A Tutor's Guide

HELPING WRITERS ONE TO ONE

2ND EDITION

edited by BEN RAFOTH

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Introduction

This second edition of *A Tutor's Guide* builds on the strengths that made the first edition so well received among tutors. One-third of the book is new material. Five new chapters add themes readers will appreciate:

- Exploring cultural issues involved in working with ESL writers
- Helping students in professional writing courses
- Meeting the needs of students in advanced writing classes
- Working in a graduate writing center
- Imagining how to save a tutoring session gone awry

The focus of the book remains the same—to take everyday events in tutoring sessions and connect them to theory and good practice. In these pages, tutors will find conflicting ideas and glimpses of theoretical debates that enliven tutoring and make it endlessly interesting. Like the first edition, the second edition helps tutors to think through and deal with common problems that arise in tutoring sessions. It encourages the exercise of good judgment and effective practices.

This edition of *A Tutor's Guide* opens the door to some of the professional conversation that surrounds writing center practices. At the same time, it offers concrete suggestions, things to try, and problems to think about for the next tutoring session. Each of the chapters in this collection, except for Chapter 3, which reads more as a case study for discussion, follows a similar organization:

- **Introduction**—Describes a problem or concern tutors are likely to encounter in writing conferences, like trying to engage a reluctant writer or helping to make a paper more creative.
- **Some Background**—Provides a context for the problem based in the professional literature.
- **What to Do**—Offers concrete suggestions for how to approach the session, and what to try when that doesn’t work.
- **Complicating Matters**—Raises counterarguments and explores some of the complexities of learning to write, including reasons why best practices don’t always pan out.
Introduction

• **Further Reading**—Recommends helpful and interesting follow-up readings and provides a short description of each selection and its relevance for tutoring.

• **Notes and Works Cited**—A complete list of notes and references at the end of each chapter.

The authors who have contributed chapters to this edition of *A Tutor’s Guide* have written for readers who are undergraduate or graduate students working part-time in a writing or tutorial center, students enrolled in undergraduate or graduate courses focused on teaching and tutoring writing, or writing teachers who are looking for ideas to improve writing conferences or peer review sessions. Most of all, the authors tried to imagine readers who can envision the tremendous potential of peer tutoring to help students become more engaged and thoughtful writers.

We all know that every tutoring session is unique, and that what works for one tutor or writer may not help at all in a different set of circumstances. Even the way in which tutors and writers define *help* will vary. And yet, it is remarkable how much similarity does exist from one session to another, and how much agreement there is about what constitutes effective and ineffective tutoring practices. These chapters in *A Tutor’s Guide* build on this agreement. They create a motivating dissatisfaction, a desire to help tutors meet the challenges that arise when they sit down to help writers.

*A final note*   Wendy Bishop, who contributed the chapter “Is There a Creative Writer in the House?” died on November 21, 2003. During her distinguished career, Wendy wrote more than twenty-two books and numerous articles, poems, and short stories. She was Kellogg W. Hunt Distinguished Professor of English at Florida State University and, before that, worked in the writing center at the University of Alaska. She was a keynote speaker at writing center conferences and was a friend to hundreds of tutors, students, writers, and teachers. Wendy’s chapter appears unchanged from the first edition.
After setting out on a summer bicycle trip in the Rocky Mountains, our group of twelve did not take long to break up into two camps—the “tourers” and the “racers.” We tourers would take our time cycling to our new destination every day. Sometimes we would take unpaved roads off the main route or sit down awhile to dip our feet into an inviting stream. The racers, on the other hand, would speed off to the day’s destination, arriving there before noon.

Different motivating factors were obviously at work. While tourers enjoyed a leisurely pace and the opportunity for friendly banter, the racers were motivated by a personal challenge or perhaps simply the desire to savor a good meal at mid-day and thus avoid the tourers’ lunch fare of peanut butter sandwiches by the roadside! Neither group was better. Our cycling style differed . . . but we were all cyclists.

And so it is with business and technical writing. It is no better and no worse than other types of writing, but its style differs from other types of writing that tutors and students may have been taught. Readers of business and technical material are motivated by the need to get a job done—they are not lolling on a beach reading a novel. In fact, readers of work-related documents have some points in common with the Lance Armstrong wannabes in my cycling group.

