Tutoring Tips and Guidelines

General Suggestions

1. Attend tutor training and tutor orientation sessions before tutoring begins.
2. Attend an LC orientation session.
3. Familiarize yourself with LC materials.
4. Meet with LC Supervisor and Tutor Coordinator.
5. Shape the tutoring environment.
6. Schedule tutoring times with LC Supervisor and Tutor Coordinator.
7. Find out the following about your student:
   a. name
   b. time to be tutored
   c. particular area to be covered
8. Prepare mentally for your student.
9. Complete necessary administrative forms.
11. Minimize discussion about personal matters unless you feel it is helpful. Sometimes personal discussions ease anxiety, establish rapport, and allow concentration and improvement.
12. If you will be late or absent, call as far in advance as possible (281-312-1439). If you know in advance that you will be absent, inform the LC Supervisor or Coordinator of Tutors, so a substitute tutor can be located. Employment will be terminated after two unexcused absences (absences with no advance notice).
13. Dress in a clean and neat manner.
14. If you have no appointments, plan for your next session, review students’ folders, or assist the LC Supervisor with assignments.
15. Act as a guide to the tutoring session but remain flexible and open to change.
16. Check students’ graded work and printed assignment sheets or the students’ notes for an assignment.
17. Do not correct students’ work or do students’ homework.
18. To explain a problem, use other examples than the ones assigned to students.
19. Schedule follow-up appointments.
20. Introduce students to appropriate lab materials.

The First Session

In the first session, the tutor sets the pattern for a tutorial process in which the student will play an active role. Following are several strategies for a successful first session:

1. Arrive a few minutes before the session is scheduled to begin.
2. Get to know your student by asking questions relating to student’s courses, textbooks, and academic difficulties. Direct your student to other resources if his or her needs are psychological as well as academic.

3. Give your student undivided attention.

4. Discuss mutual expectations to clarify policies of the tutoring process and to establish responsibilities of both participants.

5. Set realistic goals that your student can successfully reach during the session.

6. Involve your student as much as possible in the decision-making of the session.

7. If time permits, diagnose your student’s abilities, strengths, and weaknesses. A variety of diagnostic instruments are available in the LC. If diagnosis will be a part of a future session, prepare materials in advance. Being prepared during the first sessions sets the tone for the remaining sessions.

8. End your session on a positive note, and encourage students to make an appointment for another session.

**Diagnosis and the Tutorial Plan**

Diagnosis should occur at regular intervals. The initial diagnosis will provide enough information for a short-term tutorial plan.

The tutorial plan for a regular student should be an understanding between tutor and student concerning the material they will cover during the session(s). The plan should include objectives, learning activities, resources, evaluation, and follow-up activities. This plan will assist both tutor and student in pacing their work and in anticipating problem areas.

**On-Going Tutoring**

If you hold on-going tutoring sessions with the same student, you and your student should establish a professional rapport that allows good interaction, resulting in your student’s doing his or her own work. The tutor is a guide, a partner, and an observer; the ultimate goal of tutoring is to make your student academically independent.

In on-going tutoring sessions, require your student to bring both graded and ungraded work, so you are able to view transference of skills.

Do not concentrate solely on the student’s weaknesses. Work through a student’s areas of strength in order to improve his or her weaknesses.

For on-going tutoring, the tutor should use a variety of delivery systems and instructional techniques and emphasize study strategies and college resources.

**Ending the Tutoring Session**

Above all, end each session on a positive note. Below are some steps for successfully ending a session.
1. Assess and review what you and your student have accomplished. Accent the positive.
2. Make an assignment (formal or informal) for the next session. You and your student will have a goal and starting point for the next session.
3. Encourage your student to walk to the sign-up sheet and have the receptionist schedule the next appointment.

The Socratic Method

One of the most effective tutoring methods is the Socratic Method—a method of questioning. As a tutor you must learn to ask effective questions—the more effective the question, the better the response from the student. Here are several reasons for using the Socratic Method:

1. to determine problem areas for the student,
2. to determine what a student knows,
3. to help a student determine the right answer,
4. to see if a student can apply new skills, or
5. to clarify something which is not clear.

The major reason for questioning is to determine the types of problems a student is experiencing. Questions are effective for this purpose; however, many tutors use questions only in this instance. Questions should be asked throughout the session, and the Socratic Method should be used as a fundamental part of tutoring. Below are guidelines for each of the above reasons:

1. **To determine problem areas for the student.** The most frequent question in the tutor session is “What are you having problems with?” This question is an important one; however, the problem comes from tutors taking the students’ answers at face value or not examining the answer in detail. For example, John has written an essay, and it has been corrected. He has come for tutoring and when asked his problem area, he answers, “Oh, subject-verb agreement.” A good tutor will want to know more, while one not versed in the importance of using questions will plunge into an explanation of subject-verb agreement without asking anything else. Here are other questions you might ask:
   a. What other problems are you having?
   b. Why do you think subject-verb agreement is a problem?
   c. What work have you done in this area? (“Show me” is next.)
   d. What do you understand about subject-verb agreement?
   e. Are you able to identify subjects and verbs in the sentence? (Get a Subject-Verb Recognition worksheet to quiz him even if he says he can identify them.)
   f. Do you understand linking and helping verbs versus action verbs?
   g. Have you heard of collective nouns and indefinite pronouns and how they agree with verbs?
With more questions, the tutor is able to give more specific help and diagnose the student’s problem much better.

