

Praxis: A Writing Center Journal • Vol 10, No 2 (2013)

CREATING VERBAL IMMEDIACY—THE USE OF IMMEDIACY AND AVOIDANCE  
TECHNIQUES IN ONLINE TUTORIALSKathryn Rosser Raign  
University of North Texas  
kathryn.raign@unt.edu

Like many writing center directors, I was hesitant to introduce online tutoring. However, because of limited physical space on campus, the internet provides the only room for growth available to us—a problem faced by many writing centers (Carpenter 2). The inevitability of online growth is also supported by the increase of tertiary-level online and blended courses being offered at most post-secondary schools. I was hesitant to begin online tutoring because [of] the “complexities introduced by online tutoring: the increased potential for directive tutoring instead of nondirective tutoring . . . the lack of sustained dialogue in asynchronous tutorials, and technological problems of accessibility and compatibility” (Kastman Breuch 21). In a conscious effort to avoid some of these issues, when the writing lab I direct began providing online tutorials in spring 2010. Our staff chose to use a software product called ShowDocument.com that allows students to upload their drafts and then share an interactive white board with the tutor to annotate the paper being discussed while synchronously chatting. The program does not have an audio or video function, so participants type their messages. We considered using a program such as Skype that would allow the tutor and student to see each other as they speak. However, technology is never completely trustworthy, and the ongoing issues of poor, broken, or failed transmission made Skype and similar programs an unreliable choice. Second, the close confines in which we work make the noise level in our lab high, and students themselves often login to video conferences from their dorms, or apartments, where background distractions can greatly impede the tutorial. Finally, as Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch suggests, we learned that we could not assume that all of our students who use the online service have access to equipment that enables them to use Skype or similar programs (21).

Although using ShowDocument.com provides the lab with a method of offering synchronous tutorials, which are more effective than asynchronous tutorials<sup>1</sup>, it also creates a problem. My tutors find using ShowDocument.com cumbersome. They claim that the technology actually creates an uncomfortable distance between themselves and the students being tutored. Specifically, they find that their inability to use nonverbal communication lessens their ability to gauge

how well a student understands what they share, and especially if the student is engaged. Given that providing online tutorials is a necessity, the problem is finding a practical way for tutors to create verbal immediacy and avoid alienating students when tutoring online with no audio or visual interface. My research suggests that the distance caused by technology in online tutorials can be lessened by training tutors to use specific linguistic techniques shown to create immediacy—immediacy being the sense of closeness or shared purpose—between two people attempting to communicate, while refraining from the use of specific avoidance techniques shown to damage immediacy. This article suggests methods for training tutors to use immediacy techniques while limiting the use of avoidance techniques when engaging in online synchronous chat based tutorials.

Timothy Mottet and Virginia Richmond argue, “humans do not have a linguistic schema for closeness and instead take verbal cues from the context [of the conversation] to construct verbal techniques that cultivate closeness/distance” (32). Consequently, we cannot assume tutors, by virtue of having been trained to effectively interact with students, will use immediacy or avoidance techniques because a chat-based conversation lacks the nonverbal cues present in a face-to-face conversation. The original study of verbal immediacy was conducted by A. Mehrabian, a linguist, who defines immediacy as the “degree of directness and intensity of interaction between communicator and inferent in a communicator’s linguistic message” (28). However “... evidence suggests that Mehrabian’s linguistic nuances of verbal immediacy are undetectable to an untrained ear” (Mottet and Patterson). Mehrabian’s study was extended by Joan Gorham and Diane Christophel who identified 17 behaviors shown to increase immediacy between students and teachers when used in the classroom, thus positively affecting students’ perceptions of how much they learned (50). Mottet and Richmond next conjectured that if people use “verbal immediate behaviors to *accelerate* relationship formation,” (2) they may also use non-immediate or avoidance behaviors to “*retard* relationship formation” (emphasis added) (2). When communicators use these avoidance techniques, they create a sense of distance between themselves and their recipient. This can cause

the receiver of the message to feel excluded or unwanted. While Mottet and Richmond's data suggested that when people want to retard relationship formation, they will simply stop communicating, this option does not exist for tutors who are obligated to tutor any student who seeks help (38). In the context of this study, which looks at methods for improving the quality of online text-based tutorials by creating immediacy, we must ask if, for most people, "the goal is ... immediacy through contact," can specific verbal immediacy techniques be used to create immediacy through contact when there is no contact? (Bolter and Grusin 29). First, we must determine whether the use of immediacy techniques will improve a student's satisfaction with a tutoring session, and whether the use of avoidance techniques will lessen a student's satisfaction. If so, how do we train our tutors use verbal immediacy techniques to consciously create immediacy with the students they tutor while limiting their use of avoidance techniques that damage immediacy?

