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# Engaging Students in Writing Labs: An Empirical Study of Reading and Commenting on Student Papers

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## Abstract

Writing Center literature fails to come to a consensus on whether students or tutors should read student papers during tutorials. This empirical study sought to discover whether the choice of reader and the timing of the tutors' comments affected the engagement of the student in the tutorial. The study explored six patterns of reading and commenting styles with 30 trials of each. Both students and tutors completed evaluation forms following each tutorial; the results include a summary of the quantitative outcome, as well as insightful comments that were included on the evaluation forms. Both students and tutors believe that it does make a difference who reads the paper during Writing Center conferences and when tutors comment on the papers. Having students read their papers aloud while writing tutors made comments throughout not only helped student writers generate their own refinements, it also provided conditions where fruitful discussion could take place. Anecdotally, the study also raises timely questions about "control" and "agency" in the writing lab that will need to be addressed by future research.

**Keywords:** Writing Lab, Tutor, Advising, Composition

## **1. Introduction**

When you enter our Brigham Young University Social Sciences Writing Lab, you can hear the sounds of student papers being read out loud. Our writing tutors ask thoughtful questions and make helpful comments as they seek to address global issues and refrain from editing small errors. But who is reading the paper? Does it matter?

Although the literature on tutoring practices is clear on most things, it does not definitively assert who should read the paper, the student or the tutor. Even though it is understood that reading aloud is a time-honored method for catching errors and a sensible way to follow the development of thought and organization, not everyone takes a stand on whom the reader should be. For example, authors such as North (1984) fail to select a “best method” from a variety of tutorial styles that they recommend: reading “silently, aloud, together, separately” (443). Others, such as Gillespie and Lerner (2003) and Brooks (1991), recommend that the student writer should read the paper out loud. Harris (1986) says tutors could have students read the paper out loud if they are working on the “lower order concerns” (p. 94).

Since there isn’t complete consensus on this issue, two writing tutors, Mary Black and Cassandra Lawyer, and I wanted to know if the outcome of the tutorial is affected by who reads the paper. Does the choice of reader affect how engaged the student is? What are the benefits of having the students read their own papers out loud?

In addition, if the student reads the paper out loud, what is the writing tutor doing? Few scholars address this question. Gillespie and Lerner (2003) recommend that the writing tutors take notes while students read their papers. Tutors are counseled “not to interrupt, except to ask him something you didn’t catch” and to listen to the whole paper (p. 30). If the student pauses and mentions that something sounds bad, the tutor is advised to tell the student to put a checkmark by it and move on (Gillespie & Lerner, 2003). The tutors and I questioned whether this method of reading aloud fully engaged the students, so we conducted this study to see what students and tutors believed were best practices for engaging students during tutorials. We used the criteria of who should read the paper and when is the best time for tutors to make comments on the students’ papers.

This paper will first explain the six patterns of reading and commenting styles we explored, then present our results. Both students and tutors believe that it does make a difference who reads the paper and when comments are made. We learned that having students read their papers aloud while writing tutors made comments throughout, contrary to Gillespie and Lerner’s recommendations, not only helped writers generate their own refinements, it also provided a condition where “fruitful dialectic” could take place (Singley & Boucher, 1988, p. 6).

## **2. Patterns of Reading and Commenting Styles**

In preparation for collecting data, Mary and Cassandra created six patterns for testing reading and commenting styles. They combined the timing of the tutors’ comments—either throughout the reading of the student’s paper or waiting until the end—with three reading

styles: the tutor reading the student's paper out loud, the student reading his or her own paper out loud, or both tutor and student silently reading the student's paper (e.g. Table 1).

Table 1. Six patterns of advising with reading and commenting styles

Reader	Reading Style	Commenting Style
Writing Tutor	Out Loud	Throughout
Writing Tutor	Out Loud	At End
Student	Out Loud	Throughout
Student	Out Loud	At End
Both	Silently	Throughout
Both	Silently	At End

This table lists the readers for the student papers and which reading and commenting styles were used in each of the six patterns.