2. **To determine what a student knows.** Too often a tutor will focus on what a student does not know. However, it is often important to evaluate what a student does know. A student’s knowledge will not only help the tutor give more specific instruction and provide the student with some positive reinforcement, but also provide a better starting point for instruction. This information is especially true in subjective areas such as writing and interpretation. Always ask: “What do you think/know about this?”, “What are your ideas?”, “Can you explain this to me?”

3. **To help a student determine the right answer.** Generally, the student will always know more than he or she thinks, so it is often the tutor’s job to show a student what he or she does know. If you are reviewing problems with a student and the student is stumped for an answer, use questions to show him or her how to solve the problem. Ask things such as “What is the first step?”, “How did we solve the other problem similar to this?”, “At what point are you getting stuck?”, “What is the rule concerning this area?” The questions you ask will vary from situation to situation, but well asked questions are often the key to helping a student overcome anxiety and realize that he or she possesses the knowledge to solve the problem.

4. **To see if a student can apply new skills.** A very effective teaching tool is to have the student “teach” you. After you teach the student new skills, ask if he or she can explain to you how to solve the problem. Ask, “What did you learn about this?”, “Can you show me the steps to solve this problem?” Try to get him or her to practice what they have learned and to apply it. This practice reinforces the learning process for the student and allows both student and tutor feedback on the effectiveness of the tutoring session.

5. **To clarify something this is not clear.** When teaching new skills, the tutor should stop at various points and ask, “Do you understand this?”, “Is this part clear to you?”, “Do you have any questions about this?” Often, students are afraid to ask questions, even to a tutor, for fear of appearing incompetent. A tutor should use questions like the ones above and positive reinforcement to teach the student differently. Also, a student will often say he or she does not understand something but not be specific. Use questions as in #1 to determine exactly where he or she loses understanding of the subject. Ask, “Do you understand this part?” and continue until you reach the part or step in the problem that he or she does not understand. Also, use questions like the ones in #3 which ask the student to solve the problem as much as possible. Ask, “What is the first step?”, “How much of the problem can you solve?” Often, a student will understand a small part or portion of the problem-solving method. A good tutor will identify specific problem areas instead of reemphasizing general material or objectives the student already understands.

When asking questions, keep the following tips in mind:
1. **Ask open-ended questions.** Do not ask questions that require “yes” or “no” answers; instead, ask questions that require elaboration.

2. **Allow the student time to answer one question before moving on to the next.** Do not bombard a student with several questions in a row without allowing him or her time to answer. Also, do not rush a student’s answer. Give him or her time to analyze the question and answer before moving on to another one. However, some will be open-ended, and some will be guided to get specific information. Some tutors will give hints if the student does not answer in a reasonable time so as not to make the student embarrassed by lack of knowledge. No one wants to make the student feel as though he or she is being interrogated.

3. **Mix the Socratic Method with others.** Asking questions is very important and very effective, but a session with only questions can overwhelm a student and not allow the tutor to give enough feedback or instruction. You must learn to ask the best questions at the most appropriate times.

4. **Make questions specific.** Try to avoid general questions as much as possible. At times, you must be general, such as when you ask, “What are you having problems with?” However, always narrow the focus as much as possible once the general questions have been asked. Students can be overwhelmed when asked, “What theme do you think the writer is trying to convey?”, “What role do the characters play?”, “Did you find one passage you really liked?” Specific questions will help a tutor pinpoint the student’s needs.

**Holistic Tutoring**

Holistic tutoring, like holistic reading and scoring, involves the principle of the communication of a whole message. An effective reader reads for the underlying meaning of the entire passage; he or she does not simply separate the selection into individualized study skills. Too, holistic scoring involves an evaluation on the basis of how effectively an essay communicates a whole message to a specified audience for a given purpose. In tutoring, though it may be necessary to tutor students on specific topics during many instances, the tutor’s ultimate goal is to help the student become an independent learner. Therefore, tutors should give attention to the student’s overall academic problem-time management, setting goals, poor study habits, etc. A successful student leaves a tutoring program knowing the characteristics of a good student.

**The Tutor as Editor and/or Grader**

There is a major difference between tutoring students and proofreading or grading their work. Many students come to the lab with papers or with completed assignments, hand them over to the tutor, and expect the tutor to correct their mistakes and not provide feedback or instruction. The LC is not a grading service; therefore, one of the most sacrosanct instructions we stress is that tutors do not correct students’ assignments. This rule applies to all tutors. However, we do realize that there are often gray areas where this rule is concerned. As a result, please review the following guidelines carefully.
1. As soon as a tutor has determined why a student has come in for tutoring, the tutor should explain to the student the policy concerning proofreading and grading. Some students will be upset because the tutor will not acquiesce to what they want. However, the tutor should explain the things he or she can do for the student in the session.

   a. **Checking homework:** You cannot go through question-by-question and tell the student if it is right or wrong. Instead, ask the student to tell you what types of problems he or she had with the homework; then, address these problems. Look at information in the book which precedes the homework and ask the student if he or she understands all of the information. If not, work with the student on those problems. The most effective way of meeting a student's need in this situation is to go back over exercises in the book, or to do other exercises from the support files or other LC sources. Remember to ask questions and to use all available resources. NOTE: Even after all of this, some students will claim they understand the material covered and simply need someone to tell them if their homework is done correctly. Please decline. Wouldn’t it be nice if we could have experts check our homework in all our classes?

   b. **Papers:** There is a fine line between reading a paper to identify needs and proofreading. Proofreading is the process of reading a paper to identify and correct mistakes. Tutors may identify or diagnose problems in students' papers, but they should not give the exact location of the problems. Instead, instruct students on the problems and allow them the opportunity to correct the mistakes. Use worksheets or other materials from the LC to teach a student how to identify and correct errors. It is also helpful to look at the student's past written work and to point out the same pattern of types of errors as are on the current paper. After a student seems to understand how to solve the problem, read through the paper with the student and have him or her identify where the errors are located. It is important to deal with a student's organizational and developmental needs first. If a student has several grammar problems, then strongly suggest he or she make a follow-up appointment or appointments as soon as possible so that he or she can deal with those problems.

