

# BLOM WRITING SERVICES

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## The Tutoring Philosophy of Blom Writing Services

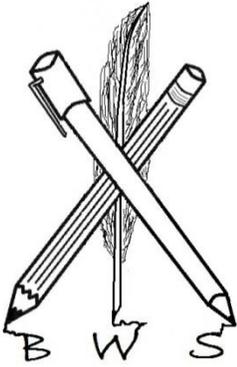
by Paul E. Blom, MA, *Founding Director and Senior Writing Consultant*

*The tutors at Blom Writing Services ground their ideas, approaches, and methods in a thorough knowledge of primary theories and studies in education and tutoring in general, especially those that surround writing centers, the main locus of all tutorial practices focused on improving writers. Our tutors supplement this knowledge with professional training, extensive experience, and versatile tactics that always serve to satisfy and improve the writers with whom we work.*

*Tutors work with a specific population that consists primarily, although not exclusively, of students. In general, those who seek our tutoring services desire to improve their knowledge and skills, either in the context of a specific project or on a broader timeframe that uses several projects as the grounds for development and improvement. These individuals should expect to engage in two-sided conversations and discussions in which both individuals come to the table as equals who desire to mutually share, learn, and grow.*

The very point of any tutorial service is to provide an alternative to getting assistance from instructors who are all too often too busy to provide adequate personal attention or instruction and—in the mind of the writer—too intimidating as authority figures for the writer to feel truly comfortable. When you're struggling with a work-in-progress, it's difficult to ask for help or guidance from the very individual who will be responsible for evaluating and judging the final product. Even the very best teachers, instructors, or professors cannot match the personal attention and sense of comfort that a tutor can provide. No matter their education, enthusiasm, good intentions, or extra efforts, instructors simply lack the adequate time and resources and are bound to their professional roles as the authority figures who not only teach but also assign grades. For this reason, any dutiful student should consider supplementing his or her education with a tutor.

In 1984 Stephen North wrote his ground-breaking essay criticizing writer centers—and other similar tutorial services focused on writing—for functioning as “clinics” or “fix-it shops.” The former label implies that the writer or the writer's writing is, in some way, diseased or impaired and needs to be treated or cured. The latter label implies a lack of involvement on the part of the writer. It calls to mind the image of the writing center as a mechanic's garage where a writer drops off his or her “lemon” of a paper so a writing mechanic can diagnose and repair the problems. North claimed that the common perception of these centers as clinics or fix-it shops was, in many ways, simply a result of outside parties clinging to outdated misconceptions. However, he also noted that many writing centers did, in fact, continue to function in these outdated ways. He criticized the departments that influenced and controlled the writing centers reliant upon them for forcing these writing centers to continue in their archaic methods, but he also placed the blame on the writing centers themselves, and he urged writing centers to improve the writer, not the writing.



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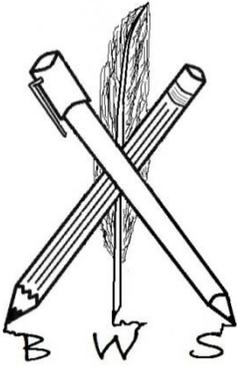
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North's arguments sum up most of my personal approach to tutoring, an approach I first learned to fully articulate as a result of composing the second chapter of the 2009-2010 tutor handbook for the Writing Center, a wing of the University Center for Writing-based Learning, at DePaul University in Chicago, Illinois. At the end of the opening of that section, I write: "All of our interactions with writers are based on a few basic principles to which we adhere: Everybody is a writer of some kind. | No two human beings are the same, and so no two human beings will have the exact same writing process or the exact same style, tone, or voice. | Many different types of writing exist, and different types of writing require different writing processes. | No human being is perfect; we all have room for improvement. | Writing is crucial for expression, communication, and learning" (6, II.A).

Heraclitus once said, "You can never step into the same river twice," and this saying has always stayed with me. A river is not the static body of water one sees on a map. It is a combination of countless water droplets constantly churning and flowing. The river is in a state of constant motion, constant change, and even as one stands in the river, the river is becoming something new. Similarly, one can never meet with the same writer twice, and a writer can never meet with the same tutor twice. Like the river, all human beings are in a state of constant change, growth, and development. Even as I write this philosophy, I am aging, growing, changing. I am not the same person who wrote the sentence preceding this one.

Because no human being is perfect, nothing a human being creates can ever be perfect. While some people might reflect on such a fact by thinking of the human race as a flawed and fallen people, I like to look at this fact from a more optimistic perspective. If we embrace the fact that perfection is an unattainable ideal, then we realize the fact that there is no such thing as perfection in this world. We can always grow and improve. There is no limit to how much we can grow. There is no limit to how good we can become. We can always become better than what we are now.

