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Guidelines for Successful Coaching

Thank you for volunteering to be a writing coach! We hope that this guide will help you have the most productive sessions possible. Helping students learn to write is a privilege that we take seriously, so please review the following guidelines.

WHAT WE DO & HOW WE DO IT

Our goal is to encourage writing and help students improve their written communication skills. We meet with students to discuss their ideas and how to effectively express them on paper. We often conference twice with each student, on a first and second draft. An individual coaching session is typically 20-30 minutes. The students we work with are in grades 7-12 with a wide variety of abilities and various levels of engagement.

We follow a hands-off, “**student-centered**” approach that emphasizes student self-discovery and keeps ownership of the paper and ideas with the student. Instead of directive “tutoring,” which is *product* oriented (improve the *writing*) and focuses on writing skills and conventions, we use non-directive “coaching,” which is *process* oriented (improve the *writer*) and focuses on critical thinking skills. A directive tutor demonstrates and the student imitates; a non-directive coach engages in a conversation with the student in which questions are the primary mode of discourse. As coaches we do not edit or proofread, do not “fix” student papers, and do not add additional or superior content. Instead of instructing the student in *what* to think and write, we **ask questions** to guide the student in learning *how* to think and write.

Student-centered coaching:

- *Maintains focus on writing assignment*
- *Develops a positive learning environment*
- *Encourages student to talk and think*
- *Promotes student's ownership of paper*

Our first area of focus is on **critical thinking skills**. To write well, one must think well. We challenge students to think logically and deeply, and to back up their ideas with convincing arguments. Often the initial coaching session is simply a discussion to help the student figure out what they¹ really think. From there, the coach can help the student formulate a **thesis statement**, and guide them in selecting and **organizing** the most compelling **evidence**.

Sessions are short, so we cannot—and should not—address every problem in a single session. We prioritize our efforts in the following order: **1. Content; 2. Style; 3. Conventions**.

¹“They” is now a grammatically correct pronoun in reference to a singular person.



1. Content includes **thesis** (the main point); **ideas** (details, examples, evidence, support of main point); and **organization** (logically ordered ideas, one point in each paragraph, topic sentences, transitions to connect ideas). Some students use worksheets and graphic organizers, including the **five-paragraph essay** to help them develop their content.

2. Style includes **voice** (attitude of the writer toward the subject and the reader), **point of view** (first, second or third person), **fluency** (sentences flow effortlessly, smoothly and rhythmically, no fragments or run-ons), and **word choice**.

3. Conventions include spelling, grammar, usage, and punctuation.

STEPS IN COACHING

1) Get to know your student. Introduce yourself. Explain that you have come to hear their ideas and to help them communicate more effectively. Ask the student what they thought of the assignment and their work so far. Do they have any specific concerns?

2) Ask the student for an overall summary of their paper’s thesis and main points. After they have outlined their ideas, ask them to read the paper out loud. It is valuable to have students provide a verbal summary since they are often able to clearly state what they are thinking, but these ideas are not always communicated effectively in their writing. Some students may find reading their paper out loud slightly uncomfortable, so you may need to explain that this is the best way for you to become familiar with the paper, and for them to catch problems that they might have missed. It is important to listen without comment. If the student finds errors while they read, they should make corrections directly on the paper or leave a comment for themselves to make changes later. If they identify major problems, such as lack of a thesis statement or poor organization, you may want to ask them to wait to discuss those until after they finish reading the entire draft. For longer papers (more than 5 pages), you might ask students to read portions of their paper that they need to work on, instead of the entire thing.

3) PRAISE the positive. Ask the student what they think are the strongest parts of their paper. Ask them if they know why it works. Tell them what worked for you as a reader and why. Have the student record these through comments in their Google Doc.

4) Use QUESTIONS to discover problems & SUGGEST solutions. As you listen to the student read, think about what needs work. After just one reading, you may be unsure where to start. That’s OK. Start by asking questions (see “Questions to Consider” document) to help you and the student focus on what’s working and what’s missing. *Remember, students mark changes on their papers, not coaches.* Our aim is to empower and educate students about the writing process, not edit their papers.



WHAT TO EXPECT

Here are the stages of paper development you can expect, ranging from non-existent to excellent:

- No work: Nothing on paper. No background work (assigned book not read.) Not interested.
 - *Response: Ask student to discuss the assignment. Try to work backwards and deconstruct the assignment and what steps the student could take. Discuss strategies: what steps are needed to complete the assignment? If student doesn't want to talk about the paper, engage them in a conversation about anything, and eventually try to circle back to the assignment.*
- No paper: Nothing on paper.
 - *Response: Brainstorm. Discuss the assignment with the student and ask about their response; ask what they found interesting or confusing. If possible, ask student to develop and write down a thesis statement and supporting examples.*
- No paper: Has outline or worksheet with thesis statement and examples/evidence.
 - *Response: Ask student to explain their examples. Ask student to write down evidence, develop and write down topic sentences to connect the examples to the thesis.*
- Underdeveloped paper: Poorly organized. Weak thesis statement.
 - *Response: Ask student to rework thesis statement and write topic sentences. Use these to reorganize ideas.*
- Strong paper: Good ideas and clear thesis but needs clearer connections for cohesion.
 - *Response: Ask student to clarify connections between ideas and write transition sentences.*
- Very strong paper: Occasionally we meet with a student who has interesting ideas and a very well written paper.
 - *Response: Lots of praise. Reinforce what the student has done well; this allows them to continue to build on their strengths. If appropriate, work on style issues such as word choice and sentence length.*

If you find disturbing or troubling thoughts in a paper, you must go to your coordinator with your concerns immediately. For instance, if you read anything that seems to be a sign of serious depression, suicidal or violent thinking, or that a student is not safe, Writing Coaches of Montana staff needs to know.

Thank you for volunteering with Writing Coaches of Montana!