

ACCESSIBILITY GUIDELINES

WHY ACCESS AND ACCESSIBILITY MATTER

When thinking about access and the writing center, there are two perspectives to consider: access and accessibility. In essence, these are two sides of the same coin, but it is helpful to consider them separately to ensure that we do not over-emphasize one and overlook the other. Access takes the broader perspective of how available and easy to use the writing center's services are for students, while accessibility deals with ensuring we provide appropriate accommodations to all students, regardless of (dis)ability, linguistic background, or socioeconomic status. Our goal should always be an equitable and inclusive tutoring experience for all students who visit the Writing Center.

To evaluate if we are providing good access for all students, it is important to think about how easy (or difficult) it is for students to learn about what we do, find our center, or use our services. We want to ensure that any student has the option of using the Writing Center, whether they live on or off campus, take classes in person or online, or have any other factors that impact their ability to use the Writing Center.

Questions we can ask as a starting point include:

- Do we advertise through a variety of avenues across campus and digitally?
- Do we offer tutoring in the evening and on weekends as well as during weekdays?
- Is our tutoring available online as well as in person?

In order to assess our accessibility, we need to think about whether our services are compliant with accessibility guidelines and laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Since the laws are not necessarily developed specifically with writing centers in mind, however, we need to understand that they are just a starting point for our considerations. In order for the Writing Center to succeed at providing appropriate and inclusive services to all students, we need to examine ways to make our tutoring adaptable so that we can adjust to what the student needs rather than asking them to adjust to how we tutor. While the Writing Center is legally required to provide reasonable accommodations to anyone with a documented disability, our goal is to make our services as accessible and inclusive as possible for anyone in the university community who wants support on their writing. Questions we can ask as a starting point include:

- Is the Writing Center's campus location physically accessible?
- Do we provide American Sign Language/English interpreters?
- Are our online resources compatible with screen reader technology?

MAKING THE WRITING CENTER ACCESSIBLE

It is critical that our services and resources are founded on a commitment to access and accessibility. Therefore, an important piece of how we provide tutoring and other writing support, as well as the writing resources we create for students, is ensuring that they follow Universal Design Learning (UDL) principles. An example of UDL would be to ensure there is captioning on any audio content we share with students, as not only does that make the content accessible to someone who is Deaf or Hard of Hearing, it is also helpful to students who are learning English as an additional language, who can comprehend the information better if they also see it in writing, or who do not have the option to watch the content with the sound on. We want our services to be as accessible as possible. This means being flexible with our tutoring approach, understanding the rationale for tutoring techniques that we have been trained to use so that we can understand when and how to adapt them as needed, and ensuring that our resources are formatted appropriately.

Since students will have different accessibility needs and may not want to disclose if they have a disability, it is beneficial to have a flexible approach to tutoring that prioritizes the students' preferences. This benefits all students, not just those with disabilities, and sets the tutoring session up to be a successful peer collaboration, too. When you sit down with a student to begin a tutoring session, for example, you can ask them what type of feedback they find most helpful and follow their guidance. If they have something that is helpful, they have the opportunity to ask that you take that approach without them having to share any more than they want to (refer to module on Universal Design Learning principles for more specific training on this). If the student does not have a specific request or isn't sure yet how to answer that question because it is their first time visiting the Writing Center, think about ways you can make the tutoring process as transparent as possible so the student can understand what you are doing and why, and so that they can think about what will help them most. For instance, if you are working with a student who is taking an English as a Second Language (ESL) class, you could mention that we usually read the paper aloud and ask if they would like to read it themselves to practice their pronunciation or have you read it so they can listen to how it sounds.

It is particularly important that we do not make assumptions as to what accommodations or approaches a student might need or prefer. It is never appropriate for us to try to diagnose students, for example, or to force accommodations on them that we think they need. For instance, although we have tutors who are studying American Sign Language (ASL), it is appropriate to inform a d/Deaf student seeking tutoring that they have the option to work with a tutor who signs, request an interpreter, or use any other reasonable accommodation that they prefer: it is not appropriate to automatically assume that they will prefer and/or be content with an option we choose for them, such as pairing them with a tutor who knows ASL before asking about their preference. Our goal is for the students to be comfortable – even if that means that as tutors we have to move out of our own comfort zone a little in terms of how we accommodate their needs.

Accessibility is not only for students who come to the Writing Center for tutoring; our tutors should expect an accessible work environment, as well. That means that as colleagues, we must be cognizant and respectful of accommodations a fellow tutor may need, and we should also work actively to ensure the environment remains accessible and inclusive.

MAKING OUR ONLINE SERVICES ACCESSIBLE

Along with making sure the Writing Center's physical location and services are accessible, it is critical to assess whether our online services and resources are accessible. When tutoring online, remember that it is the student's right to choose whether or not they activate their camera and/or microphone. If a student asks the tutor to type in the chat, that is acceptable. Since synchronous online tutoring is not always accessible, we are exploring options to offer asynchronous online tutoring – that is still a work in progress because of how challenging it can be to remain in the role of peer tutor instead of editor when providing comments on a paper asynchronously. Updates will be shared once we have developed some training and guidelines to help address that challenge.