2. **Do not write on a student’s paper or homework.** If you feel there is something specific which needs to be marked on the paper, inform the student and allow him or her to do it.

3. **Many students who return (especially with papers) will not have followed through with past assigned work.** If they are working on different material, then ask if they have mastered the past material and move on to the new material. If a student with a paper has not worked on improving deficiencies in grammar, then deal only with organization and development or deal with the previously established grammar problems before looking at the new paper.

4. **When dealing with papers, always spend a few minutes showing the student tips on how to proofread.** The most important tips include reading slowly, reading aloud to hear how a paper sounds, and
reading the paper at least twice—the first time looking at the content and style, and the second time looking for grammar errors. Most students do not proofread properly because they go too quickly and look for too much at one time.
**Group Tutoring**

Group tutorials are effective, for students learn not only from the tutor but also from each other. Below are suggestions for maximizing group tutorials.

1. Ensure visibility of students, tutor, and visual aids. Arranging seats, turning notes, or changing positions can ensure visibility.
2. Encourage students to explain ideas to each other to encourage group participation. Equal participation can be accomplished by reassuring or questioning the quiet students and controlling the dominant ones.
3. Encourage students to summarize the important points of the session.

**“What If...“ Situations**

*Note: These situations have been taken from Helping Others Learn: A Guide to Peer Tutoring, by Tom Gier and Karan Hancock, University of Alaska Developmental Studies Program (1985).*

**Situation #1: Your Student Wants You to Do His or Her Work**

This is often a very subtle, unspoken request from your student. Maybe, your student wants you to demonstrate how to work just one more problem, or do just one more sentence, or solve one more equation. A tutor must keep in mind that his or her chief goal is to help the student achieve academic independence. Gently guide your student towards doing his or her own work. Such phrases as “it's your turn now,” or “you just start the problem and I'll help finish it” are initial steps in pointing your student towards independence. At times, though, you may have to be a bit more blunt, such as “it doesn’t do you any good if I do the work for you,” or “I'm not getting graded for this-you are,” or “look, the more you do, the better you get--the less you do, the longer it will take you to improve,” etc. Try a gentle push at first, but if you need to shove your student toward independence, then do so.

**Situation #2: Your Student Disagrees or Argues With You**

First of all, ask yourself if it makes a difference. Is there more than one correct and effective method of tutoring your student? If there is, then try your student's suggestion. If it is more effective, fine. If the method you are trying to use is, in your opinion, more effective, then explain how and why it is more effective than your student’s suggestion. If your student still insists on doing things his or her own way, then you have to decide if you can operate comfortably under these circumstances. How you feel will affect your effectiveness as a tutor and will determine whether you continue working with this student or refer the student to another tutor whose methods may be more in line with your student’s thinking.

There is, however, a more serious consideration. Your student may want to continue doing something that, in your opinion, is wrong. In this instance, you must explain as clearly and patiently as possible why what you suggest is right and why your student's suggestions are inappropriate. If you feel that there is no alternative way to doing this
assignment or activity, then you must let your student know. If your student refuses this advice, which is certainly his or her option, then you should switch to another area that you and your student can agree on; failing that, terminate your session and help your student find another tutor. Though your goal is to make your student independent, it is also your goal to impart only factual information.

**Situation #3: Your Student Criticizes His or Her Instructor, Other Tutors, Etc.**

Professional ethics prohibit you from commenting negatively about any instructor, tutor, student, or employee to your students. The surest and quickest method to incur the wrath of your supervisor and lose the respect of instructors, fellow tutors, and students is to comment negatively about anyone. If a student is upset and verbally blasts an instructor, tutor, etc., just shrug your shoulders, make no comment, and go on with the tutor session. Keep two things in mind: First, your job is to improve the skill level of your student; if you reinforce your student’s negative feelings concerning an instructor, you will only make your job more difficult. Second, you are only hearing one side of the story; no matter how unfairly your student seems to have been treated, there is another side of the story you are not hearing. So just shrug and get back to work.

**Situation #4: Your Student Has Low Self-Esteem**

If a person feels negatively about himself or herself, it is not easy to feel good about a subject he or she is having difficulty with. If your student is constantly putting himself or herself down, then this is a cue to you that you need to help your student feel better about himself or herself. The easiest place to start is to get your student to notice the things that he or she can do well. Spend some time at the beginning of the session discussing the positive things that are occurring in your student’s other classes, life, and the particular course you are working on together.

Improving someone’s self-esteem is not always a quick process, but it is usually a successful one, if you stay with it. If your student doesn’t show any signs of gaining a higher level of self-esteem or even verbally opposes your attempts at positive reinforcement, then you should refer your student to a counselor for some professional assistance.
Situation #5: Your Student Has Set Unrealistic Goals

First of all, it is not your place to inform your student of this, mainly because many seemingly unrealistic goals are often met. What you can do, however, is to break the goals down into small, reachable steps. For instance, your student, whom you are trying to help pass a basic writing course, wants to become a lawyer. Help your student set goals for a semester, one goal at a time, so that a clear step-by-step sequence can be visualized and achieved. Advising your student to see a career counselor can also be helpful.

