# Tutors' Column: A "Wise Moron" Reflects on Academic Writing and Consultancy

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I love Sudoku. Adrenaline shoots through my veins as I approach the daunting grid. The extensive note-taking, the domino effect of an "aha" moment, and the ultimate satisfaction of completing such a meticulous task; all of it thrills me. This "type-A" behavior shows up in other parts of my life. Before I took my university's Writing Consultant training course, I had convinced myself that

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my neurotic perfectionism was my greatest tool. I tried to correct everything and anything or else I felt I was doing the writer a disservice. I had acquired a level of self-assurance in my writing abilities, questioning why my university had a semester-long training course for consultants. As I would come to find out, writing theory instructs consultants to do just the opposite. My exposure to pedagogy taught me that both the nature of the writing and our positions as "consultants" is incompatible with an overconfident, perfectionist attitude. Writing consists of a myriad of styles and voices, and consultants are responsible for working with writers to encourage their growth as individuals rather than simply improving writers' papers to the consultant's own arbitrary, and perhaps misinformed, standards.
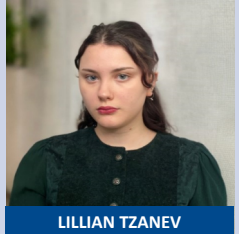
As student writing consultants, our own "specialties" may limit our knowledge of different writing styles, restricting our abilities to review all of the types of writing we might see in the writing center. I am a religious studies major. Though I have likely accrued an understanding of "academic writing" similar to any history or English major, my writing would certainly deviate from that of a STEM major or even a political science major. In "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions," Douglas Downs and Elizabeth Wardle describe this diversity in academic writing, explaining that "shared features are realized differently within different academic disciplines, courses, and even assignments" (556). Many members of the university community might expect consultants to understand some arbitrary and transcendent idea of "good" academic

academic writing even though at least twenty years of research proves that it does not really exist (Downs and Wardle 556). Consultants themselves might also fall into that trap, especially a type-A perfectionist, such as myself.

In the past, when I copy-edited friends' papers, I recommended changing certain words in their papers simply because I just "didn't like it." Who was I to pass judgment on these discipline-dependent stylistic choices? The notion that standard "academic writing" does not really exist contradicts the attitude of a perfectionist who tries to purify writing based on this very standard. In "Inventing the University," David Bartholomae describes how university curricula forces student writers to adopt and appropriate a variety of specialized discourse (4). Bartholomae points out how student writers must write "as though they were members of the academy, or historians or anthropologists or economists" (5). As consultants we face this issue as well. Each writer might challenge us to adopt the lens of a field we are not accustomed to. Wardle and Downs call "academic writing" a "dangerously misleading term" (556). With this in mind, I realized that despite obstacles such as specialized discourse, I could still effectively help writers with the "big picture" issues without unfairly boxing all academic writing into one checklist. Guided by the intrinsic diversity of academic writing and an understanding that true writing pedagogy is not prescriptive, writing consultants can catalyze a writer's growth without forcing the consultant's own voice on the writer.

 Writing is not simply a skill but rather a discipline that includes consultants as much as it includes writers and in order to thoughtfully participate, consultants must reflect on their own overconfidence. Before I began my training as a Writing Consultant, writing was merely a skill that I, in sophomoric fashion, presumed I had. Yet, Downs and Wardle remind me that undergraduate writing instruction must move "from acting as if writing is a basic, universal skill to acting as if writing studies is a discipline with content knowledge" (553). This notion that the study of writing is its own discipline contextualizes our positions as writing consultants. We are not individuals who have successfully mastered a skill; we are students of a discipline engaging in ongoing scholarship. The advice we offer students in conferences may evolve as our own understanding of writing evolves. Mara Holt, in "The Value of Written Peer Criticism," describes the flaws of hastily written peer-commentary explaining that "much peer criticism focuses either on the subjective experience of the critic… or objectified standard criteria" (384). Because not only our own perspectives but also the "objectified standard criteria" can be under

counterproductive to a writer's growth, we consultants cannot forget that every time we have a conference, there is a learning opportunity for all parties involved. Understanding this and the singularity of writers and their writing, might calm the overzealousness of the "cocky" consultant and foster stronger commentary.

Not only is the diversity within academic writing incompatible with the approach of an overconfident writing consultant, but the very concept of what it means to consult contradicts this approach as well. Prior to my Writing Consultant training course, I certainly went about the position of "Writing Consultant" as one synonymous with "writing tutor," bringing to it my preconceived notions about what it means to be a "tutor." In "Writing Centers and the Idea of Consultancy," William McCall describes the shortcomings of a tutor and examines John Trimbur's support for the role of peer tutors in universities, explaining that "tutors are likely to see themselves, at least initially, as 'little teachers'" (165). Because I approached the position of "consultant" as if it were a "tutor" position, I also approached the position with a certain level of unhelpful nonchalance. McCall writes that:

> Whereas tutors are expected to know the correct answers and to prescribe the proper and rigid structures into which the students' [sic] thought must fit, consultants are perceived as supportive listeners who work flexibly with clients to help them achieve what they have identified as their goal. (167)

The notion of tutorship works with the understanding of writing as a skill on par with algebra; however, if we understand the diversity of academic writing, then consultants could not possibly succeed in the role of "little teachers" because there is no single correct formula for writing. A consultant, by the very nature of the position, must take on a less authoritative role in a writing conference, helping the writer grow in their own right.

I finally saw the power of consultancy in action when I went home for the Thanksgiving break and my father asked me to help my 8th grade sister with an English paper on *Of Mice and Men*. I faced a challenge with this task: my sister is a sarcastic 13-year-old who could not care less about *Of Mice and Men*. Despite all of her attempts to change the topic of conversation, I could see that while she did not care about the content, she cared about being right—about proving her arguments. McCall calls consultants "supportive listeners," and in that moment with my stubborn sister, I employed my training as a listener. I remembered reading

Tracy Santa's piece, "Listening in/to the Writing Center: Backchannel and Gaze," which instructed consultants to take note of our physical posture and our style of communication with other students (4). Using "backchanneling," I repeated what he said to remind my sister of her ownership. If I had tried to dominate our "conference" process with sophomoric overconfidence, I would take away her agency from her writing process. My job was not to turn her 8th grade report into a college level literary analysis. As Stephen North, in "The Idea of a Writing Center" asserts, "what we want to do in a writing center is fit into—observe and participate in this ordinarily solo ritual of writing" (439). I embodied the participant-observer role of "consultant," helping her clarify her own voice and strengthen her claims and evidence.

While re-reading North's "The Idea of a Writing Center," I encountered his axiom, "Our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (438). North's principle was probably the single most transformative notion I learned because North framed consultancy in such a simple yet insightful way. Considering the ambiguity that is "academic writing," producing better writing is impractical as there is no uniformity in this diverse field (Downs and Wardle 556). I, like many other "wise morons," fell into the trap of this constricting term. Of course, I am still learning; when I consult with students, I battle my inner control-freak. However, I am comfortable not knowing how to navigate everything yet. Writing is not simply a skill or a meticulous process like solving a Sudoku grid, and neither is writing pedagogy. I will constantly find new, more effective methods, and I am eager to embark on the writing consultant journey.

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