The main goal of your sessions is for you to help the student understand what he or she is trying to say in writing. To facilitate this understanding, you should consider yourself to be a trained reader and the student to be a writer trying to make meaning through written English. The session allows writers and readers to relax and take time to discuss the purpose and meaning of a piece of writing. Together, the student and the consultant decide what to discuss and how long the session should last. You should strive to develop a rhythm that flows around your discussion of the student's writing.

Consultants should encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning. One way to do that is to emphasize that writing is a process that occurs over time. Some students will need to start planning their essays in advance of due dates, and should bring their drafts in progress to the Writing Center. Others might have to write a whole rough draft first, and discover their future plans by rereading their drafts. Probably, some students may already have a well-developed sense of their composing processes. *Consultants should see that writing is a process of revision that varies for each student.* What consultants should encourage is students' awareness of their writing processes. We believe that if students gain this awareness, they'll assert more control over their use of written language for college courses.

Consultants can act as interested readers of the students' work in progress. They can do this by spending time asking the writer the kinds of questions that readers normally ask when they are reading a piece of writing.

*Where is this paragraph going? Does this sentence connect to that sentence I just read? If I had a detail here, would this paragraph make better sense to me? What did the writer mean by this word? Could the ending convince me just a bit more?*

When students keep hearing these kinds of "readerly" questions being asked, they can begin to ask their own questions. We believe that students become better writers by learning to read their own work as attentively and critically as consultants do.

Your responses shouldn't take the form of telling the student what to do. Instead, give your responses to the student, and together with the student, decide how to revise a conclusion or clarify a sentence. You want to figure out what to do by seeing what you and the student both think is important to focus on. You should respond to the student's writing, and also to what the student says about the writing.

By starting a conversation with the student about her writing, you'll be able to help her clarify her ideas and to see the strong and weak spots of her writing. You may occasionally want to offer your opinions or you may want to explain a rule. But mostly you should be responding as a reader would, not lecturing the student as a teacher might. Successful consultants take the role of a relaxed but very attentive reader.
As a reader, respond to what is clear or unclear to you in the student's writing. Let the writer know where you, a careful and outside reader, have difficulties with the writing. By the same token, also let the writer know what you enjoy in the writing. By listening to the student and by attending closely to what the student is saying you can help the student begin to revise his work successfully.

Generally, you should encourage students to:
- Plan their writing in advance of due dates
- Revise their work by considering what they want to say to their readers and audiences
- Read their own work slowly and with care
- Think of themselves as writers who write for audiences
- Gain confidence in their overall abilities as writers with something to say

Some ways you can accomplish the goals of a collaborative session:
- loosely (comfortably) structure the tutorial around a beginning, middle, and end
- tell writers what you as a reader like about the writing
- consider at what stage of the writing process the paper is
- focus on only a few issues throughout the tutorial
- ask thoughtful questions concerning the paper's meaning
- summarize what you've read, seeing if the writer agrees with the summary
- direct questions to the writing: what is your main point in this paragraph? I'm unclear about this sentence -- could you explain what you meant?
- direct questions to the writer: what do you like about this paper? what don't you like about this paper? what is your biggest problem in writing this paper?
- listen very attentively to the students' answers to these kinds of questions, leaving plenty of time for students to think about their answers or to qualify them

Rhythms of a Good Session

Most sessions should have a start, middle, and finish. These should be flexible rhythms that mark the passing of time as you read silently or aloud, ask questions, and build a focus with the student. Ideally, you want the session to be focused around some "chunks": if you spend some time discussing the assignment, then you might turn to focus on one paragraph. Don't try to do too much, or to end up doing too little. Find a flow if you can. Each session will cover the issues raised by the particular piece of writing and the writer's situation. To decide which issues you'll cover, you can begin by assessing the rhetorical situation of the writer and the writing.

Starting: Assessing the Rhetorical Situation of Writing and the Writer
By "rhetorical situation," we mean that consultants should ask students questions to find out the kinds of things about the writing and the writer that affect how you can best proceed in the session. Since all writing happens in some real-world setting, try to ask questions to sum up for yourself where this paper is at in terms of the student's writing process. Try to find out what it is reasonable for you to be able to do given the writing situation. If it's Monday afternoon and the student's paper is due on Tuesday morning, then you might think about focusing on one or two paragraphs or on sentences. If the paper isn't due for a week, then ask questions suitable to a rough draft, focusing on global concerns like finding support for or expanding the paper's ideas, or even just discussing the topic and the student's purpose in addressing that topic.