If your student experiences momentary setbacks in his or her quest for a seemingly unrealistic goal, that is all right, because many of us fail many times before we succeed. Be sure that your student knows that a person can profit and learn from failure as well as from success. Let your student know that you or someone else will always be there to offer assistance.

Situation #6: Your Student Is Just Not Trying or Working Hard Enough

Simply, explain your feelings in a straight-forward, unemotional manner to your student. As you do this, be sure to point out some positive aspects concerning your student’s ability, personality, etc. Explain that your student is cheating himself or herself by not giving, in your opinion, his or her best effort. Then listen to your student; you may be surprised to hear that your student agrees with you and/or that there have been some extenuating circumstances that have contributed to the lack of effort. Once this discussion is over, be sure to set some short and long term goals that your student can use as motivators and you can use as guides for future effort.

If your student continues to fail to put forth his or her best effort, then you may be forced to discontinue working with this student. Explain that you are doing this because the sessions are a waste of your and your student’s time--time that both of you could put to better use. Always give your student the option of working with you again at a later date if his or her effort improves (set some detailed conditions, if you think it is appropriate).

Situation #7: Your Student Comes Unprepared for a Session

This is fairly common for the first session and should not be an area of concern. At the end of the first session, explain to your student what you need him or her to bring to the next session. If your student comes unprepared for the second session, politely remind your student what he or she was to have brought and then assist him or her as well as possible. At the end of the session, politely but firmly explain that you will not be able to work with him or her again if he or she doesn't bring certain materials to the session. If your student shows up at the third session without the appropriate materials, then you must keep your word and cancel the session on the spot. You are only being fair to yourself and your student, for a student will never be successful in an academic setting, or any setting for that matter, until he or she learns responsibility.

Situation #8: Your Student Is Late and/or Fails to Show Up
Don’t make a big deal of it; just simply remind your student the importance of being on time or calling if he or she cannot show up. Give your student an opportunity to explain why he or she was late or didn’t arrive. If this happens a second time, then remind your student once again and explain that if it happens again, you will not be able to work with him or her. If it happens a third time, then explain that your time is valuable and that you must spend it with others who are serious about getting help. Gently explain that you will not be able to work with your student in the future. A good rule of thumb to go by when working with students is “three strikes and you’re out.” Of course, for this to be effective, your student must know about this policy before the third occurrence happens. The purpose of this policy is not to get rid of students but to get rid of inappropriate behavior.

**Situation #9: Your Student Just Wants to Talk and Socialize**

There is nothing wrong with this in your first session. In fact, approximately half of most first sessions are involved in listening to a student verbalize his or her problems and just getting acquainted with each other. You can set the seeds for future productive sessions in this manner. You should, however, try to gently guide your student into doing work at least during the second part of the first session. If, at the start of your second session, your student still seems to be more preoccupied with verbalization and socialization than work, gently explain that you both are there to help him or her improve certain skills. Explain that the only way to do something better is to work on it. If your student still continues to talk rather than to work, then you should refer him or her to the counseling department with the explanation that you are really trained only in your skill area, while the counselors may be better able to help in other problem areas.

**Situation #10: Your Student Becomes Too Dependent upon You**

This is a common occurrence during the initial sessions. As you continue to work with your student, try to phase yourself out and have your student do more of the work. Dependence can also take the form of making decisions for your student. Your student may want you to help him or her decide on everything from what courses to take next semester to what car to buy. First of all, resist the temptation to “play God.” Secondly, give non-judgmental answers or redirect the question back to your student. For example, if asked what classes you think your student should take next semester, ask, “What classes did you have in mind?” You may be forced to respond in this manner a number of times, until your student either makes a decision or decides to try to get someone else to take on the responsibility of making his or her decisions. Remember that you want your student to achieve not only academic independence but also independence as a person. The more control, that is, decisions, a person can have over various activities in his or her life, the more responsibility and pride that person will take in his or her achievements.

**Situation #11: Your Supervisor Disagrees with Some of Your Tutoring Methods**

This does not happen very often, and when it does, it is almost always because of complaints your supervisor has received from your students and/or other tutors or instructors. The first thing you need to do is calmly discuss
with your supervisor just exactly what the area(s) of disagreement are. Once you have a common ground, then you can discuss the areas of disagreement one by one. It could simply be that your supervisor was misinformed and that once your side of the story is heard, the matter can be cleared up. On the other hand, you and your supervisor could actually have a legitimate area of disagreement concerning some tutoring method. Try to explain the reasons behind the method or methods you use. Also, listen and try to understand the reasoning behind why your supervisor disagrees with you. Find out what your supervisor would like to see you do instead of what you are doing. If you can convince your supervisor to accept your method or you accept your supervisor’s method or you reach some middle ground, then the problem is resolved. If, however, neither party is able to compromise, then you might ask your supervisor to observe you in action using the method under disagreement. This should lead to some type of agreement, but if this doesn’t, then you only have two alternatives: accept your supervisor’s method or discontinue tutoring in this situation.

