



“I send students to the Writing Center, and the paper comes back barely changed.”

*The other guides in this library help you sharpen something you already do. This one orients you to what the Writing Center does, so that when you send a student to the Center, the hand-off is fruitful. This guide is specific to the University of Wyoming Writing Center and is adapted from our OER training textbook, but it also references Stephen North’s article “The Idea of a Writing Center” (1984), Muriel Harris’s “Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors” (1995), John Bean and Dan Melzer’s book *Engaging Ideas* 3rd edition (2021), and Peter Carino’s work on writing centers and student ownership.*

What the Writing Center actually does. One commonly held misconception needs to be addressed upfront: the Writing Center is not a fix-it shop, and our consultants will not red-pen a student’s paper for them. This frustrates faculty and students alike when they believe one trip to the Center will produce a sparkling, typo-free piece of writing. What we actually do is stated in our mission statement: we aim to *make better writers, not just better writing*, and all consultations at the Center have the ultimate goal of producing a stronger writer, not a patched paper.

The best consultations are often 50-minute-long conversations about the writing. The consultant reads with the student, asks questions, points to patterns, and helps the writer decide what to change—but the pen stays in the student’s hand. Oftentimes, students simply don’t know what will make their writing better (we see it on the intake forms, where the answer to ‘What kind of help are you looking for today’ is frequently ‘grammar/punctuation’, and ‘I don’t know.’). The consultant’s role is to help the writer discover the real problem with their paper—a missing thesis statement or lack of evidence is a much more pressing problem than comma errors.

The reason why we work this way is because helping a writer see what to do produces a writer who can do it again, both in your class and in classes after yours. We’re playing a longer game than any single assignment, which is why we’re worth referring to.

What consultants won’t do: Writing Center consultants won’t proofread a paper from start to finish, won’t rewrite it, won’t ‘clean it up’, and won’t promise a grade. Every one of those refusals exists because doing the work for the student guarantees that it won’t help them next time they encounter the same problems in their writing. We don’t focus first on grammar and punctuation (unless the paper is in great structural shape, or the grammar and punctuation is so error-laden that it becomes a real problem for reader comprehension) because we work from higher-order concerns down: structure, argument, and clarity of ideas are addressed before word choice, punctuation, and typos. This is the same principle your own feedback should follow (see *Giving Effective Feedback on Student Writing*). There’s also a deeper reason. As Bean argues, a person’s language is bound up with their identity, so “fixing” a student’s writing into standard edited English isn’t a neutral act, and doing it *for* them, rather than helping them make their own choices, can indicate to a student that their way of writing is wrong. We do coach students toward academic American English, but it’s through a set of choices they learn to make, not a correction we impose on them.

How to refer students. A good referral is specific and forward-looking and shouldn’t feel to the student like you’re punishing them for ‘bad’ writing. Telling a student to “go to the Writing Center” with no

context can come across as a verdict on their intelligence and can lead to prickliness or resentment during the consultation where the student says things like: “I don’t know why I’m here; my instructor made me come.” To avoid defensiveness, make sure a referral is grounded in one or two higher-order concerns that you have flagged in the student’s recent writing. Saying something along the lines of, “The Writing Center is a great place for talking through how to introduce solid evidence so go work on that with them” gives the consultation a target and removes the sting. A generic “get this fixed” points the student toward editing—which we don’t do—and sets them up for frustration.

Students book an appointment by clicking on the ‘Schedule a Consultation’ button located on the homepage of the UW’s Writing Center website. Encourage them to come a few days before the deadline, since the most useful sessions happen while there’s still time to revise.

Send the assignment prompt with them or make sure they know exactly where to find it. You might be surprised to know how many students can’t locate their assignment prompt in their course shell once they arrive at the Center! A consultant can do far more when they can see what you’re looking for—the task, the audience, the rubric, the criteria for a strong response.

Don’t promise a grade outcome. A Writing Center visit doesn’t guarantee a better grade and framing it as “Go to the Writing Center and you’ll bring your grade up” turns a learning resource into a transaction and disappoints students when their grade doesn’t move up on cue.

How to reinforce the work when they come back. When a student returns from a consultation (especially if it was a referral), treat it as one stage in an ongoing process and not just as a box to be ticked. Ask what they worked on. Credit the revision that you can see in their next draft. However, expect students to pick and choose which of our revision suggestions to take—when Muriel Harris asked students about their tutoring sessions, the consistent theme was that they preferred to reach their own conclusions and write what was in their own heads; they didn’t want to be told what to do. The student picking and choosing which suggestions to take isn’t ignoring help even if it can be frustrating to instructors who assume students are ignoring good advice: revision choices ultimately belong to the writer, in our consultations as they should in your classroom (see *Giving Effective Feedback on Student Writing*). When your feedback and consultant feedback point to the same places, the student gets one coherent message and is far more motivated to revise in this direction.

While we try to keep the Center from becoming a transactional space, some instructors do offer small incentives to get students through our door such as extra credit or a removal of one unexcused absence—but generally only if students can provide written evidence of what they learned in the consultation and how they applied it to their draft.

Why a consultant can help in ways you can’t. Finally, a consultant isn’t a substitute teacher or a junior version of you—they occupy a different position entirely. Muriel Harris calls this triangulation “talking in the middle”: the consultant sits between you and the student, neither assigning the grade nor writing the paper, and that in-between position allows a student admit confusion to a consultant that they’d never admit to you holding the red pen. Because we aren’t the ones assigning the grade, students take intellectual risks with us that they might not take with you. In a consultation, learning might happen that is never reflected in the paper you receive for your class. If the student leaves a better writer, even in a small way, our mission is fulfilled.