To get started, familiarize yourself with the student's writing task. What is the topic; what kind of paper is it -- a story, a research paper, an argument? What course is the paper for? Who is the student writing for? Does the teacher seem to have a specific approach to the paper in mind? How does the student seem to be approaching the paper? What stage is the paper in, anyway? Use the student's sign-in form as a guide here, even if you've previously helped the student. *The Middle: Reading & Responding to Writing*

After you've gained some initial "rhetorical" information from the student, read the student's writing. Consultants vary widely on how they do this. Some read the paper aloud, jointly with the student, or have the student read it aloud. Others need to read the paper silently.

No matter how you read, try to read the paper as a whole. Try to get an overall impression of the writing. Take as much time as you need to decide what you want to do next. Tell the student that you need this time if you do.

When you've finished, ask the student what she thinks is important to discuss, or what she doesn't like about the writing.

Now, with all this information, focus the session around a few issues.

Some ways to focus on the issues you and the student decide to discuss:

- ask the student what she thinks is strongest or weakest in the paper
- concentrate on clarifying the meaning of a few passages
- focus exclusively on one part of the paper (the student can return to another session to work on other parts)
- ask the student to summarize the main point of a passage, or of a whole draft
- read part of the paper aloud

*Ending a Consultation Session: Future Plans*
End positively by mentioning what you liked about the paper. Try to summarize what occurred in the session. Make sure that when the student leaves, he knows what step to take next with his writing. Remind the student of future appointments, if appropriate.

**Sample Questions for Different Stages of the Writing Process**

*Reading Very Rough Drafts Or Notes of Papers Not Yet Begun*
- How does the student usually plan an essay? Where does she start?
- What ideas can you brainstorm together?
- What does the student like about the topic?
- Can you make a simple list of ideas?
- Can you discuss different ways to focus a broad topic?
- When can you agree the student will return with a fuller draft?
- Would the writer benefit from writing on the computers for awhile?

*Reading Rough Drafts*
- What is the writer's purpose?
- What is the writer's overall or main point or points?
- Who is the audience for the paper? Is there a topic?
- What kind of paper for what kind of course is it?
- Where are there “trouble spots”?
- What is the best idea in the paper?
- Where do certain places seem to need more detail?
- Where is a more general explanation needed?
- Does the order of points make sense to you?
- Does the paper need to be "developed"? Reading

*Final Drafts*
- Could the conclusion or opening be refined or developed?
- Could individual sentences be clarified even further?
- Could one paragraph be strengthened?
- Could the student correct the errors in one paragraph before leaving the session?

*Reading Graded Papers*

Don't comment on a teacher's grading practices. Tell students you won't discuss grades -- but you will discuss the writing. Read graded comments only as a guide to helping the student understand what the teacher is communicating to the student, and perhaps for your own information in assessing a paper's rhetorical situation.

**Responding to Error in Writing Center Conferences**
Sometimes, a student comes to the CCNY Writing Center with the request of "correct my grammar." "Grammar" is the word students use to mean, as one CCNY Writing Center Consultants explained, "I have a problem with something in my writing, but I don't have a name for it, and my instructor hasn't given me any help identifying it." Some students do need and want to work on the sentence and word level with their writing. If you and the student decide together to focus on error, then this is a good time to have the student read a paragraph aloud, self-correcting errors. If you sit patiently and quietly ask questions, probing and even prodding a bit, writers will usually discover their own errors. Don't proofread. (If you want to show a writer the kind of attention and time it takes to proofread one's work well, you may proofread one paragraph.)

Common Patterns of Error in Grammar and Style

Below is a list of the errors most commonly seen, and marked by instructors, in writing for the composition and core courses.

(1) Punctuation, especially comma splices, run-ons, and fragments.
(2) Missing verb endings such as -ed or -s (called inflections).
(3) Tense inconsistency (tenses of verbs don't match).
(4) Agreement errors between subject and verb (usually these occur with "to be" and "to have" verbs).
(5) Faulty parallelism.
(6) Faulty use of the apostrophe.
(7) Missing words, often typographical errors.
The problems in style most commonly seen:

(1) Overuse of the passive voice.
(2) Overuse of pronouns such as "it," "they," or "them."
(3) Overuse of simple sentence structures.

Dealing With Sentence Level Errors:

1. Distinguish between mechanics, grammar, and usage or style. Consider how a grammatical difficulty may be something else. For example, a writer may garble her syntax because she's putting too many ideas into one sentence.

2. Find a pattern of error in the text. Then, focus on one or two problems by ranking the most
important errors.

3. Try to find the source of some errors. For example, is the error the result of carelessness, lack of time, or misinterpretation of a rule? Or simply not understanding a rule?

4. Where in the text does the writer use a rule appropriately? Or reveal complex knowledge of sentence structures, vocabulary, and so on?

5. Try to incorporate writing practice into sentence-level work; link sentences to revision.

6. Use common language rather than grammatical terminology when possible.

7. Work inductively. Give the writer examples of a rule and ask him or her to give answers.

8. Try not to get involved in long and intricate explanations of grammar. Instead, focus on asking questions and getting the writer to find her own errors or to practice writing different sentences.

