Currently I am a writing fellow at Penn State Berks. My role is similar to that of a writing tutor, but I work with a peer group of three students in a basic writing class, rather than one-to-one with a student in the writing center. When I first began working with the students in my writing group, we would start each session with the author reading his or her paper out loud. Each member of the writing group would follow along on his or her own copy with a pen in hand to mark up the paper and be prepared to discuss it when the author finished reading. After the author read the paper, the students were supposed to start off the discussion of the paper by saying something positive about the paper and then pointing out something confusing or missing. However, group sessions did not proceed well with such a broad beginning for a discussion. I noticed that the students did not mark up the paper, nor did they know what to say about the paper after it was read. They would start a discussion by mentioning the positive aspects of the paper in mono-syllables. If I could get one student to say something good about the paper, the other students would say that was the aspect of the paper they liked also. When I asked each student to say something different, they would offer general remarks, such as “I liked the last sentence of the paper. It was short and to the point.”

I realized that starting off each session by mentioning a positive aspect of the paper did not help the students begin conversing about the papers. Because it seemed too difficult for the students to launch a discussion by mentioning positive aspects of the paper or unclear paragraphs when they weren’t even sure about their topic, I decided to give them an easy starting point. After a little thought I adapted a strategy from *Tutoring Writing* by Donald A. McAndrew and Thomas J. Reigstad. In their book, McAndrew and Reigstad say that the “thesis/focus should be the first thing on the tutor’s agenda” (43). They advise tutors to start each tutoring session by asking the writer to summarize his or her paper in one sentence. Since I am a writing fellow, not a writing tutor, I needed to adapt their strategy to fit a writing group. I decided to have each group member, ending with the author, point out or explain the focus of the paper.

At our next group meeting, after Jon finished reading his paper on the college transition, I asked Mike to tell us the focus of Jon’s paper in his own words. Mike said that he wasn’t sure, but he thought the main point of Jon’s paper was about succeeding in college. Then Jessica said that she thought the focus of Jon’s paper was that the transition to college does not have to be hard. I asked Jon to tell us his opinion, since he was the author. He said, “I don’t think my focus is clear. I want my paper to be about important steps that make the transition to college easier so a student has a better chance of succeeding in college. Does anyone have any suggestions for a thesis sentence for me?” After a couple of suggestions from his peers, Jon came up with a really good thesis sentence for his paper. He decided that it would be, “Proper planning, organization, and preparation make the college transition easier for a first-year student.” And before I could even tell him to write the sentence on his paper so he would not forget it, he started writing it down.

I applied this strategy of identifying and explaining the main point to each paragraph of the paper. This helped to continue the discussion among the students. For example, Jon said that the focus of his second paragraph was that planning is a big step in a student’s transition from high school to college. I then asked the students how the focus of the second paragraph supported or could be used to support the focus of the paper. Jessica said that she liked Jon’s idea in the second paragraph that students should visit various colleges to find the perfect campus. She said, though, that Jon could improve the paragraph by telling why finding a perfect campus makes the transition to college easier. Mike suggested that Jon could develop the paragraph more by adding an example about a student who did not attempt to visit colleges until late in the school year. Finally, the student just applied to a campus without visiting it and then did not do well in college because he hated the college he was attending.

Before I initiated this strategy, I would have to force my students to write their peers’ suggestions down. They would always tell me that they didn’t know what to write, even if I told them to write exactly what they just said. I would also have to ask a lot of questions to get the students in my writing group to talk about anything. However, after I asked my group to talk about the focus, all of them came up with really good suggestions. They were discussing the paper so much that I hardly had to say anything. I was amazed at how eagerly the students conversed about the paper, giving each other very good advice for revisions. I also noticed that the students didn’t
just criticize each other’s papers. Once I got the students to explore the focus of the paper, they would contrast the bad parts of the paper with the good parts.

I think the strategy of focusing on the focus facilitates discussion because, for the first time, these students are examining the whole text to find the meaning. Since these students are only in a basic writing class, maybe they have always read the way they write—sequentially, without constantly reflecting on how each succeeding paragraph adds to the meaning of the text as a whole. As the students in my writing group continually think back to the focus of the paper, they are reading their peers’ papers to understand the meaning of the paper, rather than just to get information. By centering the group discussion around the focus of the paper, I eventually helped my group discuss not only the main idea of the paper, but also the organization, development, clarity, and successes of each paper.

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Work Cited

Director, Center for Academic Excellence
Santa Fe Community College

Salary maximum: $45,891
Hiring department: Academic Support & Student Retention
Person hiring: Mildred Lovato
SFCC required training: All new hires are required to complete a 20-hour new employee orientation program their first week of employment.

Education and experience: Master’s degree and a minimum of two (2) years of higher education teaching experience as a full or part-time instructor and two (2) years of supervisory experience required. Must also have at least two (2) years experience with diverse populations, faculty, and staff members. At least one year of experience working with computer technology is required. Experience in providing tutoring and tutor training in an institution of higher education is preferred. Bilingual (English/Spanish) desired.

Skills and knowledge: Understands current teaching methodologies and diverse learning styles in mathematics, science, and writing as well as with current research about tutoring, writing labs, and supplemental instruction. Ability to effectively communicate with information technology professionals. Sensitivity to and understanding of diverse academic, socioeconomic, cultural, special needs, and ethnic backgrounds of community college students.

Summary: Under general supervision, provides leadership in developing and maintaining tutoring and supplemental instruction programs aimed at increasing student success. Also responsible for working closely with the Office of Information Technology and the CIO to ensure that SFCC’s open computer labs are staffed with lab assistants who have the skills and training to support student learning, and that policies and procedures implemented in SFCC’s open computer labs meet the needs of the students. Works with faculty, staff, and administrators across disciplines, departments, and divisions to provide academic support programs that enhance students’ learning experiences.

Tutoring Center Coordinator
West Virginia University

West Virginia University’s Department of English invites applications for a newly created, full-time, non-tenure track position to develop and manage the activities of a Tutoring Center that will support students enrolled in University writing courses. The person we hire will supervise writing tutors (graduate assistants and undergraduate peer tutors) and will also teach composition. The initial appointment is for 3 years.

Requirements: Master’s or doctoral degree in English or closely related field; experience teaching composition; and knowledge of tutoring and tutoring centers. We welcome administrative or faculty development experience; additional expertise in English as a second language a plus.

Application: Cover letter and c.v.; brief statement of teaching philosophy; three letters of reference; and a brief (10-15 page) portfolio of teaching and/or administrative materials. Address: Professor Laura Brady, Tutoring Coordinator Search Committee, Department of English, PO Box 6296, West Virginia University, Morgantown, WV 26506-6296. E-mail applications are also welcome: Laura.Brady@mail.wvu.edu.

Deadline: Review of applications begins March 25, 2005, and will continue until the position is filled. For more information, please visit our Web site: <http://www.as.wvu.edu/english/>.