1. They like good signposts. Cyclists in a hurry do not like to pause to figure out which way to go, or risk taking the wrong road. As they whiz by a sign, they want it to tell them clearly what lies ahead. Similarly, busy managers reading a report, or consumers following an instruction manual, depend on an informative title and visual cues such as headings to help them readily understand a document (see Chapter 11).
2. **They like smooth and straight roads.** Smooth, straight roads help racers get to their destination quickly. Racers have no patience for tourers’ time-consuming diversions off the beaten path. In the same way, readers of business and technical material want written material that gets to the point in a clear and concise way.

3. **They are human.** Sure, racers may look outer-worldly with their aerodynamic helmets and hunched-over riding positions. But they are human and yes, they too love fresh mountain air and great scenery. Readers of business and technical documents are also human. They don’t want to read documents that sound as if they were written by, and for, a machine.

In the What to Do section, we look at ways tutors can help students with business and technical writing projects to make sure that their writing has useful headings and visual cues, is clear and concise, and is human. But first let’s get some common understanding of what constitutes business and technical writing.

### Some Background

In today’s world of work, poor business and technical writing takes an incalculable toll in the form of lost time and money, misunderstood instructions, or misguided decision making. Recognizing the importance of business and technical writing, many universities offer courses in these areas. However, distinguishing between the two types of writing can sometimes be a problem. Technical writing—which is traditionally associated with science, engineering, and technology—generally has these characteristics:

1. It should be clear and concise.
2. It depends heavily on numbers due to the often quantitative subject matter.
3. It relies on graphics, such as photographs, tables, and charts.

Yet all of these traits are true of business writing, too.

Because it is difficult to make a neat distinction between business and technical writing, the two types are increasingly referred to jointly as *professional writing* (or *communication*) to include all writing and communication in the workplace. In this chapter, *business writing* and *technical writing* are viewed as merely different shades of the same color, with the term *business and technical writing* used interchangeably with *workplace writing*.

Among the many things that business writing and technical writing have in common, one of them, unfortunately, is a bad reputation. We are exposed to technical writing every day, whether it be in product inserts for medicine or instruction manuals for electronic equipment—and everyone seems to have their own horror story about an especially cryptic set of instructions. As for business writing, it is notorious for being jargon-laden, sometimes to the point of being meaningless. In a parody of this trait, one website offers millions of
combinations of business phrases available for writers. With the click of a mouse, writers can randomly “spin” the phrases together to form sentences “ready for inclusion into your business memos without all of the thinking!”

Nonsense sentences such as this one get shuffled together: “Recognizing improvement opportunities/sustainable competitive advantage/leads the way with/an enterprise-wide value framework.”

By offering courses in business and technical writing, universities are “recognizing improvement opportunities” for this type of writing. Typical assignments in such courses include correspondence and memos, reports, instructions, and presentations. Through these assignments, instructors try to anticipate the needs and requirements of future potential employers. Thus, in writing center consultations related to these assignments, tutors and writers must consider not only the teacher’s requirements, but also the imagined requirements of potential employers, who make up a “powerful secondary audience . . . [that] is nearly always casting a rhetorical shadow.”

What to Do

Tutors may find that students in business and technical writing courses are initially confused by writing requirements for their courses that differ from, or even contradict, writing guidance they may have received for academic-type research papers or personal essays. The first thing a tutor may need to do is to help the writer understand that contrasting assumptions underlie writing done in a work setting and writing done in a school setting. Two important assumptions in university writing are:

1. The reader (the teacher) is a captive audience. With university writing, we do not question the fact that the professor will read the student’s paper. But in a work setting, there is no captive audience. The reader—whether it be a boss, a colleague, or a consumer—can, and will, run away from the piece of writing if it is not inviting enough or does not meet a need.