A Few Specific Strategies:

**PUNCTUATION:** How does punctuation serve to make meaning? Some inexperienced writers use punctuation only to link or separate ideas. But punctuation can emphasize, embed, subordinate, and so on. You can use some of the following strategies to develop similar ways of tutoring semicolons, colons, dashes, etc. Explaining punctuation visually seems to help some writers; see the "Punctuation Patterns" handout.

**FRAGMENTS:** One definition of a sentence that linguists use is to ask, would this utterance be accepted as reasonably complete if made by someone who walked into a room, made the statement, and left?

It is raining out.
Because it is raining out.

If a writer uses fragments, tell her how many you see on a page and ask her to identify each by testing the completeness of the utterance.

**DEFINING AN INDEPENDENT CLAUSE:**

Ask a yes/no question to determine if the clause is independent.
The boy stole the pastries.
Did the boy steal the pastries?
Because he was very hungry.
Because was he very hungry?
For **comma splices** ask a yes/no question; if the clauses are spliced, two separate answers should appear. Yes/no may work for run-ons, too.
He was very hungry, he stole the pastries.
Was he very hungry? Did he steal the pastries?
For problems with **using commas in essential/nonessential phrases and clauses**, ask the writer, if you take away this idea, will the sentence still make sense? Using a pattern you see in the writer's paper, generate a few, then ask the writer to do so. What happens?

Mary Barton [who had 5 dollars] couldn't afford hospital care.
Mary Barton didn't want [that cat to come into the house].

**SUBJECTS / VERBS**

To **find a verb**, try inserting a "denial word" into a statement (doesn't/don't, didn't/won't). The verb that carries the tense is the one located after the denial word.
Our boss wants to call a meeting.
Our boss doesn't want to call a meeting.
If a denial word doesn't fit, try "not" or "n't." The main verb is then the one before the insertion.
He was given a present.
He wasn't given a present.
To **find subjects and predicates**, ask "who/what" questions.

Ellie made the pastries. Who made the pastries?
For **tense shifts**, ask simple questions: when is this happening? In the past, present, continuously, in the future?

For **subject-verb disagreement**, distinguish between disagreements that occur because of the writer's unfamiliarity with inflectional endings on verbs; those that occur because the writer doesn't know which word the verb is; and those that occur because too many words intervene between the subject and the verb.

Ask the writer to underline tense-carrying verbs in one paragraph and then compare them for
consistency. If you see a repeated pattern, ask her to keep a "verb log" of her mistakes.

**PRONOUN REFERENCE:** Sometimes a paper is hard to read simply because the writer uses pronouns that don't clearly refer to nouns. Be on the lookout for a floating "it," "they," or "this." Ask the writer to circle the pronouns and explain what they refer to.

**APOSTROPHES:** Distinguish between errors in possession and those of contraction (its, it's). For possession, discuss examples that show clear ownership. How can you rewrite the following?

- Mary's cat.
- The cat of Mary.
- The departments' prizes.
- The prizes of the departments.

**DETERMINERS:** Try to work inductively where you can. If the writer is having trouble with countable and non-countable nouns, a list might help:

- a fork
- a speech
- a paper
- justice
- liberty

Ask the writer to explain the rule based on a small sample like this. You should also look for places in the paper where an article has been used correctly and ask the writer to compare. You can also review the handout on "Countable/Uncountable Nouns" with the writer and encourage the writer to maintain a list for reference.

**IDIOMS:** These are largely untranslatable uses of English -- just tell the writer!

**SENTENCE CLARITY:** Some questions to ask if a sentence seems tangled: What is the action? Who or what is doing it? Who does what? If the sentence seems to have too much packed into it, you might ask the writer: How many ideas are in this sentence? How about listing them separately? What is the relationship between the first and second ideas? Some other questions you might ask: When is the action taking place? Who is speaking to whom? About what? What's another way to say this?

Sentence combining exercises are plentiful in our handbooks; read up on it if you're interested. You can start with practice sentences before turning to the writer's text:

Jenny grins.
Holding her textbooks, Jenny grins.
Holding her textbooks and shifting her weight from foot to foot, Jenny grins.
Holding her textbooks and shifting her weight from foot to foot, Jenny grins and asks why she has so much homework to do.

CONNECTING WORDS

1. Linking words that connect ideas of equal or coordinate emphasis (coordinating conjunctions):
   and, but, or, for, nor, so, yet.

2. Embedding words that introduce subordinate ideas that give information about the action (subordinating conjunctions):
   after, although, as, because, before, since
   though, unless, until, when, whenever, while,
   as if, as long as, even though, in order that, so that, whereas

3. Embedding words that introduce more information about a subject or object (relative pronouns): that, who, which, whom, whose.