On a more concrete level, this means that no writer is too good, too talented, too well-developed for our services. If two heads are better than one, then every writer can benefit from the collaborative, democratic atmosphere our tutoring services offer. Because every human being is a writer of some kind and because writing is necessary both to interpret and understand one's world and to express one's feelings, attitudes, and beliefs about one's world, then the assistance in writing we offer is something that is vital for all of humanity. This may seem like an overstatement, but the importance of writing is something I could not value more.



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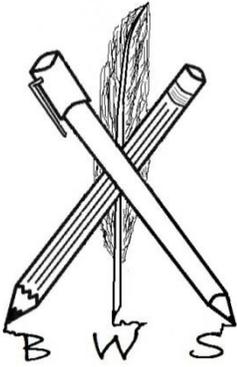
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Because no two human beings are exactly alike and because even a single human being is constantly changing and growing, we must be willing to adapt spontaneously to the needs and goals of the writers with whom we meet. This adaptation becomes even more necessary because the same writer (as if we could ever meet with the same writer twice) cannot approach different writing projects using the same writing process.

We have to value each writer as an individual who exists not in a vacuum but in a life. These are writers with feelings and passions, hopes and traumas, goals and limitations. If an imperfect writer who needs our assistance is diseased and impaired, then so are we all. We cannot function as a clinic. To treat tutees like patients is to ignore the very things that allow us to relate to and connect with the writers with whom we work. And to simply “fix” a writer’s writing is to ignore the writer who made that writing. It would (excuse my brief adoption of clinical metaphors) be treating the symptom rather than the illness. Give a writer a good paper, and he or she will do well in a class. Teach a writer to write a good paper, and he or she will do well in life.

During my many years as a tutor—at the Birmingham-Southern College Writing Center in Birmingham, Alabama; at the DePaul University Writing Center in Chicago, Illinois; providing freelance tutorial services all over the country; and now providing tutorial services as the Senior Writing Consultant for Blom Writing Services—I feel like I’ve engaged with every community of which I have been a part, whether it was a campus, a town, or a company. More importantly, though, I’ve engaged with the specific writers with whom I’ve worked on an individual and personal level. I try to approach every writer as an equal, and I contextualize my feedback not as an expert or even as a tutor but as an objective, interested, and careful reader, and that is almost always sufficient to convince a writer to value my opinion. While I often express my opinion to the writer with whom I am working, I try to usually ask the writers questions and let them formulate their own answers, answers which usually lead them to address the very concerns that brought them to me in the first place. All too often, writers just need to be pushed a bit into discovering what they’re struggling to articulate. For some reason, it’s so much easier for most people to *tell* something to a person rather than *write* something on a blank page. A lot of the time, my tutoring consists of empathy, stenography, and encouragement.



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While I try to honor writers' requests, I internally prioritize global concerns (such as content, argument, structure, and organization) over local issues (such as diction, syntax, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and typos). I create such a priority because, while clear and precise communication *is* important, the precision with which a poor argument is made rarely improves the argument itself. I value awkward truth over attractive inaccuracies any day of the week. However, if a writer urges a focus on local issues, I will still leave time to discuss those issues so that, if he or she first makes global revisions, he or she will then be able to make local revisions by himself or herself.

Ultimately, I think that tutors can only learn to tutor by first being comfortable with their own writing process. Effective writers have often internalized a lot of the writing process, making it difficult to articulate that process to others. One of the most important aspects of training a writing tutor is encouraging the tutor to reflect deeply on his or her own writing process in order to better prepare for interactions with other writers. In addition, a foundation in writing center theory is vital, in conjunction with a carefully controlled shadowing process that must include both collaborative and individual reflection with more experienced tutors.

For the future of the tutorial services provided by Blom Writing Services, I hope to see a continued growth that does not lead to a decrease in quality. I hope to see more writers visit from disciplines not traditionally associated with writing and more opportunities for collaborative discussions or reflections on writing and on tutoring during our downtime. I hope to meet fewer writers who label themselves with such restrictive titles or categories. We're all humans. We're all writers. No two people are alike, and I find most of the assumptions people make about themselves and others to almost always be untrue, reductive, distracting, and sometimes even destructive.

I know that the tutors—and all of the staff members, for that matter—at Blom Writing Services will continue to value the words and voices of the writers with whom we work. As we continue to meet and collaborate with new writers every day, we hope to continue learning as much from you as you learn from us.

**Paul E. Blom, MA**

*Founding Director and Senior Writing Consultant*  
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