2. The reader (again, a teacher) is the expert. In university writing, the teacher is the expert, and students must often prove to the teacher that they know a subject and understand its specialized vocabulary. In English classes, students may feel an additional need to use complex syntax or an expansive writing style. The assumption that the writer must prove knowledge to an expert reader can lead people to write more rather than less, and to use complex terms and sophisticated sentences over common words and shorter sentences. Yet in the workplace, such an approach is the opposite of what is needed. The workplace author of a document is probably seen as the expert on the topic at hand. Rather than showing off knowledge, the writer ideally shares only pertinent information so that readers can readily understand an issue or carry out a task.
Once a tutor helps a writer see that the underlying assumptions between school and workplace writing differ, the tutor can then deal with specific issues. At one writing center devoted to business writing, tutors show students who are already excellent writers how to “take their writing to the next level” through editing. Following this approach, I will edit samples of “good writing” to show tutors how the samples can be transformed into “good workplace writing.” By observing differences between the two versions, tutors can see more clearly how workplace writing differs from other types of writing. Understanding these differences will prove helpful when tutors try to guide writers toward effective revision. The writing samples to be edited are taken from Joseph M. Williams’ book, Style: Toward Clarity and Grace.

**Headings and Visual Cues**

Because the reader of a workplace document wants to be told up front what the main point is, tutors should look for the equivalent of a conclusion at the beginning, with supporting information then following. This can run directly counter to essay writing that often builds up to a conclusion or saves the best for last. The burden to say what a document is about should not be left entirely to the text. Titles also play a key role in defining the subject and purpose of the text. Williams recommends that titles be straightforward like this one:

*Before:* “Computer Assisted Instruction: Advantages and Disadvantages”

This title can be made to be more informative. Depending on the main point of the document, the title could say:

*After:* “Computer-assisted instruction: Disadvantages outweigh the advantages” or “How computer-assisted instruction can help us expand our training program”

Tutors can ask writers to think of a title as a type of newspaper headline. After all, the day after a hotly contested mayoral election, a city newspaper would not use as its headline “Election Results.” It would print something like “Jones Wins Election by Slim Margin.” In this way, the reader who reads nothing more than the headline, or headline-like title, is still gaining valuable information.

Beyond the title, informative headings should be used throughout the document as well. While wording is important, so is visual distinctiveness. Headings should stand out, like stepping-stones across a creek. Some options include: bold face, a larger type size, a box, or extra white space around the heading. Using typography and layout to reveal the structure in a document will help entice the workplace reader to read the document, and then to make his way through it. For example, just by using shorter paragraphs with spacing between the paragraphs, a writer can break up masses of gray text that otherwise
might discourage reading. Tutors may need to remind writers that they do not need a topic sentence and a minimum number of sentences for a paragraph to be a paragraph.

Using bullets can also be a good visual tactic to make information stand out. In the following example, Williams shows off a sentence with model parallelism:

Before: The committee recommends that the curriculum in applied education be completely revised in order to reflect trends in local employment and that the administrative structure of the division be modified to reflect the new curriculum.8

With slight rewording, we can use bullets to make the important information in this sentence stand out more:

After: The committee recommends these actions:
• Completely revise the curriculum in applied education—to reflect trends in local employment, and
• Modify the division’s administrative structure—to reflect the recommended new curriculum.

An added advantage to point out here is that strong action verbs—usually a plus in workplace writing—replace the passive constructions of “be revised” and “be modified.”

While bullets are visually appealing to the reader in a hurry, they are not always the best option for making information clearer. For example, Williams uses bullets to present this information:

Before: . . . [We] must understand three things about complex writing:
• it may precisely reflect complex ideas,
• it may gratuitously complicate complex ideas,
• it may gratuitously complicate simple ideas.9

The problem here is that the reader is forced to sift through each bulleted item to discover how each one differs from the others. A better option would be to forget the bullets and use a sentence:

After: While complex writing may precisely reflect complex ideas, it may gratuitously complicate ideas, whether those ideas are simple or complex.

Clear and Concise Writing

Most students know instinctively that clarity and conciseness often go together. Reducing unnecessary words usually helps the meaning of a sentence stand out, just as weeding a garden helps the flowers to stand out. The two sentences that follow demonstrate how tutors can show writers how to weed out unneeded words and make the meaning clearer. In these examples, I italicize words that can be eliminated or replaced with fewer words.
Before: We set for ourselves two more objectives because seeming clarity in professional writing is a matter that depends on more than merely a writer’s level of skill.¹⁰

After: We have two more objectives because clarity in professional writing depends on more than a writer’s skill.

Before: Those who experience problems with their writing have to understand that they must approach different causes of bad writing in different ways.¹¹

After: Those with writing problems must approach different causes of bad writing in different ways.