I began my study by developing a list of "immediacy" techniques and "verbal avoidance" techniques based on the work of Mottet and Richmond (31). However, because Gorham and Christophel based their study on the identification of verbal immediacy techniques used by a teacher in a classroom, oral usages, and Mottet and Richmond looked at the use of avoidance techniques in "everyday conversation," I have adapted the list of immediacy and avoidance techniques to reflect the fact that my study uses written transcripts of written, online conversations between the tutor and student (27). Again, I looked first at tutors' use of six techniques to create immediacy when engaging in synchronous text-based chat with students: humor, praise, personal examples, comments/questions that show willingness to communicate, accessible responses, and uses of "we" and "us." Next, I looked at their use of four techniques to avoid immediacy: condescending language, communication that is unresponsive, discourteous or abrupt communication, and exclusionary language.

## Methodology

To see whether the use of immediacy techniques by tutors could lessen the technological distance between tutors and their students and the use of avoidance techniques could increase distance, I coded 14 written transcripts of 45 minute online tutorials for the tutors' use of 6 linguistic techniques identified by Gorham and Christophel shown to create immediacy (a positive attribute) (50), and 4 avoidance techniques (a negative attribute) identified by Mottet and

Richmond (27) shown to disrupt immediacy. Next, I asked each of the 14 students tutored to complete a satisfaction survey at the end of their online tutorials. I used a 5-point Likert scale and asked each student 8 questions. The highest possible score on any question was a 2, and the lowest possible score was a -2. The highest possible total score for the survey as a whole was 16, and the lowest was -16. (See Appendix for a copy of the survey.)

This strategic analysis of tutoring transcripts for the use of positive and negative verbal techniques has never been done, and should offer insight into whether the use of specifically chosen communication techniques can improve students' perceptions of the success of a tutoring session.

## Immediacy Techniques

Each immediacy technique below is followed by examples from the 14 coded transcripts I collected in my writing lab. Because each technique I coded for is equally important, I have listed them in order of most-used to least-used.

### *Comments/Questions That Show Willingness to Communicate*

The tutor "uses communication in a way that reveals that [he or she] is willing to communicate and wants to continue communicating" (Mottet and Richmond 30). Examples could include: "What prompt did your teacher give you?" Questions with the intention of the student to answer "yes" or "no" are not counted because they often result in one-word responses and therefore stop communication, or result in an "I don't know" response that also stops communication:

- What do you think you should do to the rest of this list?
- What are your primary concerns about this document?
- What do you have trouble with when writing?

30% of the immediacy techniques used were in this category.

### *Uses "We" and "Us"*

The tutor uses "communication that includes [the student]" by talking about what "we" or "us" share (Mottet and Richmond 30); for example, "We need to work on that."

Given the already dehumanizing nature of technology, we must attempt to use the student's name, or inclusive pronouns such as "we" whenever possible:

- Shall we get started?
- Let's look at the next sentence.

- We don't want to move on until we get it sorted out.

This technique accounts for 27% of the total number of immediacy techniques used. However, while tutors frequently used "we," no one used a student's name.

*Praise*

The use of "complimentary, and encouraging statements" (Mottet and Richmond 30). Tutors can use praise to build the students' confidence:

- Awesome!!!
- Exactly right.
- Looks like you've done good work.

Of the total number of immediacy techniques used, praise accounts for 17%, making praise the third most-used technique.

*Accessible Responses to Student Initiated Questions*

The tutor uses "language that [the student] understands—language that does not sound superior, over [the student's] head, or language that is condescending" (Mottet and Richmond 30).

Tutors work with an incredibly diverse body of students, so they must be careful to tailor their responses to the individual student:

- Student asks, "Should I have the running head on the first page only?" Tutor replies, "Yes and the running head itself after the colon."
- Student asks, "Did I write a critique?" Tutor replies, "I see more summary than critique."
- Student asks, "How do you know when to hyphenate?" Tutor replies, "Ok—you hyphenate two words if they are before a noun and are all working together to describe the noun."

Of the total number of immediacy techniques used, accessible responses account for 13% of the sample.

