

# IN THE POCKETS OF YESTERDAY'S PANTS:

Theory, practice, theory



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# Some Introduction

Kathryn Byrne, Writing Center Director

*In the pockets of yesterday's pants:* Theory, practice, theory and the peer writing tutor community of Johnson County Community College.

If the world were made one size fits all, life would be much simpler. Each and every student would have the same understanding about each and every subject; each of us would learn at the same pace, contemporaneously demonstrating the same ability.

As a community of tutors, we would be better prepared to drone on through the day, reciting ritualized practices without having to think about how well or how much the student was "getting," what we were saying to them, or if we were being effective. Even worse for us as tutors, they might not need us. Writing would be a breeze (after all, most of us have been writing since kindergarten).

Thankfully, the world is not one size fits all. Each person is diverse and unique with his or her own agendas, needs and abilities in which writing complicates each situation. The same applies to theorists too. Theorists seemingly obscure the simple and simplify the compound to fit the world into their perspective. Over time, the understanding of a theory becomes institutionalized, unquestioned and valued as ideal.

With this in mind, I have invited us to come together in these pages to create a world that supports our unique applications of theories of writing and tutoring, to think about how a theory breaks down in daily interactions with others (pragmatics /practice), how a theory must be modified to fit the situation, and how we, as a community (as tutors and writers), can benefit from sharing our knowledge, experience and unique perspectives with each other and those who come after us.

The title of our work comes from a comment Gwenevere said one day when I had asked for some information. Wanting to retrieve the information

but unable – “Oh,” she mumbled under her breath, tapping her upper thighs, “I must have left it in the pockets of yesterday’s pants.” Her reply was introspective and thoroughly metaphorical, applicable to the events of any day.

Like so much of what we do, we never truly expect to need much of our academic knowledge again. What we are asked to learn is just a hoop we jump through to get through college and out into the “real” world. Yet in a unique moment, a situation arises that seems perfect for that one application (. . . what was it “X” said? How do I do “X” again. . . hum), now out of reach, locked in a fog of memory from our immediate need and ability. Theory can be like that: seemingly unpractical, unnecessary. By understanding that theory is generalized understandings and observations and comes with exception to particular, situated experience, we are more likely to understand its value. Culture changes over time. Everyday practices alter, dependent on who participates in the community of practice and how she or he understands the purpose of that practice (Wenger 2001).

We, as a community of practice, combine others ideas with our experience to explain how we work toward being more effective tutors at Johnson County Community College. In the first year of training, peer writing tutors are asked to do research on a topic of their choice. At the end of the first semester, they present to the Peer Writing Tutor group what they have learned. To me, they write about how their new understanding has affected their tutoring style. In the second semester, after viewing video of one of their tutorials and reflecting, I ask again for a written assessment, but now with the added dimension of how theory informed their practice. We, next, share our new understanding with a larger audience through the medium of this newsletter – with you and all of the tutors who will come after. The following, then, is the beginning compilation of our work in the Writing Center.



A moment of reflection ...

## On the Road to Being Less Critical

Allison Arias

If forced to focus on either the positive or negative aspects of my performance, I, somehow, automatically focus on the latter: the negative. This dilemma makes it very difficult to recognize areas in which I have improved, especially in my role as a Writing Center tutor. As the time came to reflect on my tutoring again, I was not expecting to be amazed by my progress; yet, as I sprawled out on my living room floor, watching the tape of my tutorial, I had a change of heart. I'll just come out and say it though these words seem awkward to me: I saw that I had vastly improved as a tutor; I feel that I have learned how to better contribute to the tutee's journey as a writer while not feeling responsible for his or her arrival at a higher destination in the writing process.

First off, I realized that I enjoy using my hands when I explain concepts during a tutorial. I was not aware of this phenomenon in my tutoring because, in my

fall tutorial, I saw that I was more reserved with my hand movements; however, during this semester, I explained how a run-on sentence was exploding with too much information while I moved my hands in an upward swirling motion. Yes, it may have been a little over the top; nevertheless, this seems to be a positive development in my tutoring because it shows I am using other media to convey a concept. Moreover, as I explain different concepts, I am also more aware that the student, not me, should be accountable to improve his or her writing. In last semester's tutorial, I frequently had the pen in my hand; whereas, this semester, my tutee had the pen in the "ready" position for almost the entire session. I also observed that as I read the tutee's paper out loud, we both equally hovered over the essay. Last semester, I seemed to be in control too much of the time due to my insecurities that the student would not respond to my promptings to be more involved. It seems that certain aspects of collaborative learning have become a more natural part of my tutoring.

