— FROM THE EDITOR —

As the next academic year starts, we too are delighted to be back with the new, all new Volume 33 of WLN. To help with tutor training now underway, Anna Kendall offers us insights into how to help students decipher the mysteries of assignment sheets, and Robert Haselwander decodes the arcane rules of the English article (“a/an” and “the”) so that tutors can assist ESL students working on mastering this confusing part of speech.

Then, for directors who are working with graduate assistant directors and also graduate students stepping into the position of assistant director, both Lyndall Nairn and Zachery Koppelmann review the new collection of essays, (E)Merging Identities: Graduate Students in the Writing Center, edited by Melissa Nicolas. On the same topic, two peer tutors, Jessica Legg and Jessica Lott write a column for tutors about negotiating authority among tutors, assistant directors, and directors in the writing center.

Our Associate Editors, Mike Mattison and Janet Auten, have been collating a list of our reviewers, and we plan to post this list to the WLN Web site so that we can publicly thank them for their efforts and their collaborative work with authors who submit articles for WLN. If we had the budget to do so, we’d certainly host these excellent reviewers at a dinner (preferably somewhere on an exotic island paradise).

Mike, Janet, and I wish everyone a productive, rewarding academic year ahead.

✦ Muriel Harris, editor

THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET MYSTERY
✦ Anna Kendall
DePaul University, Chicago, IL

About midterm, a student scheduled an appointment to meet with me in the university’s writing center. As we took our seats around a small circular table in the middle of the room, I asked the tutee what she wanted to talk about. Pulling out a few unstapled pages of computer paper, she responded that she wasn’t sure that her essay was “what the teacher’s looking for.” And, she didn’t know how she could figure it out. My first reply was “Can I look at the assignment sheet?”

As we began discussing the assignment sheet, the student confessed that she hadn’t paid much attention to it after the teacher passed it out in class—she had only recognized that she needed to write an essay on a specific children’s book. However, she didn’t use the assignment sheet any further to locate the specific rhetorical situations the teacher had created through this writing prompt. Basically, the only thing she knew was that she had to compose an “essay.” What needed to be included in the essay? What themes was the teacher expecting? What was the expected style? The tutee didn’t know. Therefore, my tutoring mission became clear: Crack the assignment sheet code. We read over the sheet and identified the command words, like describe and include.

We analyzed each paragraph. We talked through the major points the teacher was requesting. Once we de-coded the assignment sheet, once we solved

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the mystery of the assignment sheet, the tutee knew immediately how her paper was to be written and
what exactly she needed to include in it.

This experience, along with other similar assignment sheet situations I’ve encountered working in the
Writing Center and with friends, has really opened my eyes, and ears, to the power of the assignment
sheet. I’ve become somewhat of an assignment sheet advocate. I fight for its use and try to spread
the word of its power in writing. And, my experience is definitely not unique; it’s a common scenario in
writing centers.

Muriel Harris writes that because the assignment sheet is misunderstood with such regularity, we
ought to view it as a part of the education process, such as learning the language of the academic
communities, learning how to understand that language, as well as how to act on that understanding
(Talking 39). Harris continues by stating that learning how to interpret assignment sheets is often a
subject in a writing center tutorial (Talking 39). And, as Steven M. North writes, our job as tutors “is
to produce better writers, not better writing.” In a writing center, our objective is to make sure that it
is the writers who get changed, and not necessarily their texts (37).

I believe the assignment sheet should be studied and its de- coding should become a vital part of
the composing process. The writing center is a great place where the mystery of the assignment sheet
can be solved. In the following sections I’ll briefly discuss the composing process and the research that
has been produced about the planning phase. I’ll also explain why the assignment sheet is such a powerful
text in the classroom. And, most importantly, I’ll describe how writing tutors can help students work
with assignment sheets and understand the role they play in their own writing.

THE COMPOSING PROCESS: PLANNING

Many scholars write that a major component of the composing process is “planning” (Stotsky 37).
According to Linda Flower, this process involves developing and refining one’s goals (Flower 373).
The planning process involves several sub-processes, such as generating ideas, organizing, and goal
setting (Flower 372). According to a tutoring handbook, writers attempt to answer the “planning
questions,” such as the following: What is known about the topic? What is the purpose? Who is the
audience? (Gillespie and Lerner 15). During this phase, students may use a number of invention
activities, such as brainstorming, clustering, and freewriting to answer their planning questions (St.
Martin’s 200).