If you are asked to create resources for the online writing lab, keep in mind that you should use the template developed for handouts and ensure that there is adequate color contrast in PowerPoints. Videos must always be captioned. Additional information and step-by-step instructions are provided in another section of this handbook.

MAKING AN ONLINE TUTORING SESSION ACCESSIBLE

There are a variety of questions to consider before and during an online tutoring session to make sure it is as accessible as possible. When preparing for the appointment, we always email the student from the Writing Center email to remind them of their appointment and request a copy of their paper (and rubric, if available) at least one hour in advance. This is also a good time to include a brief overview of what an online tutoring session looks like and to ask if the student has any questions or concerns that you can address ahead of time.

Once you have the paper, save it as a PDF and upload it to the Blackboard Collaborate session. Then, copy the guest link and paste it in your reply thanking the student for sending their paper. Remind them that at their appointment time, they can click on that link and be connected directly with their tutor. One of the reasons we ask for the paper ahead of time is so that we can take care of uploading it so the student has less to worry about. Having the paper ahead of time is also helpful for the tutor because sometimes there can be technical difficulties that take time and attention away from the tutoring session; in instances like that, having already read the paper and thought about to talk about with the student helps us refocus and stay on track.

Once you have the paper, read through it (and the instructions or rubric, if available) and think about how what sorts of questions you will want to ask the student and what resources you might want to recommend. Remember, although you may want to make notes for yourself, you should

not be editing or extensively marking up the paper. The goal, just like in person, is to think about the higher order concerns first and focus on responding as a reader and coach, not as an editor. It can be especially easy with online appointments to want to try and address every aspect of the paper, but that is just as overwhelming online as it is in person, so try to focus on about three items and remember to find positive features to comment on, as well.

A few minutes before the appointment time, log onto Blackboard and join the tutoring room. Remember to activate your camera and microphone, although don't be offended if the student chooses not to activate their camera or microphone. If the student is new to Blackboard Collaborate, be prepared to offer some technical guidance if they have trouble logging on or figuring out how to use Collaborate.

It is nice to start off the tutoring session with a friendly greeting and some discussion before you share the paper on the screen. This is your opportunity to ask the student how they are doing, find out if they are familiar with the Writing Center and/or Blackboard Collaborate, and ask them about their goals for the tutoring session. Once you have built a rapport and know a bit more about what they are looking for, you can share the paper so both you and the student can see it on the screen. There are a few things to keep in mind about how an online session could differ from an in-person one. To begin with, even if you can see and hear each other, there is a difference between being in the same room with someone and communicating through a computer screen. Be patient if there are delays, a choppy connection, or difficulties with audio. If the student does not activate their camera, it might be hard to understand them without the visual cues, so don't be afraid to ask for clarification. If you are typing back and forth in the chat, remember how much context and tone can be lost without being able to see each other's body language and hear intonation – be extra friendly while typing, and double check to make sure you aren't hastily typing a response that might be friendly in person when said in a light tone of voice and accompanied by a smile, but that might seem rude as a line of text.

An important way to make the online tutoring session accessible and empower the student from the beginning is to provide information about how a writing center typically goes and our philosophy of tutoring, then ask the student what their goals are so that you can learn a bit more about what they want or need. For example, if you start off briefly mentioning that tutoring sessions last about half an hour and we usually start by reading the paper aloud and then focusing on a few main themes, it is easy to segue into asking the student what main topics they were hoping to focus on. Once you have negotiated the goals of the session with the student, let them know you are going to begin reading the paper aloud so that you can see what they have written and so they can hear it and experience it a different way than they do when reading it quietly to themselves.

After finishing your read-through of the paper, think about the main items you want to address. Just like with an in-person tutoring session, remember to pick a small number of aspects to discuss and focus on higher order concerns and patterns of error. If the student has the Blackboard Collaborate screen up (which hopefully they do), you can identify what you are referring to by highlighting it on the screen. If they have the paper open in another program, you

may have to explain which part of the paper you are referring to more precisely. You can send examples or links to helpful websites through the chat, and you can type examples directly onto the paper. Remember to tell the student that Collaborate doesn't save notes, though, so they should take a screenshot any time you flip a page.

Sometimes the Blackboard Collaborate environment can make a student eager to start revising their paper during the tutoring session. While it can be a useful strategy to guide a student through a small revision so they know how to do it, be conscious of the time and careful to stay focused on your role as a peer tutor. If students start to edit the paper extensively – or ask you to – during the tutoring session, one technique is to mention, “We have about 10 minutes left of our tutoring session. Is there anything else you wanted to look at or had a question about before we wrap up?” If it is relevant, you could also offer to send them a resource. For example, a student who wants you to check each of their MLA citations could benefit from being referred to our resources on MLA once you have worked through one or two examples with them.