Another aspect of my tutoring that has become more second nature has been learning to focus and prioritize during a tutorial. Last semester, as I read a student paper out loud, I noticed that I was bombarded by the weak thesis statement, unclear sentences, organizational flaws and fragments all at once; it was an informational overload in my mind and I struggled to use the "hierarchy of concerns" idea, especially when pressured by the student to "check grammar." I would often fight back and push the attention towards the lacking thesis statement; yet, too often, I would focus on everything at once. After having watched my spring tutorial, I realize that I am beginning to learn how to choose a focus for my tutorials. As the tutee and I read his paper out loud, I resisted the temptation to "camp out" on the parts of the essay that needed work in order to forge ahead in an attempt to see the overall picture. After reading the essay, the tutee and I discussed how his teacher had been warning him about his complicated sentences; thus, we decided to focus on that for our session.

In order to keep our focus, I decided to address certain passages of the tutee's essay rather than trying to tackle the entire paper. In this particular tutorial, I decided I would pick out one example of a clear sentence as well as one example of a complicated sentence in a few of the tutee's paragraphs.

This student's struggle was that he could not distinguish a clear sentence from a complicated one; so, as we began to point out good and bad examples within his writing, we noticed many patterns of errors. We narrowed the tutee's problems with wordy sentences to the following: repeated words, the order of phrases, vague pronouns and extra information not needed to reinforce the sentence. Eventually, the tutee began to cross out extra words and communicate that he was beginning to notice these patterns too. I attempted to withhold the easy answers as I reinforced, with the tutee, he was in control. The tutee was actually creating stronger sentences without my direct assistance. By the end of our session, the tutee shared that he could begin to recognize the problem that his teacher had been pointing out to him all semester; I felt relieved.

Though many aspects I noticed in my tutorial were, surprisingly, on the positive side, I do have some constructive criticism for myself. I definitely should have physically left the tutee so that he could find a complex sentence on his own. I believe we would have arrived at our conclusion much quicker if I would have disconnected from the tutorial sooner. I realize that my personality tends to want to feel the relief that often comes with completing a task. By seeing confirmation that something is finished, I feel that I can move on to another task; yet, life is not always that simple and neither is tutoring. I cannot have a firm sense of "completion" at the end of most tutorials and I struggle with that reality. Realizing that I am just meeting the tutee for a brief moment in his or her process as a writer, I know that I am not responsible for the completion of a strong paper. By learning to leave the tutorial for a moment or end sooner, I hope I can relinquish this need to feel a sense of completion during tutorials. I want to become more comfortable with the unknowns of the writing process and remember that a tutee's journey as a writer progresses in small increments.

Overall, I feel encouraged by how I have learned to focus within my tutorials while also reinforcing that the student is in control. Instead of "giving" answers, I am leaning towards helping the student look for patterns in his or her writing. Perhaps the greatest part of viewing my spring tutoring session was seeing the tutee refer to a concept we had previously discussed. I asked the tutee if he remembered working together on transitional phrases about a month ago. He

proceeded to point out a passage in his essay that clearly showed a strong use of transition between sentences. That moment was a beautiful one to witness on tape. Although I did not help this tutee become a "perfect" writer, I helped him further his own writing in a concrete way. I will definitely keep that memory close as I struggle with wanting to see the immediate fruits of my tutoring. In the meantime, I hope to continue to reflect on the experience of being a tutor in order to not become complacent in my tutoring style, but always strive to mature.

# ELL ISSUES

*The following are artifacts of a collaborative research project  
conducted in the fall of 2008 by Allison Arias,  
Sara Ramirez, Ignacio Carvajal,  
Peer Writing Tutors.*



# Strategies for Tutoring ELL Students

Sara Ramirez

Tutors have to resist fixing every grammatical error, and remember that tutoring should be a learning process, not simply an editing session. With only having thirty-minute sessions, tutors must keep in mind that not every concern can be addressed. Often, at the beginning of a tutoring session, I am handed a paper and politely asked, "Can you just check my grammar?" Entering a tutoring session, I often like to address concerns students have about their papers; however, I simply am not allowed to focus just on correcting grammar. When students are learning English for the first time, stepping away from grammar rules to focus on larger concerns, such as organization or sentence structure, can be especially hard. "Tutoring ESL Students: Issues and Options," by Muriel Harris and Tony Silva, present many strategies as to how best focus on higher concerns with English Language Learners (ELL).