In each of these examples, the number of words was reduced by more than one-third, and in the process the main point of the sentence was made to stand out better. Tutors can remind writers that such conciseness and clarity can be a godsend for workplace readers who typically are inundated each day with bulging inboxes, both paper and electronic.

Even when tutors don’t understand a text, they can still offer editing advice. Consider the following sentence (take a deep breath first!).

Before: When pAD4083 in the E. coli pmiimanA mutant CD1 heterologously overexpressed the P. aeruginosa pmi gene, there appeared high levels of PMI and GMP activities that were detectable only when pAD4083 was present.¹²

Williams says that this sentence “is clear to someone who knows the field.”¹³ Even if this is the case, perhaps we can make the sentence clearer for the specialist who reads it. As a tutor, you may ask, what can I notice about this sentence even if I don’t know what on earth it’s about?

First, note that the action of the sentence—the passive expression “there appeared”—does not occur until more than halfway into the sentence, after we’ve already slogged our way through a lot of complex terms. Second, note that something significant appears to be reported at the very end of the sentence, but the reader might overlook it because it is last in line behind a string of weighty words. Wouldn’t it be better to bring to the forefront this significant information by means of a separate sentence?

Using this logic, I might edit the sentence this way:

After: High levels of PMI and GMP activities appeared when pAD4083, in the E. coli pmiimanA mutant CD1, heterologously overexpressed the P. aeruginosa pmi gene. These high levels were detectable only when pAD4083 was present.

Now, I still don’t fully understand what this is saying. But I think tutors will agree that the edited version conveys its meaning in a clearer way for those who do understand the terminology. One caveat here: It’s always a good idea when editing material that uses unfamiliar terminology to double-check with
the author to make sure that errors are not inadvertently introduced in the editing process.

A tutor who demonstrates options for editing writing is motivated not by a need to nit-pick, but by a desire to show writers concrete ways to attain a whit-tled down, to-the-point writing style. Such an approach, which emphasizes product as much as process, can help satisfy a craving by writers for specific information about workplace genres that may be totally new to them. Martha Thomas, director of a writing center devoted to business communication, recommends that tutors share explicit knowledge about business forms and conventions, thus possibly avoiding an “unnecessarily protracted attempt to prod struggling students into discovering the knowledge for themselves.” Sometimes, says Thomas, the “most pedagogically effective thing the tutor can do may be to turn on the headlights and stop relying too heavily on the rearview mirror.”

Writing That Is Human

Some tutors might conclude that business and technical writing should be all business and devoid of any personality. Don’t let yourself or the writers you work with fall into the trap of thinking this. As William Zinsser says, “just because people work for an institution they don’t have to write like one.”

One reason workplace writing is often not human is that writers may want to appear smart in front of their boss and colleagues, and so they use pretentious terms. Another potential problem is that workplace writers often use models or templates for their writing. Now there’s nothing wrong with this. It’s like the guy who, distrusting his fashion sense, observes the mannequins in the men’s department to help him figure out what shirts and sweaters go together. A problem would arise, however, if the fashion-challenged guy stopped acting like a human being and assumed a stiff pose with a glazed-eye look. Unfortunately, many workplace writers—relying on model formats—do the equivalent of acting like a mannequin when it comes to their writing. The result can be writing that sounds as if it was written by a robot.

Business writing consultants say that getting workplace writers to write in a more human way can be a big hurdle to overcome. For example, one consultant worked with employees of an insurance company who wrote letters in response to insurance claims. In cases where claims officers responded to widows or widowers requesting survivor benefits, sometimes the only hint of kindness in the letter was the statement: Please find enclosed a self-addressed envelope for your convenience. To help these writers craft more human letters, the consultant suggested that they write as if the recipient were a loved one, such as a father or grandmother. This helped the writers to consider thoughtful options, like acknowledging the person’s loss before discussing the insurance claim.

The next hurdle for the consultant, however, lay in convincing the supervisors of the claims officers to approve the more human writing. Some bosses
believe that incorporating a personalized remark is being unbusinesslike. They don’t see that treating the reader like a person, instead of a policy number, can be good for business.