**Situation #12: A Fellow Tutor Is Not, in Your Opinion, Doing, His or Her Job**

First of all, make sure that there really is a problem, not just a one-time occurrence. If, for example, you feel a fellow tutor is constantly rude or abrupt to his or her students, make sure that you just didn’t observe or notice him or her on an off day. If, however, you have continually noticed certain unprofessional or counter-productive behavior, then quietly report it to your supervisor. Give your supervisor as much pertinent information as possible. Why should you be concerned about the behavior of other tutors? Quite simply because the actions of other tutors reflect upon you as a tutor. Even more important, though, is the fact that one or two bad tutors can give a whole tutor program a bad name and make even your own students reluctant to come to you for assistance. Unfortunately, the old adage about one bad apple spoiling the whole bunch is true when it comes to the reputation of a tutor program.
Situation #13: Your Student Feels that You Are Not Helping Him or Her

This is not uncommon. Often, a student will become frustrated with the rate of his or her improvement or progress. Let your student verbalize his or her feelings. Explain how you believe your student has progressed. Ask your student what changes he or she would like to see in your sessions. Go over each suggestion and see if you can incorporate it into your sessions. If you cannot incorporate the suggestions into your sessions, for whatever reasons, then let your student have the option of choosing another tutor. A more common solution is simply increasing the number of sessions per week. If this isn't possible, another solution would be to continue working with your student on certain skills while arranging with another tutor to work on different skills. The most common solution, however, to this complaint is simply reassuring your student of the progress that has been made and pointing out the direction you are headed. Your student may just need assurance that he or she is really progressing.

Situation #14: You Are Ill and Cannot Make a Tutor Session

Very simply, call in as soon as possible and notify your supervisor. You can also have your supervisor try to reschedule the students missed. The key here, though, is to notify your supervisor as soon as possible.

Situation #15: You Are Not Feeling Well but You Make Your Sessions

If you are tutoring and are not at your best, then let your student know this as soon as you start your session. A statement to the effect that you are a little under the weather today but didn't want to miss your session alerts your student to the fact that you consider him or her important enough to see despite the fact that you are not feeling so great. It also lets your student know that you may not be at your sharpest during the session and to take that into consideration. As long as you give your student the very best you can, despite how you feel, then no one can ask for more.

Situation #16: Your Student Says That His or Her Teacher Disagrees with What You Told Him or Her

This usually happens because of a communication problem between what you tried to tell your student and what your student said you told him or her. Very patiently and calmly listen to what your student says is in disagreement with the teacher. If it is something where you were wrong, then admit it, make a mental note not to do and/or say that again, forget about it, and go on with your session. However, if the teacher in question didn’t, in your opinion, get the facts accurately or you disagree with the teacher’s reason for disagreement, then just drop the issue with your student by thanking him or her for the information. After the session, discuss the situation with your supervisor. Do not attempt to discuss the problem with the teacher until you have had an opportunity to discuss the matter with your supervisor. Let your supervisor decide how to handle the disagreement; after all, that is what he or she is there for.
Situation #17: A Teacher Comes to You Complaining About Your Work with One of Your Students

First of all, don’t get into a heated discussion with the teacher. The best method is to get your supervisor involved.

Write down the teacher’s complaint, go over it with the teacher, and see if you, the teacher, and your supervisor can get together to discuss the complaint. Whatever you do, do not argue with the teacher. As soon as possible, go over the complaint with your supervisor. If a meeting can be arranged with the teacher, you, and your supervisor, then fine. If not, let your supervisor handle the situation. You will be amazed at how many crises situations can be diffused by remaining calm and involving a neutral third party, your supervisor.

Tutoring ESL Students: Some Practical Tips

by Conny Katasse, Chairperson, English Department, University of Alaska (taken from Helping Others Learn: A Guide to Peer Tutoring, by Tom Gier and Karan Hancock, University of Alaska Developmental Studies Program [1985].)

Most tutors discover, almost immediately, that the approaches they use to help native English speakers are not really adequate for English as a Second Language (ESL) students. This is understandable: anyone studying a college subject in another language faces a number of linguistic challenges—in addition to the challenge of mastering the subject itself.

Of course, some academic subjects (especially math and engineering) use universal symbols (for example, $+,$ $=$, $<,>,$) which are the same or similar in major languages of the world. Such symbols facilitate problem-solving and lessen the learning burden of ESL students. But other subjects (such as history, psychology, and composition) demand a great deal of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in English. Consequently, they are more difficult for students and their tutors.

Another problem for many ESL students is the process of living and studying within a different cultural setting. Some students have moved to the U. S. permanently, whereas others will remain for only a few years. Some are here by choice, others by necessity or force. But regardless of resident status, they must deal to some extent with loneliness and insecurity—as well as with the challenge of learning new academic material while immersed in an unfamiliar language and society.

This task, though difficult, is by no means impossible. And you, as a tutor, have a unique opportunity to assist ESL students in developing skills and confidence. Based on the experiences of other tutors and tutees, here are 10 practical tips for getting started.

1. **Work with the student, and if possible, with the classroom teacher, to establish reasonable goals and priorities.** With your help as a tutor, many ESL students will be able to stay in their regular classes and make reasonable progress toward meeting course goals. For a few, however, lack of English skills will become a stumbling block. During the first two or three tutoring sessions, it is particularly important to
assess the student’s English skills. If you simply cannot understand the student (or if he or she has great difficulty understanding you), get outside help at once. Your job, after all, is to tutor the student in the college subject--for at least 75% of your time together. If you find yourself tutoring ESL instead, suggest two kinds of tutoring to the student (ESL and subject-area). Then promptly refer the student to an experienced academic advisor (for possible adding/dropping of courses).

2. **Examine the subject matter, text, and other materials for cultural information which may be unfamiliar to the student.** Even when you are tutoring in an area other than English, you must be alert to how language and culture are interwoven with the learning of concepts and procedures. Review with your student popular idioms, slang expressions, and cultural details that teachers often assume their students are aware of. Phrases such as “check into”, “get away with,” “top notch,” and “aced the test” are hard to find in dictionaries. Names of American cities, regions of the country, and even national leaders may be unknown to some ESL users. The nonverbal cues that teachers give--head nods, raised eyebrows, sarcastic tones of voice--can be confusing or meaningless to people of different backgrounds. Help your student to understand important linguistic or cultural customs which can facilitate interaction with teachers and classmates. (NOTE: One such custom is NOT calling female teachers by their last names only, as in "Katasse, will you help me?")