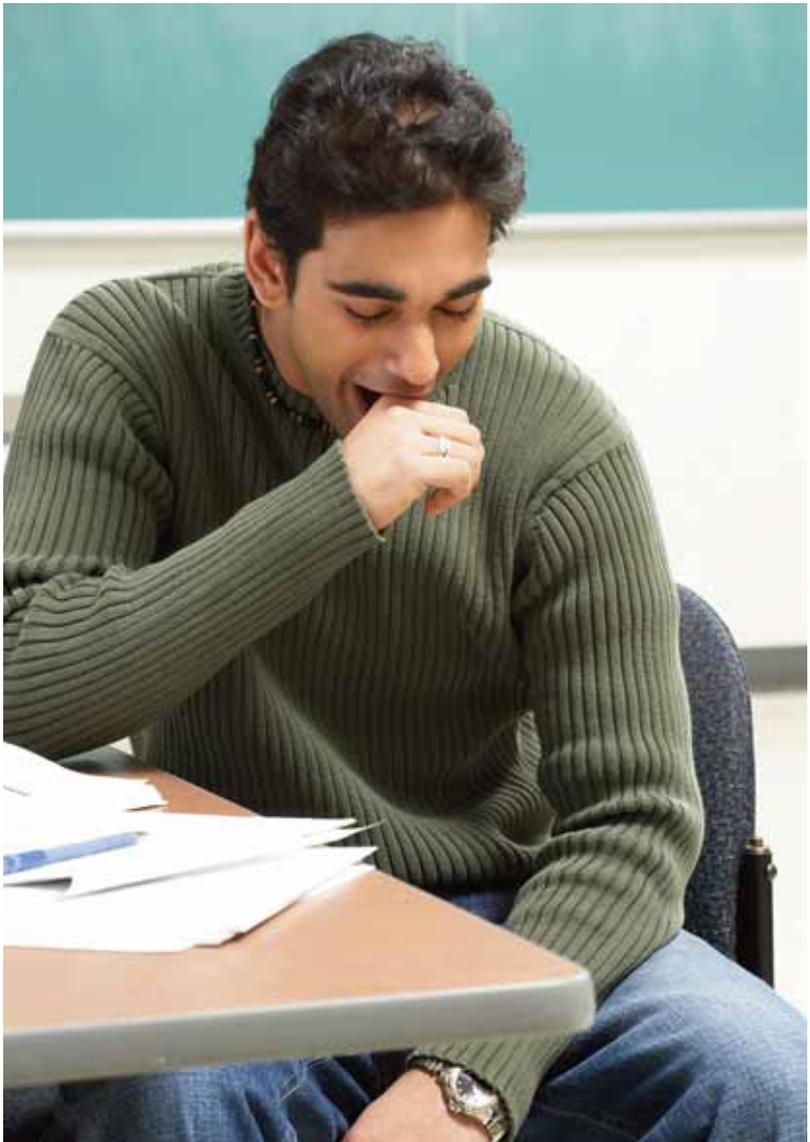
Harris and Silva establish the terms local errors and global errors to help a tutor address the content of an ELL student's paper while allowing flexibility to instruct with grammatical errors. Local errors are when grammar is misused but the grammar error does not affect the meaning of what is said. Global errors are when the meaning of the sentence is obstructed by the error. Therefore, tutors can prioritize errors by how the misuse of grammar affects the meaning of the paper (526). When trying to address a local error with an ELL student, it is sometimes difficult to ask if something sounds wrong because intuition of the language has not been developed. Instead, a tutor should ask, what did you mean by this? That way the student and the tutor are able to work through the thought process of writing together to fix the sentence.

Learning a new language is a long process. Authors Harris and Silva list recurring errors among ELL students: agreement with nouns in person, number, deriving nouns from other parts of speech, the use of the wrong article, prepositions, count/mass distinction. Harris and Silva go on to suggest that article problems in ELL writing take a long time to develop to an English native proficiency and don't normally obstruct the meaning (534). Knowing

which grammatical errors are most common among all ELL students helps the tutor from addressing too many grammatical issues in one tutorial.