When we began implementing the testing, all of the lab tutors conducted tutorials as “normally” as possible. When students signed into the lab, they were randomly assigned to one of the six treatments and a tutor. As usual, the tutors introduced themselves and asked the student preliminary information such as the student's name and what particular concerns he or she had for the paper. The tutors then briefly explained the process (e.g., “I would like you to begin reading your paper out loud. Feel free to stop and make comments. As you read, I may also stop you to comment on the paper”).

At the end of the tutorial, both tutor and student completed an evaluation form with corresponding questions. The tutor and student in a given tutorial session had forms with the same number so they could be paired for evaluation. The evaluation forms included questions that addressed both the reading and commenting techniques to assess student engagement in the areas of comfort, ability to focus, time efficiency, and ability of the student to catch and correct problems in the paper. Some technique questions were found only on the tutors' forms: ability to effectively address global writing issues, ability to understand what was going on in the paper, and ease of use of both the reading and commenting techniques. There were also two questions about communication on each form: one on whether the technique allowed the tutor or student to communicate in a useful way, and one on whether the techniques could be used to discuss everything necessary in the time allotment. The final three questions for tutors asked about ability to help improve the student's paper, satisfaction with outcome of the session, and confirmation that they had taught writing skills, not merely corrected writing problems. The final three questions for the student included helpfulness of writing session, evaluation of self-confidence to improve the paper further, and rating of good

versus poor experience with the tutor. The response options for each question were in the form of a Likert scale with five choices ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The opportunity to list concerns and comments was included at the bottom of the forms for both students and tutors.

### 3. Our Results

Each of the six methods was used for 30 tutorials with students, for a total of 180 paired evaluations—one from the tutor and one from the student. From the data collected, Mary and Cassandra ranked the six tutorial methods in order of favorite technique to least favored. Table 2 shows the order of preference for both tutors and students. The data indicate that the tutors prefer commenting throughout the reading of the paper and would rather read the paper themselves. However, they would rather have students read the paper than read silently. In contrast, students prefer reading their own paper out loud. They would even prefer reading silently with no comments until the end over having the tutor reading the paper out loud.

Table 2. Order of preferences for reading and commenting styles

Reader	Reading Method	Timing of Tutors' Comments	Tutors' Preference	Students' Preference
Tutors	Read out Loud	Comment throughout	1 <sup>st</sup>	5 <sup>th</sup>
Students	Read out Loud	Comment throughout	2 <sup>nd</sup>	1 <sup>st</sup>
Students	Read out Loud	Comment at end	3 <sup>rd</sup>	2 <sup>nd</sup>
Tutors	Read out Loud	Comment at end	4 <sup>th</sup>	4 <sup>th</sup>
Tutors & students	Read silently	Comment throughout	5 <sup>th</sup>	6 <sup>th</sup>
Tutors & students	Read silently	Comment at end	6 <sup>th</sup>	3 <sup>rd</sup>

This table indicates the order of preferences for tutors and for students in reading and commenting styles.

Some of the comments provided by tutors and students on the evaluation forms offer insights into each tutoring pattern. I will discuss each of these six patterns below.

#### 3.1 Tutor reads out loud; tutor comments throughout

Having the tutor read the student's paper out loud while commenting throughout was the tutors' favorite way of helping students. It enabled them to stay focused on the paper and to address concerns immediately as they read. The tutors were surprised to find that out of the six methods being tested, this was the students' fifth favorite method (e.g. Table 2). Students complained that they were unable to stay focused on their paper. They felt that the control of their own paper had shifted into the hands of the tutors. In fact, one student strongly voiced this feeling by saying that having the tutor read out loud was a waste of his or her time! (The

tutor described this student as “hostile.”) Although tutors were fully engaged, students were not.