3. **Using appropriate course materials, teach important study skills such as previewing, skimming, formulating questions to aid comprehension, and note taking.** ESL students desperately need shortcuts to effective listening, reading, and memorizing. Since it almost always takes them longer to get through required assignments, they must know ways to maximize their time and effort. Sometimes enrolling in study skills courses or attending workshops in study techniques can be useful to ESL students.

4. **Give your students lots of realistic practice in following directions precisely and completely.** Many ESL students have difficulty picking out “wrong” answers, analyzing true/false statements, and completing work which gives them a “choice” of questions to answer. Intermediate ESL students--those with approximately five years of experience in the language--can be especially negligent in following their teachers’ specifications. This is because they have already gained some confidence in English and tend to be careless listeners. Be sure that each tutoring session requires attentive listening and thoughtful response from your tutees. And occasionally change your own procedures to help teach flexibility.

5. **Beware of the side-by-side or “cooperative” position at the tutoring table.** Regardless of skill level, ESL students benefit from watching your mouth, face, and body. In this manner, they gain valuable information on pronunciation and nonverbal communication. Avoid sitting beside a student, but do not sit directly across from him or her (in the “antagonistic” position). Place yourself at one end of the tutoring table and the student at your right or left side.
6. **Be alert to non-ESL difficulties that a student may experience.** These include dyslexia and other learning disabilities, personal and financial problems, and physical impairments in hearing, vision, or speech. In addition, some ESL students lack literacy in their first language or had to drop out of school at a very early age. Don’t pry, of course, but if you suspect that non-ESL problems are interfering with a student’s learning, seek specialized help very quickly. Avoid the tendency to attribute most learning problems to language and cultural differences.

7. **Make ample use of other resources and personnel.** Each adult student is a total human being, with an array of individual desires and needs. But you will “burn yourself out” very rapidly if you try to be counselor, financial advisor, friend, role model, and tutor to your ESL students. Learn about the support services that your campus offers, and explain their purposes to your tutees. Many ESL students will be hesitant to seek out counselors and other staff, but you can encourage them by walking together to various offices or assigning short reports (oral or written) on particular services. Keep in mind that the processes of giving and receiving help are often culturally different, and beware of conveying the impressions that your tutees need all kinds of “help” to survive. Let common sense and human kindness guide your referral efforts.

8. **Be open-minded and slow to judge behaviors and motivations.** Again, cultural and individual differences make it easy to misinterpret what an ESL student says, does, and believes. Is he or she always late for tutoring sessions? Perhaps time is not so strictly measured in his or her society. Does he or she fail to maintain direct eye contact when you are presenting an important point? This could be a compliment to your status as tutor. Obviously, part of your task as a tutor is to convey expectations of students, teachers, and others in U.S. college settings. But be careful of criticizing students who do not immediately live up to these expectations. Inform them of the consequences of failure to perform, but let them exercise their free will in following or disregarding the “rules.”

9. **Know your own limits.** It is sometimes reasonable to stop working with a student who won’t meet you halfway. And lots of tutors feel uncomfortable with ESL tutees who seem overly dependent. But before giving up, allow tutees and yourself plenty of time to get used to each other and the tutoring process. If you feel very uncomfortable with ESL students for cultural or personal reasons, have an honest talk with your tutoring supervisor. Your success—and that of your students—depends upon your ability and desire to help.

10. **Read, research, and keep informed of innovative materials on tutoring and ESL.** Chat with successful tutors, students, and teachers. Whenever you can, attend workshops and seminars. Experiment thoughtfully with new theories and technologies. Accept, enjoy, and enrich your role as a tutor of ESL students. Two thorough references for tutors of ESL students are Tutoring ESL Students (by Arkin) and The Tutor Book (by Arkin and Sholtar), both published by Longman, Inc., in 1982.
**How to Tutor Mathematics**

by Gretchen Bersch, Math Instructor, Developmental Studies, University of Alaska (taken from Helping Others Learn: A Guide to Peer Tutoring, by Tom Gier and Karan Hancock, University of Alaska Developmental Studies Program [1985].)

Tutoring mathematics is a challenge that can bring satisfaction to you and a great deal of success and relief to the people you help. Tutoring is not easy. It requires that you be patient, caring, and flexible, and that you have a positive attitude. It also requires that you try to be sensitive to the needs and wishes of the students you are helping. But it can be exciting and rewarding.

Here are five general steps that may give you some ideas about how to better help.

1. **Set a comfortable climate.** Try to be friendly, relaxed and make students feel at home. Most people have come to a tutor because they are having trouble in math, and they may be tense or uncomfortable. Talking a bit first about other things, or offering a cup of coffee or tea, may help relieve their tension.

2. **Identify where the student is.** In order to make the best use of your time and that of the student, find out where the student stands in mathematics. It will be frustrating for the student if you start at a level above or below where that student is. Begin with math material which is at a comfortable level for the student, and then, step by step, lead carefully and clearly to a more difficult level. This is especially important in math because mathematics is sequential, and if the basics are skipped, the more complex material will be impossible to understand. By starting at the right place, you can build on the strength of what the student knows. In this way, the student will learn more, and at the same time, build his or her confidence. It is helpful to know the student’s goals because you can possibly assist the student in reaching the goal. One more useful factor is: what was the motivation to come to tutoring?