*Personal Examples*

Tutors can "use self-disclosive statements" that begin with "I" to create a sense of equality (Mottet and Richmond 30). For example, the tutor uses "I" to relate an experience similar to the student's:

- I'm not familiar with that field.
- I see what you mean by "tricky."
- That's exactly what I would have done.

Of the total number of immediacy techniques used, personal examples account for 8%.

*Humor*

"Laughter and humor are . . . like an invitation..." (Gorham and Christophel 47):

- Ha Ha.
- LOL.
- ☺.

Of the total number of immediacy techniques used, only 5 % involved the use of humor. Table 1 shows the total number of usages for each immediacy techniques that I coded in the 14 transcripts in order from least to greatest.

Table 1: Total Number of Immediacy Techniques Used By Tutors

Technique	Number of Usages	Percentage of Total Usages
Comments/Questions That Show Willingness to Communicate	60	30%
Uses of We/Us	52	27%
Praise	35	17%
Accessible Answers	26	13%
Personal Examples	17	8%
Humor	11	5%
Total	201	100%

**Verbal Avoidance Techniques**

Next I include examples of avoidance technique I identified in the 14 coded transcripts I collected. Again, I have listed them in order of most-used to least-used because they are equally important.

*Exclusionary Language (jargon or tech-talk the student in question would not understand)*

We must determine whether a tutor's response is exclusionary based on the context in which it occurs. When tutors use language that students do not understand, they create a division that prevents learning:

- Tutor types, "You will cite the PRINT version." Student responds, "What do you mean by print version?"
- Tutor types, "Because it is an afactual statement ..." students respond "not understanding"
- In response to an international student's question regarding hyphenation, the tutor types, "This is the case with all multi-adjectival expressions which function as a unit."

*Discourteous or Abrupt Communication*

When tutors use inappropriately short answers or visual cues that indicate impatience, the student may feel the tutor is being rude:

- Tutor types, “It’s a HUGE problem.” (textual shouting)
- In response to a student’s question, the tutor types, “?”
- The tutor types, “a thesis should be an arguable point.” The student responds, “I guess that’s were im stuck.” The tutor types, “What can we ARGUE about it?”

In a face-to-face tutorial, tone of voice could make examples such as these either positive or negative, but because tutors can’t indicate a tone of voice when sending written messages to students, such comments tend to have a negative effect.

*Communication That Is Unresponsive*

Unresponsive communication clearly indicates that the tutor has other more important things to do than communicate with the student. Each of the tutor responses below clearly indicates that he or she does not wish to engage with student:

- I have not given it a close read.
- That’s all I have.
- We’re out of time.

These sorts of comments might seem appropriate at the end of a session, but even then such an abrupt cut off can leave students with a negative impression of the session as a whole.

*Condescending Language*

When tutors indicate that they doubt the student’s ability to understand a concept, the tone of the message is often condescending, which can cause the student to quit actively participating in the session:

- Student asks, “Should that be my new thesis?” Tutor replies, “There is no right answer to that question.”
- Tutor types, “Here is what we call a misplaced modifier” (“we” is meant to exclude the student and establish the tutor as an expert)
- Student asks for help citing an article. Tutor types, “FYI—I’m amazed her paper [the published author] was published.”

Table 2 shows the total number of usages for each avoidance techniques that I coded in the 14 transcripts in order from least to greatest.

Table 2: Total Number of Avoidance Techniques Used By Tutors

Technique	Number of Usages	Percentage of Total Usages
Exclusionary Language	47	47%
Discourteous Communication	31	31%
Communication That Is Unresponsive	15	15%
Condescending Language	7	7%
<b>Total</b>	100	100%

**Results**

To determine the effect of the use of both immediacy and avoidance techniques on student satisfaction scores, I totaled the number of immediacy and avoidance strategies for each tutor, and then determined what percentage of the total was made up of immediacy techniques and what percentage of the total was made up of avoidance techniques. I listed this in order of highest uses of immediacy techniques to lowest, and compared them to the student satisfaction score for that tutorial. As Table 3 illustrates, the higher the percentage of immediacy techniques (which indicates a lower percentage of avoidance techniques) the tutor used, the higher the satisfaction score of the student.