### *3.2 Student reads out loud; tutor comments throughout*

Allowing the student to read his or her own paper while the tutor made comments throughout the reading was the students’ favorite method. The tutors found this method helpful, too (their second favorite technique; e.g. Table 2). This enabled the tutor to address concerns as they arose and not wait until the end, although tutors sometimes had difficulty focusing on the paper while the student was reading. For example, one tutor said, “I feel like I have to be repetitive when the student reads out loud because I feel like I have to read through most of the paragraph again in order to give helpful feedback.” This negatively affects efficiency. If the paper has a large number of errors, this is particularly problematic: “It was also difficult to comment throughout the paper because I didn’t want to continue interrupting the student as he read, so then I saved my comments for the end of a section (only about 1 ½ pages), but forgot what I was going to say sometimes.” Both tutors and students claimed that students caught many of the problems and even offered solutions as they read out loud. This method was slightly less time-efficient than having the tutors read the paper, but student comfort and involvement were higher. The fact that this method was the tutors’ second favorite method suggests that “being in control” of the session is not the issue; the main concern is remembering what comments they want to make about the student’s paper.

### *3.3 Student reads out loud; tutor comments at end*

Having the student read his or her own paper out loud and having the advisor refrain from commenting until the reading was complete was the students’ second favorite method and the tutors’ third choice (e.g. Table 2). Students were able to focus on the paper and were comfortable in reading their paper. The tutors frequently had a difficult time staying focused on the paper and trying to remember all of the comments they wanted to make at the end. One tutor voiced his concerns this way: “When the student reads out loud, I sometimes get lost because he may read faster than I can understand and then I have to pause and process all the information, but then I miss the next thing he says.” Besides the concern of forgetting what he or she wants to tell the student, one tutor worried about marking a student paper: “Marking on her paper to help me remember points/questions probably made her feel uncomfortable while she was reading.” In fact, one tutor adjusted this technique while working with a non-native English speaker. “I felt it would severely hinder the student if I only commented at the end, so I commented at the end of each section.” The efficiency of this method was diminished since several tutors had to re-read sections.

### *3.4 Tutor reads out loud; tutor comments at end*

Neither the tutors nor the students liked having the tutor read out loud, but waiting until the end to comment (tutors’ and students’ fourth favored method; e.g. Table 2). Although students were able to focus more on the paper during the comments at the end than in the prior method, the tutors struggled to remember what comments to make after reading the paper, especially for the longer papers. One tutor commented, “I feel like I’m not

understanding what is going on [in the paper] because I don't think I will remember what I want to say so I'm distracted." Another tutor made marks to help her remember where the problems were, but still could not remember what all of the marks meant. In fact, one tutor said, "I felt like I basically had to read through everything twice in order to be effective, because of the commenting technique." It also didn't allow the tutor to address issues as they came up. In contrast, one tutor claimed that "this combo of techniques works well with short papers." If control were important to the tutors, this method would have been the tutors' second favorite method, rather than their fourth. Their concern appears to lie with timing of the comments.

### *3.5 Tutor and student both read silently; tutor comments throughout*

This method was fifth choice for the tutors and the least favorite for students (e.g. Table 2). Timing the tutors' comments was a problem since the student and tutor read at different speeds and both had a hard time staying focused. One tutor noted the problem this way: "The student seemed disconnected and like she didn't want to be here—maybe reading aloud would have engaged her more." Another tutor suggested that "the student can catch problems and solve them when we read aloud" rather than reading silently. The problem of noise and distraction was mentioned and it was the most time consuming method.

### *3.6 Tutor and student both read silently; tutor comments at the end*

Finally, the tutor and student both read silently and the tutor waited to comment until both had completed the reading. Although this method was the third choice of the students, it was the least favorite for the tutors (e.g. Table 2). They felt they distracted the students as they made marks on the paper during the silent reading to help them remember what comments they wanted to make. Both students and tutors struggled to stay focused on the paper and both commented that this method was easy to implement, but it was less fruitful than some of the other methods. Several tutors commented that they were often distracted by sounds around them. One tutor mentioned that he "fixed" local problems as he read the paper, but then failed to address them with the student. One tutor asserted that using this method prevented the student from participating in helping to solve the problems because the tutor and student need to be reading out loud together. Another tutor said, "I hated it," adding that the student asked questions while the tutor was still reading, so the tutor forgot the comments he had planned to make.

