An Artist's Guide to Tutoring Creative Writing

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All tutors have a subject that prompts anxiety when they see it on their schedule; for me, this is creative writing. As a Fine Arts graduate student, I often read papers outside of my discipline, but they are usually research papers, studies, or journal submissions with conventions and goals in common. Creative writing varies widely in style, genre, and form. There are conventions in each genre, but creatives famously flaunt rules and norms, meaning that tutors' advice designed to improve thesis statements and academic clarity could stifle creativity. When I began to work with creative writers, I was worried I would give confusing or incorrect feedback. Complicating this was my fear that I would lose credibility if I admitted I wasn't familiar with a particular form. I started to feel more competent when I began pulling from my experiences as a drawing course teaching assistant, instructor of record, and veteran of creative workshop courses. I supplemented these experiences with my research on creative writing tutoring strategies and theories of workshop pedagogy. In an artistic workshop course, students and instructors may review a sculpture, painting, and drawing in one class period; good workshops are designed for flexibility and allow experts and a generalist audience to participate equally. The purpose of an artists' workshop is to help the creator clarify their intention and more fully realize their goals. To achieve this open and supportive environment in tutoring sessions, I take cues from workshop courses by discarding the need to be an expert, responding as a reader and not a critic, taking time to understand a writer's form and goals, and accepting ambiguity in their work.

I have found that using a modified artist's workshop model, with the tutor acting as a reader and member of a workshop, allows tutors and students to work as peers in a creative activity and reduces student anxiety as they experience the tutor as a fellow creative or reader and not an expert ready to pass judgment. I make this claim as a result of my work with Adelaide (name changed) who used our sessions to edit her short stories or work on writing prompts to generate prose. Adelaide's primary goal for our sessions was to hone her creative writing skills rather than complete assignments. Adelaide often worked in the horror genre, which caused me concern since I am not a frequent consumer of horror media. During my research on tutoring strategies, I found that scholars suggest tutors should be open about their level of genre familiarity. For example, drawing from the work of Melissa Ianetta and Lauren Fitzgerald, Nicole Finocchio recommends that tutors should be open about their familiarity with a form

and give the writer a chance to explain the form and elements they are using or prioritizing (153). Discussing the form and genre could include the writer's explanation for the reasoning for the number of lines or stanzas in a poem or describing science fiction or fantasy elements. After I began to meet with Adelaide, I worked to ensure our conversations about genre were open and productive, and as a result, my fear of losing credibility dissolved.

In an artist's workshop, creatives learn how an audience perceives their techniques, giving them a measure of what their work currently accomplishes and allowing them to make informed creative choices. Tutors can also respond as lay readers and provide this same kind of descriptive feedback. Finocchio suggests tutors respond as a lay audience member, giving first impressions and asking clarifying questions (19). Responding as a lay reader involves focusing on the experience of the story and not on strict adherence to technical requirements or grammatical conventions. I used this approach with Adelaide when she brought a short horror story based on a local urban legend. After she introduced her project, I asked Adelaide to explain the urban legend to me so I could act like a local reader and understand the story on a deeper level. After we read the work together, I shared my first responses to the story, focusing on the memorable imagery and ways the story paralleled the urban legend. Rosalie Morales Kerns emphasizes description as an element of an egalitarian workshop, endorsing a form where reviewers act as peers and give descriptive comments, rather than advice or criticism (804). Morales Kern's focus on an egalitarian workshop is especially apt for tutors acting in a peer reviewer capacity. In addition to receiving help from the tutor, having a second party read their work—or even just hearing their work read aloud—gives writers the chance to visualize their work from a new point of view. Finding a way to see one's work through fresh eyes is invaluable for any creative practice. For my drawing students, I suggest propping their drawing pads up and moving back five feet; even this short distance causes a radical change in perspective. Students need to learn to create distance from their work to make intentional and thoughtful creative decisions.

Asking questions about form and genre allows tutors to get an understanding of the discipline and calibrate their approach, and it gives the writer a chance to clarify their goals and determine elements of a form they prioritize. This clarification can begin when the writer introduces their work, or it can happen after the tutor reads the work so they can give an uninfluenced first impression. Once the session begins and the tutor has read the work, tutors can compare that intention to their initial reader reaction and discuss how the work currently functions. To help writers understand how their work is perceived and evaluate if it achieves their goals, Morales Kerns suggests that reviewers describe the effects the work has on the reader, and then after that dialogue, the conversation can move towards suggestions for improvement (if requested) or potential alternative techniques (803). After I shared my first response with Adelaide, we spent time discussing horror stories as a whole and the elements of a successful horror story Adelaide wanted to capture; we determined that Adelaide wanted her story to have an eerie tone and a shocking ending. This focus on identifying and pursuing student's creative goals applies to any creative field and helps me avoid giving prescriptive advice and shaping my student's work according to my own tastes. My success in using these techniques has transferred to all my writing and drawing students. I now find myself asking questions like, "How do you want your readers/viewers to feel?"

Tutors should also keep in mind that creative projects have some distinct differences from much academic writing; one of the most significant is the ability to leave room for reader interpretation. Jennifer E. Hime and Karen J. Mowrer's writing guide discusses the complexity of creative writing and provides questions for writers to consider to make their work more memorable and mature. When I began working with some of their guidelines, I found that one of Adelaide's pieces contained a strong start and good imagery, but the first draft of the ending felt unsatisfying. It ended with a paragraph of description and removed the mystery from her horror story. Talking about the lasting effect of the story prompted a nuanced conversation about how great stories often have ambiguous endings. Academic writing traditionally needs a clear thesis that is followed exactly; creative writing is often the most effective when it leaves room for the reader's interpretation and examination. Additionally, literary analysis thrives on multiple interpretations of the same work.

For early drafts of creative work, having a reader the author can trust for honest reactions provides a safe space for experimentation before the work heads out into the realm of professors and group workshops. Students often need permission to see themselves as artists or writers, especially students who are new to the major or not pursuing an arts degree. At the end of the semester, Adelaide's reviews of my tutoring were positive, but perhaps the best feedback was: "I'm a lot more willing to write and fail in my writing." As an art teacher, I took this review as a gold star. I have found that the most important thing I can do for my tutoring students and drawing students is to take their work seriously, analyze it with the same sincerity I would a professional's, and validate them as creatives.

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