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# The Role of the Peer Writing Tutor

Allison Arias

Stories that draw their influence from all corners of the globe unravel on paper at the Writing Center each week, stories of pain and restoration, joy and despair, confusion and clarity. Yet, one story, in particular, has influenced my own life: a story of how one woman responded to rejection.

Upon her arrival in the United States, Jane, a young South Korean mother, was eager to connect with this new culture. She discovered the perfect connection: Saturday community breakfasts at her apartment complex. Jane anticipated this gathering for weeks; she wanted to belong; she wanted to try out her English; she wanted friends. But all of her anticipation would soon be squashed. As Jane entered the breakfast hall, she shouted out a cheerful greeting only to receive blank stares in reply. She did not understand why she was being ignored or why she ended up eating at her own table. Yet, week after week, Jane returned to the breakfasts and tried to befriend those who had judged her as an outsider. Eventually, this woman tore down barriers of misunderstanding and built unique relationships with her new neighbors. I know I would have given up after that first breakfast encounter. I would not have taken the risk of trying to be kind to those who rejected me for no reason; yet, Jane somehow chose to take that risk.

I have realized that my role as a peer tutor is really quite simple: I am given the privilege to allow the students' experiences to come alive and be put into words that amplify their power. And as I give advice about writing, I am constantly amazed of how little I know. I realize how little I comprehend about being far from home. While some days being abroad may seem like a thrilling journey, I imagine that other days it feels like falling into a never-ending chasm. It is students like Jane who help me picture what it must feel like to be plunged into a new world with brand new patterns of thought and rhythms of movement.

I may have helped Jane organize her thoughts and restructure her sentences; yet, she already possessed knowledge about matters that I could not even begin to understand. David Takacs, an environmental humanities professor at

California State University, touches on this very theme:

“By respecting the unique life experiences that each student brings into the classroom...we empower all students as knowledge makers. We allow each student to assert individual knowledge that contributes to a collective understanding... we move to celebration, as we come to cherish how diverse perspectives enable us to experience the world more richly and come to know ourselves more deeply” (28-9).

By embracing the experiences and insights that international students offer, the tutor does not have to lay a new foundation in order to further the writing process; he or she merely helps students tap into what they already know. Thus, students who hail from all areas of the world can help native English speakers notice “things they may have missed about their own language and culture, about their own positions in the world” (Takacs 28). By enabling international students to draw from the knowledge that lies within them, both the tutor and tutee can have an experience that endures beyond a 30-minute tutorial.

\* The name of the student in this article has been changed in order to honor the student’s privacy.

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# Patchwriters

Ignacio Carvajal

Dozens of students enter the Writing Center daily seeking to enhance their papers and writing abilities. Student writers, along with tutors and faculty members, work to understand and improve engagement in the writing process. As one of the principal obstacles in the creative process, plagiarism always must be addressed and, ideally, avoided. Effective source utilization is key in any student writer's work. Plagiarism, however, is a particularly difficult issue for students who learn English as their second language. In addition to explaining effective source utilization, tutors and faculty members, by teaching and implementing techniques such as patchwriting, can enhance ESL students' ability to understand and avoid plagiarism.



According to Diane Pecorari's study, "Good and Original: Plagiarism and Patchwriting in Academic Second-Language Writing," ESL students often plagiarize without the intention, sometimes even the knowledge, that they are doing so. Different cultures view idea utilization and incorporation in varied ways. Some cultures encourage the use of another's work as a sign of legitimacy. Others "see plagiarism as a kind of positive collaboration." Therefore, intent becomes key to determining whether a student is, in the full meaning of the word, plagiarizing (Pecorari).

Tutors and faculty members must understand the lack of knowledge that constitutes the problem of plagiarism, but they also must be critical and flexible on a case-to-case basis. Instead of merely blurting out the monotone "You have to give credit to your source when you quote; otherwise, you need to paraphrase this passage so it is in your own words," a tutor must dig deeper. If a student truly lacks the understanding and knowledge to identify and avoid plagiarism, tutors must attempt to explain and provide guidelines to which the student can abide. Sometimes, though, second-language students may try to use their cultural backgrounds as an excuse to get away with ineffective source utilization. Once tutors identify the specific student's intentions and understanding of plagiarism, they can provide more insightful, or more blunt, explanations of the issue. Explanations, however, can only become effective through practice (Pecorari).