Complicating Matters

When reading a writer’s work, tutors may feel as if they’re looking through a window smeared with petroleum jelly—everything seems a bit fuzzy. Either the paper refers to subject matter the tutor is not familiar with (such as accounting terminology), or the writing may be full of jargon or abstract concepts. Rule number one is: Don’t be afraid to ask questions. So many times I’ve asked managers about something in their writing: “What does this mean?” or “Can you give me an example of this?” And so many times I’ve seen that either they don’t truly understand it or have an unclear notion about it. When questioned, they are forced to explain it in more detail or give examples (and, in some cases, they must seek answers from their organizations). This probing for clarification can be valuable because it can bring up helpful information that supplements or even replaces the original information.

If you don’t feel comfortable or your ego risks taking a bruising for asking what is perceived to be a dumb question, not to worry. Try these tactics:

• **Ask the writer to explain something as if he were explaining it to a bright twelve-year-old.** This gets the burden off your shoulders, but still forces the person to reformulate something that otherwise seems too obscure.

• **Have the writer think about whether there are secondary audiences that haven’t been considered.** Secondary audiences are often ignored and provide good reason for taking such moves as spelling out acronyms on first reference or providing additional explanations, anecdotes, or examples.

A big complicating matter may be that you don’t have any complicating matters. That is, perhaps your writing center doesn’t receive any writers with business and technical writing projects. Several reasons could explain this. First, your university may be fortunate enough to have a business writing center affiliated with a school of business. If so, great. You might want to check it out. You can learn something from them, and they can undoubtedly learn something from you and your writing center experience.

But if there is no such specialized writing center at your university, perhaps students in business and technical writing courses don’t know that you exist, or they think you cannot help them or are not interested in their type of writing assignments. One good strategy to try to change the situation could be to plan a résumé writing and editing workshop at your writing center. Résumés or CVs (*curricula vitae*) are great documents to work with because

• Writers have a personal stake in making them good.

• They’re concise (or they should be).
• They represent a microcosm of workplace writing issues discussed in this chapter. Résumés rely on good visual headings and on clear language with strong verbs. Ideally, they should be personalized somewhat, too.

Most people have trouble writing an effective résumé for themselves because they’re too familiar with the jobs and experience they’ve had. They give in easily to using preexisting job titles and descriptions that may not have much meaning to an outsider. Just talking over the content and presentation with someone in the writing center can yield huge benefits. Besides, it’s a good way to introduce your writing center to business, engineering, and other professional majors. (Be sure to put notices about the workshop in areas they’re likely to see.)

Naturally, by reaching out to students of business and technical writing, tutors can help these writers. But just as important, tutors can help themselves. By initiating more contact with these writers, you (and your writing center) will develop expertise in workplace writing—expertise that you’ll inevitably draw on at some point in your future profession. While you’ll be making things easier for future readers of your writing, you may also find, as many have, that the style of business and technical writing makes the actual act of writing easier. . . . It can be like having the wind at your back.

Further Reading


A college writing teacher, Bailey says that before discovering plain English, he used to teach a formal style designed to impress rather than communicate. In his book, Bailey practices what he now preaches. The book is succinct and user-friendly with many examples that show how to achieve a writing style that is well-suited to the workplace.


This book is intended as a compact reference for students and on-the-job writers. Pfeiffer advocates an “ABC” structure—first an Abstract of the main points, then the Body of supporting details, and lastly a Conclusion that wraps up and provides information the reader needs to act. The book includes a helpful chapter on “Graphics and Oral Presentations” as well as numerous examples of formats for different documents, such as “positive” and “negative” letters, feasibility studies, lab reports, and résumés.


A journalist by profession, Zinsser devotes two chapters to business/technical writing. One chapter is entitled “Science and Technology” and another chapter is entitled “Business Writing: Writing in Your Job.” Once you pick up this book, though, you’ll be hard-pressed to limit your reading to just these two chapters. Throughout the book,
Zinsser explains how to put into practice his tenets of good nonfiction writing, including two of the most important qualities: humanity and warmth. As books on writing go, they don’t get any better than this one.

Notes

4. Shor.
8. Williams, 138.
9. Williams, xi.
10. Williams, x.
11. Williams, x.
12. Williams, 18.
13. Williams, 19.
14. Martha Thomas (personal correspondence, 26 September 2004). Thomas is director of the Center for Business Communication at the Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina.
15. Thomas.

Works Cited


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