a piece of written work (introduction, body, conclusion), showing the relative size and importance of each, along with some notations about what kinds of things might be included in each element. These illustrations can be used to represent both the forms the writer is trying to learn and the actual structure of the writer's text. (See Chapter 3 for ideas about creating graphic models.)

The benefits of this strategy are many. These techniques can help loosen up a blocked ESL student by turning her attention from a troublesome sentence or paragraph and helping her see, literally, the big picture. ESL writers who are visual learners may benefit more from these pictures than their explanations. In addition, by creating a picture, you are giving the ESL writer something physical to take with her—an additional reference she can consult as she seeks to revise her writing.

### Complicating Matters

In this chapter, we have tried to review one of the challenges you're likely to face when working with ESL students in the writing center: finding ways to pull students' attention toward higher-order concerns such as focus, development, and organization, and away from lower-order concerns such as grammar or word choice. It sounds like a simple goal, but it's an extremely complex issue with no easy solutions. To a certain extent, it is this complexity that presented the two of us with unexpected challenges when writing this chapter. We kept getting sidetracked by "what-ifs." We'd like to share some of these "what-ifs" here because they're the kind of complications you may encounter.

What if the student is a repeat customer and has already been to the writing center several times to work on content and organization? What if the student is insistent about working on language only? What if one of the myriad factors that *can* affect the focus of a writing conference (the time pressure of last-minute visits to the writing center, a tutor's awareness of a particular instructor's grading criteria, and/or a tutor's desire to be helpful and student-focused) *does* affect the conference? In these situations, it's important for tutors to remember several things:

- You don't have to choose between substance and grammar. Though the goal is to focus as much as possible on higher-order concerns, it doesn't necessarily mean you should focus on these concerns to the exclusion of everything else.
- Most students' time is at a premium: they are students, employees, daughters, fathers, friends, and so on. They need to use their time wisely; if they truly have little need for additional discussion of higher-order concerns (as in the case of the repeat customer), their time—and yours—may be best spent on issues of language. (See Chapter 8 for strategies; see Chapter 14

for a broader perspective on discussing issues of language.) However, even these situations provide room for *conversation*. Try to find out why the student made the language choice she made, and you may discover entirely new areas to discuss. A misplaced comma might lead to a discussion of how punctuation is used in Spanish—or Hindi or Korean—and how that might affect the relationship between author, audience, and text.

- Your students' needs are driven by the situation in which they find themselves. Our preference to focus on higher-order concerns stems largely from our desire to address the majority of our students' needs. We support a community college with a significant ESL population from a wide range of backgrounds—from international students with multiple degrees earned in their native countries to immigrant students who are inexperienced writers in English and their native language—but the majority of our ESL students are inexperienced writers in any language, and they tend to benefit most from assistance with larger textual issues. In environments with upper-level undergraduate or graduate ESL students, it might be more appropriate to shift the balance toward the middle ground between text and language—or shift more toward language.

Finally, remember the cornerstone upon which every writing center is founded: trust. *You* are working with the student. *You* are there to read his body language, her inflection, his facial expressions, her motivation and intensity. You must trust yourself and your instincts to make the right decision based on the information you have at the time. You must trust the student's knowledge of his own needs and priorities. And ultimately, you must trust in the validity of the ultimate goal of the kind of writing center Stephen North describes—a place for the "creation of a continuous dialectic that is, finally, its own end."<sup>13</sup> Sometimes this requires a pragmatic approach. You may need to cut a deal now to lure the students back later, so the conversation can continue and the real growth can begin.

One final note: Tutors need to be engaged in another type of conversation as well, and that is the one that all professionals have with the research in their field. We offer some suggestions for further readings we think you will find helpful and interesting:

Leki, Itona. 1991. "Twenty-Five Years of Contrastive Rhetoric: Text Analysis and Writing Pedagogies." *TESOL Quarterly* 25 (1): 123–43.

In this article, Leki gives a useful overview of the various strands of contrastive rhetoric research and discusses a number of ways that contrastive rhetoric can and should influence writing instruction.

Spack, Ruth. 1997. "The Acquisition of Academic Literacy in a Second Language: A Longitudinal Case Study." *Written Communication* 14 (1): 3–62.

In this research study, Spack follows Yuko, an undergraduate international student from Japan, over the course of three years and explores how Yuko develops

academic literacy in English. Spack's research not only highlights the complexities involved in this undertaking but also suggests ways that teachers and tutors can assist international students as they negotiate this process.

Tucker, Amy. 1995. *Decoding ESL: International Students in the American College Classroom*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

In this book, Tucker examines how the cultures and cultural rhetorics of both students and teachers influence what happens in the college writing classroom. She demonstrates through multiple examples the need for teachers to learn to "read" and "reread" their students, an idea that is equally important for tutors.

If your writing center does not already have a professional library for tutors, these readings and others cited in this book would make a great start. They will draw you into a conversation you will want to continue for a long time.

### Notes

1. North, 76.
2. North, 73.
3. Harris and Silva, 526.
4. Fox (1994).
5. Shen (1989).
6. Leki, 133.
7. Blau and Hall, 23–44.
8. Severino, IV.2.3.
9. Harris and Silva, 531.
10. Gillespie and Lerner, 126.
11. Leki, 107.
12. Harris and Silva, 529.
13. North, 83.

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