Joe Student often seeks the help of peer tutors in the Writing Center. His papers are usually extensive, complicated, obscure-term-filled biology compositions. Often, while we read over a paper together, we come across passages that seem more than slightly different from how Joe Student usually sounds. "My teacher knows where I got the information. Please just see if it makes sense." The words roll off his knowledgeable, experienced tongue. When I explain to him that plagiarism is a crime and should be avoided at all costs, he dismisses my concerns with an apologetic "It's ok; let's keep reading." Because students who are introduced to a new language rely heavily on their sources for information and words, "patchwriting" becomes a necessary stage and technique (Pecorari).

Patchwriting is a middle ground in which students blend their words and ideas with their sources. This technique is an “essential phase through which writers pass en route to a stage at which their own voices can emerge” (Pecorari). Because students do not instantaneously learn to weave other people’s ideas into their own by knowing the definition of plagiarism, they must progressively learn to incorporate concepts and thoughts into their writing as their knowledge of the language increases. Patchwriting is, then, separate from plagiarism because it “lacks the element of intentional deception, and it is not a terminal stage.” As the obtainment of any other skill, mastering source utilization takes time. As long as students understand the temporary nature of their cooperative drafts, they will be able to take strides towards developing ideas in their own styles of writing. As Pecorari cleverly states, “today’s patchwriter is tomorrow’s competent academic writer, given the necessary support to develop” (Pecorari).

Plagiarism poses a threat to the development of student writers in the academic world. ESL students particularly struggle in incorporating ideas and concepts to their work. Besides the factual information and guidelines, patchwriting provides an intermediate step, a launching platform for students to developing a resilience to plagiarism. As students’ knowledge grows, their source understanding and utilization will become more effective. Joe Student reads a passage from his biology paper. We worked on it for a while and, aside from technical terms, this draft sounds a lot more like him. He is tired, may be even upset that I didn’t simply “see if it made sense.” But he smiles and genuinely thanks me before walking away.



# Learning Disorders

Matt Barnett and Mackenzie Smith

Attending college as a student with a learning disorder and without the proper instruction can be tough to overcome. Many students will get the help they need through services offered by the college such as the Writing Center. For those who have a disorder, you know what I'm talking about. For those who do not, you soon will. Learning disorder is a categorical term that covers a broad base of learning problems. The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) describes learning disorders as "...a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities" (Learning). The specific disorders can be hard to diagnose, and a tutoring session with students who have a learning disorder can be even more difficult, for both the tutee and the tutor. When tutoring a student with any learning disorder (LD), from dyslexia to ADHD, it is important to use a wide range of tactics to accomplish each specified goal in a tutoring session.

Tutoring an LD student, in most aspects, is the same as tutoring a non-LD student, each student is different and requires different techniques to accomplish the set goals of a session. As usual, start out a tutoring session establishing good rapport with the tutee, forming a friendly relationship relaxes the tutoring session. Keep in mind that some LD students have difficulties with study skills, organizational skills and social interactions, each of which can result in low self-esteem. After establishing good rapport, begin the session by asking if the student has specific problems he or she would like to address, or if he or she learns best with a specific method, as most students know their strengths and weaknesses. Continue the session as normal.

If a student does not know his or her strengths and weaknesses or the best method of learning, be prepared to find the right tool for the job. Finding the right tool is not always an easy task, it can take multiple tries with different methods to find one that works. These methods can include variations of verbal strategies, visual strategies, and strategies that involve writing. For example, if

a student is having difficulty understanding a concept, a possible strategy would be to draw a picture of the concept as opposed to verbally stating the concept. If the student understands the concept but can't seem to get it down on paper, turn the tutee's attention away from the paper and have them look at you and explain verbally what they know. Also, if the session just isn't going well, don't be afraid to ask for help from other tutors or any of the fine instructors on duty.

\* Special recognition to Allison (A.K.A. Beartrap) for helping with the early research last semester.