Table 3: Percentages of Immediacy and Satisfaction

Tutor	% of Immediacy Techniques Used	% of Avoidance Techniques Used	Student Satisfaction Score
2	100%	0%	15
4	100%	0%	16
9	97%	3%	16
6	90%	10%	16
3	88%	13%	11
7	84%	16%	10
10	70%	30%	8
11	68%	32%	8
8	56%	44%	8
13	50%	50%	8
1	46%	54%	6
5	33%	67%	6
14	26%	74%	-3
12	15%	88%	6

## Implications

If, as my study suggests, a tutor's conscious use of these immediacy techniques has the potential to improve the satisfaction level of the students being tutored by creating a sense of closeness between tutors and students, we must consciously train our tutors to use them, while also training them not to use the identified avoidance techniques because student satisfaction indicates a positive learning experience. Clearly Mottet and Richmond were correct when they argued that "humans do not have a linguistic schema for closeness and instead take verbal cues from the context [of the conversation] to construct verbal techniques that cultivate closeness/distance" (32) because, although each of the immediacy techniques studied has the potential to improve the quality of student learning by creating an atmosphere of closeness and cooperation, tutors did not use any more than 30% of the time:

<i>Comments/Questions That Show</i>	
Willingness to Communicate	30%
Uses of We/Us	27%
Praise	17%
Accessible Answers	13%
Personal Examples	8%
Humor	5%

After completing my study, I met with each of the tutors who participated and shared my copies of their coded tutoring transcripts. In every case, they were surprised (sometimes dismayed) at what was revealed. None of my tutors intentionally set out to alienate the students they tutored, and they were all eager to begin attempting to use the immediacy techniques I shared with them. I now provide my tutors with a list of these techniques (approach and avoidance), and the likely effect their use will have on student satisfaction, and I plan to duplicate my study after all of my current tutors have had a semester to finish their training. I hope that my research will show a marked increase in the satisfaction level of all students being tutored, both virtually and face-to-face. Finally, I suggest that other writing center directors also begin training their tutors to use the six immediacy techniques outlined in this article while avoiding the four avoidance strategies, both online, and in face-to-face environments. Sharing the use of both the immediacy and avoidance techniques discussed in this article with our tutors will

help their awareness of their own communication patterns. And with awareness, may come positive change.

### Note

1. See Kastman Breuch. Because of "the lack of sustained dialogue in asynchronous tutorials" tutoring sessions tend to become a method of offering prescriptive advice rather than a non-prescriptive discussion of writing.

### Works Cited

- Braeutigam, Andrea M. "What I Hear You Writing Is...Issues in ODR: Trust and Rapport in the Text-Based Environment." *University of Toledo Law Review* 38 (2006): 1-28. Lexis Nexis. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- Bolter, David J. and Richard A. Grusin. "Remediation." *Configurations* 4.3 (1996): 311-358. Print.
- Carnegie, Teena A.M. "Interface as Exordium: The Rhetoric of Interactivity." *Computers and Composition* 26.3 (2009): 164-173. Print.
- Carpenter, Russell. "Consulting Without Bodies: Technology, Virtual Space, and the Writing Center." *Praxis: A Writing Center Journal* 6.1 (2008): 1-5. Print.
- Gorham, Joan, and Diane M. Christophel. "The Relationship of Teachers' Use of Humor in the Classroom to Immediacy and Student Learning." *Communication Education* 39 (1990): 46-62. Print.
- Kastman Breuch, Lee-Ann. "The Idea(s) of an Online Writing Center: The Search for a Conceptual Model." *The Writing Center Journal* 25.2 (2005): 21-38. Print.
- Mehrabian A. *Silent Messages*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 1996. Print.
- Mottet, T.P. and Patterson, B.R. "A Conceptualization and Measure of Teacher Verbal Effectiveness." Annual Convention of the Speech Association. San Diego, Nov. 1996. Address.
- Mottet, Timothy, and Virginia P. Richmond. "An Inductive Analysis of Verbal Immediacy: An Alternative Conceptualization of Relational Verbal Approach/Avoidance Strategies." *Communication Quarterly* 46.1 (1998): 25-41. Proquest. Web. 9 Apr. 2012.
- Neadarheiser, Stephen, and Joanna Wolfe. "Between Technological Endorsement and Resistance: The State of Online Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 29.1 (2009): 49-75. Print.

---

**Appendix: Student Satisfaction Survey**

1. My online tutoring session was very useful
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
2. I received valuable information.
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
3. The tutor was responsive to my needs.
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
4. The tutor treated me like an individual.
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
5. The tutor encouraged me to participate in the session.
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
6. The tutor made an effort to establish rapport with me.
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
7. I would schedule another online tutorial with this tutor.
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree
8. I would schedule another online tutorial but not with this tutor.
  - Strongly agree
  - Agree
  - Neutral
  - Disagree
  - Strongly Disagree