ASSIGNMENT SHEETS IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

As described above, much of the planning process involves reading assignments and then using invention
activities to generate material for composing papers. An analysis of the assignment sheet is also
a useful activity for students attempting to compose papers. This should become a staple sub-process
within the planning process. This is important because the assignment sheet is an important text
within the university; the assignment sheet is a text written by instructors and affects the rhetorical
situations within which students must compose, and the assignment sheet is frequently misunderstood
by students.

While often misunderstood by students, the assignment sheet is an important text within the university.
It’s important because it is written within the language of the academic discourse community. As David
Bartholomae writes, students must learn to speak the language of those members in the university
community and try on the particular ways of knowing, selecting, and evaluating that define the dis-
course of the community (589).
In order to learn how to compose in the discourse of the university community, students must include assignment sheets as a critical component of the planning process. Such analysis is important because assignment sheets complicate the student writer’s rhetorical situations—assignment sheets are texts written by teachers for the students, who are the readers (audience) and must negotiate between this text and that of the text they are asked to compose. Anis Bawarshi claims that the writing prompt, like any other genre, “organizes and generates the conditions within which individuals perform their activities” (127).

Most importantly, though, the analysis of assignment sheets should be incorporated into the planning process because students often misunderstand assignment sheets, as well as struggle with them. One reason for this struggle is that the students may not understand the language of the assignment sheet (Harris, Talking 38). Students may also become overwhelmed by particular verbs in the sheets, such as analyze and compare (Harris, Talking 39).

**STRATEGIES FOR WRITING TUTORS**

The writing center is a great place where students can learn to solve the mystery of the assignment sheet. This conclusion is based on the plethora of research that illustrates how collaborative learning is beneficial for students. It has been shown that active learning is more effective and students can learn a lot from working with each other (Coe and Gutierrez 262). Also, as Harris notes, when describing teacher feedback on papers, the tutor’s role is one of translator or interpreter, in which he or she turns the teacher’s language into the student’s language (Talking 37). And, as Kenneth Bruffee notes, the tutors bring “knowledge of the conventions of discourse” to the tutorial (644).

There are several ways tutors can help students incorporate assignment sheets into their planning processes—by de-coding the assignment sheet, identifying the problem and solution within the writing prompt, discussing strategy words, and describing the rhetorical situation.

• **DE-CODE THE ASSIGNMENT SHEET**

Tutors can help students learn how to de-code the assignment sheets they are given before they begin other sub-processes during planning. Linda Simon writes that by helping students de-code assignments, we may persuade them that the writing process begins way before they begin to actually compose (155). Tutors can show tutees how they would de-code the assignment sheet, such as identifying the key sentences in which the instructor directs the students on what and how to compose. The tutors can also model for the students how they would de-code the writing prompt. As Harris notes, showing is a valuable tool because “it can bring alive for the student a writing process or strategy that has seemed shrouded in the mystery of textbook descriptions” (Teaching 68). Also, Harris writes that helping students to get the “feel” for some component of writing is something that tutors can accomplish in a tutorial (Talking 33). Tutors can also practice de-coding their assignment sheet while sitting next to their tutees, which is beneficial because the tutor can answer questions as the student works (as well as provide encouragement) (Talking 34). Understanding how and why they must de-code these sheets may reduce the chances that students will misinterpret the premises of their assignments.

During the tutorial I described in the opening of this article, I showed the tutee how she could de-code her assignment sheet. I showed her how I often take highlighters to mark the key sentences in the writ-
Call for Proposals
Michigan Writing Center Association
Fall Conference
October 4, 2008
Livonia, Michigan
“Reaching Out: The Campus, The Community, and Beyond”

This year’s conference theme focuses on various ways in which a writing center might extend its services, concerns, and commitments outside the center itself. Satellite sites, collaboration with other units or programs, community service, and service learning are just a few possibilities.

Needed Info for Proposal: Send Title, Contact information, desired format (Round Table, Panel, etc.), equipment needs, and short blurb for the conference program to Ann Russell @ arussel@madonna.edu. Send form and two attachments to Ann Russell, Writing Program Director, Madonna University, 36600 Schoolcraft Road, Livonia, MI 48150-1173, or e-mail to arussel@madonna.edu. Conference Web site: <http://www.miwritingcenters.org>.

Due Date for Proposals: September 12.

In all of the previous examples, one of the major benefits for the tutees was identifying the strategy words in the writing prompts. The verbs in the assignment sheets helped the tutees realize that an essay isn’t just an essay—it’s the umbrella term for a specific writing task that asks students to do something, or to describe something, or to argue something. Therefore, tutors can help students by showing them how important it is to look for, what the St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing has labeled, the “strategy words” on assignment sheets. Students must learn that understanding these words is important, because the words tell them what strategy they are to use in composing, and they determine the form of their written response.