3. **Help diagnose errors.** When you are sick, you don’t just tell the doctor, “I’m sick” and give no further explanation about symptoms. Instead, you give all the clues you know to help the doctor diagnose what is wrong. In the same way, errors can be wonderful clues to fixing problems in mathematics. The more specific you and your student can be about the errors, the faster you can fix them. Some problems are slight and some are more serious, and every new clue to the problem can help you, as a tutor, suggest solutions to remedy the situation. Taking care to diagnose errors is important to include in your tutoring. The best plan of all is to teach your students how to diagnose their own errors.

4. **Tutoring/teaching.** Offer explanations in clear, sequential steps. Try to take the student’s interests into account, and, if possible, use concrete experience or examples. For instance, use temperature, tides, football, or the stock market to teach signed numbers. Not only do concrete examples often help in
understanding, but if the student uses the new ideas or skills in real life, he or she will be reinforcing the new knowledge.

Don’t lecture. Be brief with your explanation, and then get the student involved. Your student will tell you if he or she understands. The best solution is when the learner is 100% involved, so strive to make your interaction two-way, or from-the-student-to-you, instead of too much you-to-the-student.

It is important to give the student a chance to practice. If the student is right, you can reinforce the learning, and if wrong, you can help identify the problem and correct it. Check the work, don’t do it. Strive to make the student independent, not dependent on you for every answer.

Avoid abruptly telling the student he or she is WRONG. Instead, try something like, “You were right up to this point. Why don’t you try.”

Don’t be afraid if you forget how to do one of the problems yourself. Ask your student to show you the examples in the book.

5. **Tips to remember.** Here are some ideas to try to teach your students:

   a. Speed reading math is not the technique to use on math word problems. Slow down. Read slowly and analyze.
   b. Use the answers in the back of the book (if there are some) as a teaching tool. If a student doesn’t know how to do a problem, he or she can pick one in the back that has the explanation and the answer and use it to learn how to do the problem. If the student knows how, suggest trying one or two problems, checking the answer, doing several more, checking again, then more. In this way, errors will be caught quickly and not allowed to be thoroughly learned.
   c. Teach students to trust their intuition. There may be several ways to do a certain problem. Teach estimation skills; estimating the answer can be an excellent way to catch errors.
   d. If a problem has very complex numbers and that seems to make the problem especially difficult, substitute simple numbers. Once the student figures out how to do the problem, put the more complex numbers back in the problem and work it.
   e. Show the student how to use quizzes given in the course as study aids for the mid-term and final exams. Since the math problems given on the quizzes are what the instructor believes should be learned, they are good problems to use for review. Suggest that when the quizzes are returned, the student ask for an explanation of all the problems missed. Try to look over these quizzes once a week. This will keep the procedures fresh in mind and prepare your student for the exams. A’s in math are real confidence builders.
When You Meet a Person who is Handicapped

1. First of all, remember that the person with a handicap is a person. He or she is like anyone else, except for the special limitations of his or her handicap.
2. Be yourself when you meet him or her.
3. Talk about the same things as you would with anyone else.
4. Help him or her only when he or she requests it.
5. Be patient. Let the student set his or her own pace walking or talking.
6. Don’t be afraid to laugh with him or her.
7. Don’t be over-protective or over-solicitous. Don’t shower the student with kindness.
8. Don’t ask embarrassing questions. If the student wants to tell you about his or her disability, he or she will bring up the subject.
9. Don’t offer pity or charity. The student wants to be treated as an equal, to be given a chance to prove himself or herself.
10. Don’t make up your mind ahead of time about the student. You may be surprised at how wrong you are in judging his or her interests and abilities.
11. Enjoy your friendship with the student who is handicapped. His or her philosophy and good humor will give you inspiration.

Consideration for Students who are Physically Disabled

1. Prepare for the arrival of the student beforehand. If he or she is in a wheelchair, make sure there are no obstacles in the way of his or her reaching the learning area. Adjust tables to a height comfortable for a wheelchair. Make sure materials (books, paper, pencils, etc.) are within reach and make accommodations for poor gripping ability, should that be appropriate.
2. Do not touch a person’s wheelchair unless you are asked to do so. Many disabled people feel that the wheelchair is an extension of their body, and appreciate respect accordingly.
3. Allow for ample break time for a student who is disabled.
4. Be aware of potential frustrations with handicapped transportation. Although most students are accustomed to intermittent tardiness or occasional delivery to the wrong destination, it can be a source of aggravation and annoyance for a person who needs to depend on others to get around.

Ideas for Working with Students who are Blind
1. Ascertain as soon as possible how long your student has been blind and whether his or her blindness is total. Those who became blind after some years of sight will have experience to rely upon quite different from those born blind. Blindness is rarely complete. Apparently most blind people can distinguish some degrees of light even when no images are perceived.

2. Gear your speech to the above. Be especially careful to be thorough in verbal descriptions with the congenitally blind. Explain everything and request feedback. Avoid repeating visually based adjectives, or better yet, take the time to make the connection between that adjective and something the student might have experienced (“green” could be described in conjunction with the smell of cut grass and leaves, etc.).

3. Don’t be patronizing! Once the ability of your student is determined, blindness becomes only a physical barrier that must be compensated for.

4. Most students who are blind appreciate getting “tours” of their physical environs, be it a classroom, office, or restroom. Describe the characteristics and function of items as the students feel them. (“That aluminum cabinet with the odd handles contains all the Social Studies books.”)

5. Whenever possible, verbalize physical guides which the students might use in getting around. Let them know that the computers are on wheels and might be in their path some day. Go with them to get coffee and help them serve themselves until they are comfortable with the procedure. Let the students do all they are able to do.

