

Tutors' Column: "Supporting Hard-of-Hearing and Deaf Writers"

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Among my experiences as a writing tutor, undergraduate speech language pathology (SLP) major, and graduate student, I have seen a throughline that suggests consultations should be individualized to each writer. In her 2015 article, "Disabilities in the Writing Center," Rebecca Day Babcock argues that writing centers should develop adaptive learning approaches to support writers who have disabilities. Her work especially focuses on adapting tutoring for those with two of the most common disabilities disclosed in writing centers: deafness and being hard-of-hearing. While many of the writers Babcock worked with in her research had the support of an interpreter, she encourages greater use of embodied communication practices and careful negotiation of directive and nondirective approaches throughout a session.



Four years ago, I was able to test out the kind of embodied communication practices Babcock describes. I participated in a class assignment that allowed me to combine my job as a writing tutor with my SLP academic background to support deaf and hard-of-hearing writers. I have a particular investment in the topic as I have studied the basics of communication, language, and audiology. In one of my audiology courses, we were tasked with simulating hearing loss for a day by wearing earplugs, a common practice in speech-language pathology and audiology programs. I had to complete this task on one of the days I was tutoring, and this experience helped me better understand why and how to create adaptive learning approaches for those who do not have access to interpreters during their tutorials. During my exercise, I was initially hesitant to advocate for myself. I began each appointment by telling the writers about my assignment and that, at times, I might ask them to repeat or to adapt their communication style so I could better engage. I quickly realized I had to be cautious of my speaking level since I couldn't hear myself. I also couldn't hear well when writers were talking in different directions, such as toward their laptops. Furthermore, I had to adjust the rhythm of the conversations since I wasn't always aware if I was talking over the writer. Overall, though, the writers were helpful and understanding and just as focused on ensuring we had successful appointments. Although this was only a limited approximation of hearing loss, it was enough for me and my fellow tutors to think more critically about developing adaptive strategies. We discussed the space of a writing center, different communication modes, the position of writers and tutors during an appointment, the rate of speech, and the gestural role of our bodies (Knoblauch 58).

The truth is, no one strategy or practice will work for every tutor/writer pair, which Babcock notes in her book *Tell Me How It Reads*: "I realized the preferred communication model is whatever the deaf person favors" (172). Tutors and writers need to engage in open conversation to understand what works best. The person with the hearing difference and the tutor both may have ideas to

help facilitate the tutorial. However, the suggestions below are a starting point and were designed for a tutor and writer model, with no interpreter in the session. These tips modify or affirm existing techniques and technological options likely already in use in many writing and tutoring centers:

1. **Space:** Work in a quiet environment. For example, my center has a small conference room available for appointments. Sitting in the conference room allows the writer to focus since the ambient noise and other conversations are less intrusive.
2. **Gestures:** Tutors can also use gestures. For example, they can point to specific lines in a paper or occasionally use hand motions to further illuminate a concept, such as describing how to focus the big idea of an essay into a more specific one. Nonlexical vocalizations, such as sighs and groans, can also contribute to an appointment. Most tutors use such vocalizations during their appointments to signal a change (Haen 182; 194). This may not be clear to hard-of-hearing writers, so they should not be made alongside accompanying negative gestures (such as hunching over) because this may convey an unintentional, negative connotation (Haen 190).
3. **Notes during appointments:** Writing down notes during the appointment can ensure the writer does not miss any major conversational points. If the writer is having particular difficulties tracking the conversation, the tutor can keep even more detailed notes while still being careful to look up during the conversations and pause to allow the writer time to process and respond to the spoken and written information. The notes can be non-linguistic as well: pictures or diagrams can be helpful. This approach can help the writer further visualize what is happening in the assignment. When referring to the notes, the tutor should use a pencil to help point out areas of the paper so the writer knows where the tutor is referencing (Babcock 2015).
4. **Hearing-Assistive Technology:** Some writers may rely on hearing-assistive technology during appointments (“Hearing Assistive Technology”). If there are multiple concurrent conversations in the center, the writer may benefit from using one-to-one communicators in the session, such as microphones that connect to a writer’s hearing aids (“Education of the Deaf”). The writer provides the microphone for the tutor, and the sound is directly transmitted to the writer’s hearing aid.
5. **Positioning:** The positioning of the writer and tutor is critical during a tutorial, as Miranda Zammarelli and John Beebe have noted. The tutor and writer should sit on the same side of the table or at the same corner. This setup allows the tutor and the writer to look at the same screen occasionally when working on the paper. When speaking, though, the tutor and writer should face each other in order to facilitate lip-reading. Babcock also suggests asking the writer what their preference is for the seating arrangement because they may have a setup that works best for them. If they have no preference, the tutor may suggest the side-by-side or corner options.
6. **Pacing:** The tutor should speak in a clear, slow but natural manner to facilitate lip-reading. Also, use an appropriate but not overloud volume. Excessively loud speech can be harder to understand because the vowel sounds can be overpowering. Speaking excessively slowly and at a very high volume can appear condescending or draw unwelcome attention to the appointment.

If the tutor knows in advance that they will be working with a writer who would benefit from these practices, they can be prepared to present these options in advance of or at the beginning

of the tutorial. For example, the tutor might learn of the writer's needs through their intake form or self-created profile, or at the beginning of the session. The tutor and writer can also revisit the practices at the end of the appointment to plan for the future. The goal is to show the writer that the center aims to create a thoughtful, accessible, individualized experience, one that is open to change as the writer continues to work with different tutors or on various assignments.

Writing centers should also work alongside other programs at their institution to support deaf and hard-of-hearing students. For instance, our center worked extensively with the Technology Resource Center, eventually collaborating on their Campus Accessibility Panel for our student and faculty symposium. The goal was to make the audience aware of how they can work with writers who disclose being deaf or hard of hearing. In addition to revising the strategies tutors use, working collaboratively with other academic support services by developing appropriate techniques and strategies for working with one population creates well-rounded support for writers of all populations, especially those who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

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