## **4. Discussion of Our Findings**

Based on only student responses, the "best method" for engaging students in tutorial sessions in our writing lab is to have the students read their own papers out loud while tutors make insightful comments, offer praise, and ask questions about the paper. Commenting during the session allows tutors to ask questions such as "What point are you trying to make in the paragraph you just read?" The student can stop and respond to the question to find his or her own answer to the question. If tutors wait and comment at the end, students may no longer remember what the point of the paragraph was. Going back to read it means reading it out of context and it will be harder to respond correctly. The feedback should be "kept close and

recurrent”; “any comments at the tail end of an effort are far less effective than on-the-spot responses” (Harris, 1986, p. 21). Commenting throughout the time the student is reading his or her paper offers opportunity for a fruitful conversation.

However, students and tutors did not agree on the “best” method for a tutorial in the writing lab. Although students preferred reading their own paper out loud, tutors preferred reading the students’ papers themselves. This may suggest that students are unwilling to yield control of their own papers or that students have more difficulty staying engaged if someone else is reading the paper. In contrast, tutors’ preferences appear to be based on ease of making comments on the students’ papers, rather than on a desire to “control” the paper. This is borne out by tutors’ comments as to the difficulty of waiting until the end and trying to remember what they wanted to say to students. They are more concerned about keeping their concerns in mind than they are about the control of the paper.

What does an understanding that students prefer to read their own papers mean for tutors? After seeing the results of the study, our tutors recognized that tutorials are more successful when students feel engaged and as a result improve their writing skills, not just come to the lab to get their paper “fixed.” If the student is not fully engaged in the writing tutorial, the tutor may become the “plumber” trying to repair the leaks or the “electrician” trying to fix the wiring. Instead, students should be coming to a Home Depot-like atmosphere where they can get advice and the best tools to do the job themselves. Therefore, the tutors concluded that it is better to have the students read the papers out loud while the tutors comment throughout.

## **5. Limitations of Our Study**

Our study would be enhanced by using larger numbers of students to support our findings. The study also limits students to a single option of reporting whether or not they liked the method they used and did not allow them an opportunity to try other options.

An additional insight we realized that we needed to deal with was that regardless of who reads the paper, maintaining interest during the reading of the student paper is a problem. Tutors who have little background knowledge about or no interest in students’ topics may find it difficult to concentrate on students’ papers. If tutors are reading the paper, students often fail to pay attention, assuming that tutors are going to “fix” the paper and that they need not play a role in the revision process. Another inherent problem with reading papers out loud in a writing center is the probability of external noise. If others are tutoring at the same time, it is often difficult to concentrate (Edgington, 2008, p. 10).

To deal with these problems, it is important that tutors have strategies to compensate. Taking notes often helps dispel boredom and helps tutors pay attention to the student as he or she reads the paper. It also provides fodder for questions and directive comments. It may also be necessary to have students repeat portions of the paper for clarification. Doing so may help the students to hear the problems and be able to correct the errors on their own or at least provide an opportunity for the tutor to re-state what he or she thinks has been said and ask for confirmation from the student.



## 6. Conclusion

Although this research provided us with an immediate tool to implement in our lab to more fully engage students in the writing tutorials, it raises additional questions for us and others who grapple with similar issues. Additional research is needed to further determine where agency lies in a tutoring session and what the implications are for those choices. For example, the students prefer to read their own papers out loud; how does this impact the role of the students and the role of the tutors, who may prefer reading the paper themselves? More research also needs to be done to understand learning styles of both the writers and the tutors. Would a preference for one method over another automatically guarantee that it is the “best” method for that student? What criteria would a tutor use to select the “appropriate” reading method for a student? Other empirical studies may suggest best practices for tutoring in the Writing Center and in other settings to more fully engage students and to provide them with additional tools to successfully improve their own writing.

Our search to find the best reading method for our writing lab does not provide the ultimate solution to better writing, but it does provide a tool students can use to more confidently look at their own work. In addition, a by-product of the experiment is that our tutors became at least cognizant of, if not comfortable with, each of the six tutoring patterns. Clearly, more research needs to be done. In the meantime, however, as a result of this study, students who are struggling with writing a paper at our university come to our writing lab where they can read their own papers out loud while tutors offer support by asking questions and offering praise.

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