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# Dialogue Strategies

Evan Harmon and Scott Young

As tutors, we face a number of unique challenges to being successful at our jobs. Being mere college students, how do we manage the endless sea of knowledge about writing and grammar? And when we do possess the relevant knowledge, how do we communicate an intuitive understanding of it in such a way that we are teaching, and not merely giving the correct answer? Yet, a particularly interesting challenge is presented when a tutor is confident in the accuracy of what he or she is teaching but the tutee decides to disregard what is being taught. How should tutors handle this situation? Paradoxically, the answer to this question is indicated in another, more ultimate, tutor challenge – how do we encourage the development of student assertion in writing? It is all too common for students to see their tutor as someone who should simply tell them what is wrong with their writing. But ideally, students should have some understanding of what some of the issues may be and use the tutor for advice and guidance on how to get there. Encouraging such confidence is often quite difficult. When prioritizing the challenge of student assertion over the challenge of student receptivity, it becomes clear that the answer to the latter, far less important, challenge has already been indicated – to pursue the student’s reception of what the tutor thinks is “right” automatically discourages the far more important development of an already present student assertion. This would be a negative trade-off for the student and should be avoided. So, even if the tutor is giving a great piece of advice, if the tutee decides to disregard it, the tutor should understand that encouraging student assertion is more important than any single piece of advice. To illustrate this idea, let’s look at a real-world scenario: Lisa has been working alone for two hours at one of the Writing Center’s computers. After typing intently all morning, she’s confident in the strength of her essay – a persuasive argument against smoking bans. She is, however, unsure of a few stylistic aspects of the paper. But these shouldn’t be too much trouble. Lunch is beckoning, people are trickling out slowly, and she is ready to get the “okay” on this essay and move on. One of the on-duty tutors

introduces him/herself and asks a few basic questions about the assignment . . .

LISA (L): I just finished typing my final draft. It's a paper about smoking bans – a persuasive paper. I've actually enjoyed the assignment, and it hasn't been too much trouble. Can you check for comma errors and "to be" verbs? I got some comments about them on the last paper I turned in. TUTOR (T): Sure, I can do that. Do you have any particular passages in mind you'd like to point out or would you just like for me to read your paper? L: Oh. Well I'm not really sure. I kind of figured you'd just read it . . .

The tutor spends a few minutes reading the essay and making a few notes on a pad. Lisa seems interested and somewhat nervous about this. She wishes the tutor would simply point out the grammatical mistakes and finish the session.

T: Okay, after reading the essay, I can tell that you have a real interest in the topic. You've done a good job of balancing personal opinion with research and support. You've even included an anecdote. However, I didn't see very much counter-argument. Do you think there are any valid arguments in support of smoking bans? L: Maybe . . . I'll think about it (glances at the clock). T: In the eyes of your reader, the argument will be much stronger if they see that you've considered all facets of the argument. Especially if they disagree with your viewpoint. L: Well, I'm so opposed to the idea . . . I just don't want to sound fake by giving credit where it's not due. T: I see where you're coming from. You definitely don't want to sound fake. Let me just offer you a short handout on counter-argument. It might help you to incorporate alternative viewpoints without losing your own voice. L: Okay.

Lisa takes the handout, but still seems uninterested in the tutor's advice. Recognizing this, the tutor does not force the issue. They go on to look at Lisa's usage of the passive voice and commas, as she requested.

As tutors, sometimes it is easy to see these kinds of examples as negative occurrences. But, they are actually quite positive; Lisa is making her own decisions and taking ownership of her paper. Tutors need to understand their role as tutors that help with the writing process, and less with what is actually written. We must emphasize process, not product.

### **Always Helpful Links:**

Citation Styles (quick look how to): <http://www.cite.auckland.ac.nz/www.php>

Grammar Girl: <http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/>

Grammar Myths: <http://ncteinbox.blogspot.com/2008/03/grammar-myths-for-ellesl-classroom.html>

Johnson County Community College Writing Center (OWL, handouts, MLA/APA formatting guides): <http://www.jccc.edu/writingcenter>



# Masterpiece, A short story:

First day of school. The halls crowded; knees weak; all these people run around in hopes of future success.

She is going to become a writer: a great writer. English will be a piece of cake. She will, in just a few years, trample them, look down on them while, with a crown on her head, write up the world.

Not even her teacher can compete with her abilities. That poor woman. Oblivious, she stands in the front of the class and lectures, gray-haired and sure of her wisdom. The girl pitied her. All those years this woman must have wasted in order to stand at the front of the class, an example to aspiring writers.

The first task: an autobiography. She will, no doubt, blow people's minds with her story; her rough childhood, her plague of family crisis, her refuge in reading, her self-teaching of the writing craft. She will compose a story certain to populate anthologies and literature books for centuries to come.

She sits in her room, taking deep breaths. And, thesaurus in hand, she begins her masterpiece.

—Anonymous, August 2008



