

The Practical Tutor

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INTRODUCTION AND SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS BOOK

This text is a practical guide to tutoring composition. It is intended for anyone assisting adult writers at various levels in formal and informal educational settings: literacy programs, colleges, and workplaces. We hope that undergraduate tutors, graduate teaching assistants—anyone planning a teaching career in any discipline who recognizes the importance and difficulty of helping writers learn to write well—will find our chapters valuable. We hope, as well, that supervisors of writing centers or programs in community agencies, educational institutions, and firms will encourage their staff to use this book as a resource.

The Practical Tutor attempts to alert its readers to issues that frequently arise in writing tutorials. Because tutors are usually themselves strong writers, their writing is often considerably more advanced than that of the writers with whom they work, and they may take for granted the very skills most difficult for inexperienced writers to attain. Accordingly, the chapters describe the problems of various kinds of writers, some with little experience in writing and others who are more practiced but still need assistance. In exploring these problems and their causes, the book also summarizes recent research and thinking in the field of composition in order to familiarize tutors with the composing process as it is now understood. Much has been learned about this process over the past ten years, primarily that generating, forming, reconsidering, editing, and revising are continuous rather than sequential processes. (We represent this continuity on the cover of this book with the Möbius strip—a figure made by turning one end of a rectangular ribbon 180 degrees and then fastening it to the other end, so that it has only one unending side.) We think it important that tutors be aware of the research and its pedagogical implications. Many tutors, for instance, have taken traditional composition courses that presume that writing is a linear rather than a recursive activity. Even if tutors have not, as writers, actually employed the conventional procedures that follow from such thinking, they might feel obliged to transmit what they believe to be the party line. Most importantly, the chapters offer prac-

tical applications of current theory. By using examples of writers' compositions and including sample dialogues between tutors and writers, the book suggests how to talk with writers, how to help them learn to think, read, and write more critically. Inexperienced tutors tend to talk descriptively or prescriptively about writers' essays without realizing that doing so may confuse writers and hinder the growth of their independence. *The Practical Tutor* helps tutors learn how to formulate questions rather than to make corrections or additions for writers.

We begin the book with chapters on getting acquainted with writers and on the special nature of tutorial dialogue. Next, we discuss tutorial strategies appropriate to important aspects of composing: helping writers generate ideas fluently, helping them form concepts, helping them shape papers, and then helping writers with surface issues such as punctuation and spelling. We have chosen this sequence because we believe that this is the order in which problems ought, ordinarily, to be addressed. Young children speak when they have something to say, and they do not worry about correctness; the more they speak, the more correct their speaking becomes. Similarly, writers need to have something they want to say before they have either occasion or incentive to perfect it.

While reading the chapters sequentially may be advantageous, it is not essential, especially since each chapter refers readers to other portions of the book that treat related issues. Our chapter sequence suggests how tutors can progressively help writers to overcome difficulties, but since some writers are more advanced than others and may not experience all the problems we describe, we have designed the book in such a way that it can be used in any order that is suitable to tutors' practical needs. Tutors who are not working with writers on fluency problems, for instance, may begin with later chapters and refer to the earlier ones as necessary.

We assume that many of our readers will use this book in formal training programs or courses, so we have divided the materials into fourteen chapters to correspond with the number of weeks in a semester. A course might devote one week to each chapter, but such a division is not necessary. If, for example, computer-assisted instruction were not integral to a program, Chapter 14 might be omitted and more time devoted to one of the longer chapters, such as "Reading and Writing across the Disciplines" (Chapter 11) or "Tutoring Spelling and Vocabulary" (Chapter 13).

While *The Practical Tutor* need not be used in a formal course, we have found a seminar desirable because it helps tutors see their work not as a series of disconnected encounters but as a continuous, practical learning process. In addition, offering formal training helps to affirm a principle only now gaining acceptance: that composition is an established field of intellectual inquiry. In order to assist the development of formal training programs, we have created questions and assignments for the reader, which are integrated into each chapter and marked by arrows. We have also included at the end of each chapter suggestions for classroom activities and writing exercises that provide practice in forming tutorial strategies and questions. In addition, we offer chapter bibliographies to invite deeper exploration of issues than class time permits. In our own seminar, we require tutors to prepare either two short papers or one long project on a topic related to

their tutoring experience. By affording the opportunity for further reading, we encourage tutors to become researchers. Finally, we include suggestions for journal entries in hopes that tutors will record comments about the chapters, jot down thoughts about their own composing processes, and reflect upon their tutoring experiences. It is often useful to record thoughts about a particular tutoring session: to speculate about sources of the writer's difficulties and try to recall what was said, what went well, what did not, and to consider what could be done next time. When used in a course, these journals can help teachers or supervisors guide tutors. We assume that mentors will not evaluate the journals but will comment on them to stimulate further thinking about composition, offer suggestions for working with particular writers, and recommend further reading. The more detailed the tutors' recollections of tutoring sessions, the more helpful their supervisors can be. The basic premise of this book is that writing is a way to form ideas, to make meaning, to discover one's thoughts, so we want our readers to write about composing, their own and others', as a way to encourage reflection on the subject.