A discussion of these strategy words will guide students to a more complex understanding of how their essays will be evaluated. Tutors can explain what each of the major verbs mean, such as which ones dictate style and form and which ones direct the discussion of the topic. Tutors can help students realize that instructors will likely use a number of verbs, and tutors can help students comprehend what the most common verbs mean. The verbs most commonly used in assignment sheets include the following: discuss, analyze, compare, contrast, define, describe, evaluate, explain, and summarize. These are words that are also common within the discourse of the academic community. And, these words signify the rhetorical action that students must take as they compose; the rhetorical action is a focus of the reader’s (teacher’s) evaluation.

In some tutorials I’ve had, the major problem is that the students don’t know what type of paper they are being asked to compose. Once we identify this problem, we can work through the writing prompt to identify the solution. After spending some time reading over the prompt, identifying what actions the student needs to take (argue, discuss, etc.), and what needs to be included (outside sources, references to the textbook, etc.), the student discovers what type of paper the teacher is expecting and finds the solution. In one tutorial, after we went through this process, a student’s paper describing American soccer became a paper arguing why American soccer is not as popular as European futbol.

**DESCRIPT STRATEGY WORDS**

Before students can begin composing, it’s important that they understand what action they must execute: analyze something, describe something, or argue something. Therefore, tutors can help students by showing them how it’s important to look for, what the St. Martin’s Guide to Teaching Writing has labeled, the “strategy words” on assignment sheets. Students must learn that understanding these words is important, because the words tell them what strategy they are to use in composing, and they determine the form of their written response.

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In all of the previous examples, one of the major benefits for the tutees was identifying the strategy words in the writing prompts. The verbs in the assignment sheets helped the tutees realize that an essay really isn’t just an essay—it’s the umbrella term for a specific writing task that asks students to analyze and include. And, a mere description of something does not argue how it is better (or worse) than something else.

**DESCRIBE THE RHETORICAL SITUATION**

According to Gerard A. Hauser, rhetorical situations are situations that contain multiple features, which include “the persons involved, the events that involve them, the object of their conscious attention within the context of the salient events, and the relations among the persons, events, and objects.”
(Hauser 33). The writing prompt is a genre that contains multiple features, which consequently creates students as both readers (of the teachers’ assignment sheets) and writers (of their own texts). Tutors can help tutees become aware that they must understand the rhetorical situations of the assignment sheet before they begin composing. David Sudol writes that on the first day of his composition classes, he discusses college composition with his students, and he presents a mini-lecture on the rhetorical situations. Sudol presents this information to his students because they are expected to understand the rhetorical situations of future writing assignments, and he also includes rhetorical situations in his assignment sheets (52). This activity can also apply to the writing center tutorial. Tutors can explain and describe the rhetorical situations of their tutee’s assignment sheets. It is important that tutors help their tutees understand that the rhetorical situations from which they compose are often made known implicitly through the writing prompts.

During several writing tutorials, I’ve realized that some students’ papers are not at all a reflection of what the teacher has laid out in the assignment sheet. That part doesn’t shock me. Assignment sheets are often misunderstood. What shocks me, however, are the students’ deliberate decisions not to follow the writing prompts’ guidelines and to continue writing as they have, because they “like it better that way.” And it is often these same students who explain that “the teacher doesn’t get” their writing when they come in after receiving a poor grade. I think that these students could benefit from a tutor helping them to understand the rhetorical situations presented through the writing prompt.

CONCLUSION

The assignment sheet, as illustrated through my experiences as a writing tutor, is often neglected or misunderstood by student writers. Therefore, tutors, as well as instructors, should acknowledge that the time spent interpreting the assignment, as well as understanding the rhetorical situations, is far more valuable than the time spent evaluating a finished product (Herrington 387). If tutors work with their tutees on analyzing the assignment sheet and providing strategies for interpreting it, then students may not only understand the assignment better but also become aware that the assignment sheet is a significant text that must be incorporated into their planning processes. The writing prompt should be considered a valuable aspect within the composing process, because it’s a text produced by a member of the academic discourse community, a community that students must try to appropriate. The writing prompt is a genre that complicates students’ rhetorical situations from which they compose. And, most importantly, the assignment sheet is often misinterpreted by students. Tutors can help students understand and incorporate assignment sheets into their own composing processes by showing students how their assignment sheets can be de-coded and how they can identify the problem and solution. Students need to know how they can interpret the various strategy words, and how they can describe the rhetorical situations. In the writing center, tutor and tutee can work together to solve the mystery of the assignment sheet.

Works Cited