6. Keep a space open where the student can always depend on putting his or her things (coat, bag, books, cane, brailler, etc.).

7. Discuss the weather, bus rides, etc., in terms of physical sensations and sound. (“The sun feels warm today.” “Did you hear that car screech to a halt?”) When another person enters your teaching space, even if to get materials, let the student know who is there.

8. Incorporate the kinesthetic in your instruction. “Hands-on” materials are terrific in math: Cuisenaire rods for multiplication, division, and fractions; geoboards for multiplication and geometry; chip trading for multiplication; etc. Make your own teaching aids with cardboard and scissors. Coins can be used to great advantage as well--especially in teaching decimals.

9. The kinesthetic is a daily part of the student who is blind’s reading experience, thanks to Braille. There are two methods of writing Braille: first is the slate and stylus (a hand-punch system which is time consuming but easy to transport--its main disadvantage is that the student needs to take the paper out and turn it over in order to read what has been written), and second is the typewriting Brailler, which allows the student to read immediately what has been typed.

10. Learn to read as much Braille as you can. Have your student print out a copy of the numerals 0 - 9 and the alphabet. The numerals are easy to pick up, which means you can correct math homework. The letters are more complicated largely because many contractions are used for common letter combinations ( -ing, -tion, -ough, for example). You need not, of course, read by feel; you can distinguish the dots visually.

11. Tapes are a nice teaching tool. You can make your own, especially for homework assignments. This eliminates the tedious process of having the student type assignments on his or her Brailler during class
time. Many tapes for spelling, phonics, social studies, and science can also be handy—just check them prior to use to make sure the narrator is not constantly asking the student to refer to accompanying books or workbooks.

12. Be aware of the balance of verbal and kinesthetic, active and passive activities in your instruction. Just as a sighted student bogs down after too long a session of reading, so the blind student will “max out” after hearing your voice for too long, reading too long, or trying to calculate in his or her head for too long. Try to vary instruction as much as possible.

**Suspect that a Student May have an Unidentified Disability?**

Note that you can see that the student is struggling. Also state that there are many reasons that can cause a student to struggle, and that perhaps if you better understood the source of the struggle, you would be better able to assist the student. Offer several scenarios that could cause a student to struggle, such as moving around a lot during school, leaving school prior to graduation, or having a learning challenge such as a learning disability or ADHD. Ask whether any of those sound familiar, and if so, which one? Should the student choose to self-disclose a disability, reassure the student that there are resources available to help. Refer the student to the Counseling Office to schedule an appointment to discuss available resources.

**Practical Suggestions for Improving Tutoring**

1. Don’t start off with testing. Create a friendly environment. Talk about yourself and encourage students to talk about their successes, failures, family, jobs, hopes and aspirations. Communicate by establishing a common goal about what you hope to accomplish during the tutoring. Develop that goal based on their need within the framework of what the classroom teacher wants you to accomplish. Keep your goal simple and clear. Don’t overwhelm the student.

2. Use instruction involving all the senses. Seventy percent of the population is visually oriented and most people will profit from methods that go from concrete examples (actual objects), to semi-abstractions (pictures), and finally to abstract concepts (written or spoken words). Use your imagination to involve as many senses as possible when you approach a subject. Evaluate your methods and determine the major modality of instruction you use most of the time. How often does the student have an opportunity to paraphrase or express an opinion? Do you play roles? Is there movement or physical involvement? Regardless of what your ultimate goal is, the students must paraphrase whatever they are doing. As a general rule, if the students can discuss it, there will be better understanding; if they can write it, they can read it.

3. Use clear and simple oral directions. If you must involve a number of steps, break them up into written subdivisions using traditional outline form. Provide written instructions testing near-vision (handout) and far-vision (board work to be copied). Make sure your own handwriting is very clear.
4. When teaching new work or a student is expected to work independently, always demonstrate with simple, clear examples, at a lower instructional level, if possible. Be consistent with how you expect them to complete the work. When you make a change, have the student paraphrase the directions or demonstrate by using an example in a similar exercise.

5. Teach PROCESS, not memorization of facts. Go back to basics and don’t take anything for granted. For example, in arithmetic, do students have a number concept they can demonstrate with manipulatives, and can they describe the process involved in simple addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division? Can students verbally describe each of the steps for completing the problem? Review process often and make the student follow each step exactly until they demonstrate mastery. In reading, students must be aware of the fact that there is a different process used when reading for main ideas, facts, or inferences. They must learn how to study, make decisions, ask questions, and find information. Comprehension only occurs when the student becomes involved with what the author has written—it is a process a student can learn. There is also a process to learning vocabulary which is really the key to good understanding for reading, writing, or speaking. Learning to use context, a dictionary, or a glossary involves a process. The more concrete the definitions, the faster the learning. “Use it or lose it” is very applicable to vocabulary growth. Finally, test-taking can be taught as a process by providing testing situations in a variety of forms, such as matching, filling in the blanks, multiple choice, answering questions with complete sentences, etc.

6. Don’t take things for granted if you intend to help change student thinking and learning patterns. Eliminate the weak areas by reviewing inductively such areas as basic facts about the calendar, time, measurements, distances, handwriting, etc. Insist on good handwriting for all written work. Keep the information simple and accurate. Insist on complete sentences with appropriate punctuation in writing assignments.

7. If you require memorization, teach students how to categorize and differentiate material. Show them how to evaluate examples of opposition or what something is not. Memorization can be simplified if material is broken down into smaller categories by association, visualization, or mnemonic devices.

Good instruction will occur when a tutor uses the magic of imagination to teach a boring subject and when it meets the needs of the student. The most important ingredient is creativity.