Strategies for a Having a Great Tutoring Session

At ELSO’s Writing & Presenting Tutoring Service, our goal is to help you in the most effective way we can. To help us help you, we created the list below that gives you some strategies for ensuring you have an effective tutoring session.

- **Tell us your context and what you need.** When we start a synchronous session, we make a plan for the session. We need to know your context (e.g., what you’re working on, when it is due, how confident you feel about it). The faster you can tell us, the faster we can get to your work. We also need to determine what you want from a session. For example, do you want to brainstorm ideas, check your overall structure, or look for errors? If you’re not sure what you need, tell us. We can help you figure it out. If you have an eTutoring appointment, be sure to send us clear instructions about what you want us to do.

- **Catch us up on what you’ve done.** If you’ve worked with other tutors, explain what you’ve done. If you’ve worked with the same tutor before, remind them what you did last time and what progress you’ve made. If a professor, colleague, or someone else made comments on your paper, tell us what they said. That way, we can build on what others have said and not repeat their work.

- **Be honest.** If you're struggling, just say you’re struggling. If you don’t know something, tell us. Sessions you have with us are confidential. We may talk to each other about your session, but we don’t talk about them outside of our tutoring service unless you give us permission.

- **Know our limits.** ELSO Writing & Presenting tutors are Cornell graduate students who have an interest in writing and working with students from other cultures. They go through training, which continues on a weekly basis. However, they are limited in their knowledge and abilities. They may not have seen the kind of paper you are working on and/or they may not know your subject well. In general, they won’t work with you on content—your advisor should do that. What they can do is read your work as an informed reader, work with you to determine your needs, find ways to meet those needs, and raise concerns. They can usually read between one to six pages in a 45-minute session. They can also offer you strategies and tools that you can use, so at some point, you won’t need tutoring.

- **Know what we can do.** It’s very hard for us to focus on multiple levels of writing at the same time. For example, it’s very difficult to look for grammar problems while assessing the overall structure of a paper. In the following list, we can usually just address one set at a time: (1) overall structure, logic, and argument; (2) structure, logic, and argument of a section and/or paragraph; (3) sentence structure and flow between sentences; or (4) surface-level matters, including grammar, punctuation, vocabulary, phrasing, and spelling. So, if you are looking for comments on overall structure as well as surface-level matters, usually we will have to focus on one before addressing the other, and this will only work for a short document. For longer documents, make two or more appointments. Also think about the order of what you want to do. Working on surface-level matters may not make sense if you are on your first draft because you may have to make major edits, deleting parts.
• **Understand our role.** Our goal is for you to become a better writer, independent of us. So, we don’t just correct mistakes, we explain what’s happening and why we think something is erroneous. This can slow things down, especially for eTutoring when we need to write explanations. If you have a lot of errors, we may only get through a page or two. (However, you can always tell us just to look for major errors—ones that affect comprehension—and ignore the minor ones.) When we take time to explain errors, we expect you to take time to understand what’s wrong and address these errors in the future.

• **Consider the appointments you make.** We can usually cover one to six pages in 45 minutes, depending on your needs. If you have more pages, make consecutive appointments. You might even make an eTutoring appointment (i.e., asynchronous), so the tutor can read your work, and then make an online appointment afterwards, so you can talk about what the tutor noticed. Consider making an online appointment (i.e., synchronous) to discuss organization, structure, logic, flow and brainstorming—matters they may take some negotiating. Consider making an eTutoring appointment to work on surface-level matters, unless you want to talk about mistakes.

• **Working with one tutor or multiple tutors.** Before you start to work with a tutor, check out their bio. You can find a link to bios on our main ELSO tutoring page (Google “Cornell ELSO tutoring”). You might choose a tutor with a similar background as yours. You might also choose a tutor who has a different background to get a general audience reaction. Once you find a tutor you like, consider booking only with that tutor. If they know your work, you can quickly get to your writing. However, tutors all have their own styles and expertise. Try several to know who works best with you on different subjects.

• **Use all tutoring services.** ELSO Writing & Presenting is only for international students and grad students. We focus on all aspects of writing, but we specialize in language and cultural matters. Pronunciation tutoring works for making your speech intelligible. Pronunciation tutors also work with job interview questions, though their focus is on intelligibility, not content. (To discuss interview content, make an appointment at Career Services.) Graduate Writing Service (GWS) is open to all students and even others, such as visiting scholars. They will work with any writing at any stage, but generally they are trained less to work with language and cultural matters, such as grammar and appropriate cultural content. You can make appointments for all three services on the same website: cornell.mywconline.com.