

## Creative Expressive Writing and Perceived Self-Efficacy in the Writing Center—A Tutor’s Narrative

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### Abstract

*You know the story...the one about a curious little girl, captivated by a little white rabbit? Like young Alice, my curiosity compelled me to follow my own white rabbit down an unknown path, at least to me. It found me when I attained an internship in our university writing center the fall of 2012. And down the rabbit-hole, I fell. My adventures in writing center wonderland grew into an infatuation with writing—the tutoring of, the process of, the pedagogies of, the praxis of. Many discourses of writing pull at me, begging to be consumed and adapted to suit the situation. This infatuation led me down a path in which I could prepare myself for the rigors of graduate research, through the McNair Scholars Program, in 2013. For nearly two years, I developed and attained a summer research fellowship where I had the opportunity to explore the intersections of creative expressive writing, perceived self-efficacy, and the theory/practice of tutoring writing. I sought insight into new ways of combatting writing apprehension, both for my clients in the writing center, in addition to new apprehensions I was feeling as a writer/researcher/tutor. This exploration pulled me in directions that were unexpected, forcing me to face anxieties that I’d managed to suppress for many years. I found that intentionally applying low-stakes creative writing activities into the writing center consultation brought even more relevance to undergraduate creative writing programs. Moreover, making creative writing studies more transparent brings levity to the seriousness that often stigmatizes writing center praxis, fosters writing development across the curriculum, and shifts the writing center focus on perceived self-efficacy. This essay is a culmination of my research experience—it shares some insight into case studies documented over the Summer of 2014, my reflection of my research development—and intends to demonstrate the ongoing value of narrative inquiry, the methods of my madness.*

### Down the Rabbit Hole

“My toe skimmed the lip climbing the stairs of the Liberal Arts Building. I had to block my fall up the stairs. Sweaty palms left haunted marks on the concrete. Nerves were getting the best of me. I am not a writer. I have no business talking about writing to anyone.”

Reading this reflection, one could imagine the narrator was a nervous student, shaken by the idea of what to expect in a college English class. It was actually my initial thoughts heading in to my first official consultation as a peer writing tutor. With five weeks of theoretical training, observations of seasoned peer writing consultants, and hours of discussion, I should have been ready. But, my anxiety was through the roof. I began my internship with the writing center the same semester I took my first creative writing workshop, a fiction writing workshop. So, as a ‘newbie’ in both the creative writing and the writing center realms, I found myself in flux. Just dipping my toes in courses for my major emphasis, I questioned whether I had the capability to pursue a writing career. This, coupled with my increasing apprehension about my abilities as a writing tutor, manifested into nervous knots that left me visibly shaking in the back room of the writing center, reaching for my shiny new name badge.

What I was plagued by was writing apprehension. I was scared. Scared to talk to clients whose papers were sure to be stronger than anything I could write. Scared that they’d see right through my façade, or worse, could condemn my major, creative writer. In the three years I’ve been a peer writing tutor, I am still aware of my anxieties, but learned to be ever-mindful of what I’ve gained through multiple creative expressive writing courses; these creative expressive writing strategies are what shape my tutoring writing approach. I treat each client session as another opportunity to seek out new information—every session begins discovering context about the client. I ask about their major, which semester they are in, their week/weekend, and the course their current project is for all in an effort to benefit the writing development of each client. This information allows me to decipher what writing strategies might alleviate the client’s writing apprehension.

Venturing deeper into the rabbit-hole, I sought connections to how creative expressive writing has served as a way to curb my own writing and tutor apprehension. Wendy Bishop asserts that, "Before tutors can help apprehensive students, they must understand their own writing processes and, I would argue, the creative aspects of writing apprehension" (33). This new consciousness of my own fears about writing has motivated me to pursue research regarding perceived self-efficacy (PSE), or the perception of capability to accomplish a specific skill. Pajares (562) says that there are two ways of self-efficacy research. The first looks at the relationship of PSE levels to performance outcomes (i.e., grades), and the second type explores how PSE affects one's learning development (qtd. in White 22). This study is structured to align with the second type of self-efficacy research. The writing center serves as a site for inquiry; it provides a reader's perspective for writers, regardless of skill level. This student-centered approach offers writers the space to find opportunities for writing development, discuss revision strategies, and gain skill development. Exploring the impact of creative expressive writing in the writing center consultation through this lens of PSE, seeks to ensure that the focus of the writing center is for the writer (North). To narrow this lens even further, I seek to explore the client's PSE in regard to their perceptions of writing capability. For the sake of this essay, I refer to this as perceived 'writerly' self-efficacy, or PWSE.

### Curiouser & Curiouser

I had been actively working as a peer writing tutor for over a year when I first learned about PWSE. In the fall of 2013, I worked with Karen<sup>1</sup>, a biology undergraduate who was revising a lab report her instructor had "murdered" (student's emphasis). The report was littered with red ink; at the top of the cover page were the words "Get help from the Writing Center and Resubmit" beside an oversized "D." The instructor may or may not realize that this remark affected the student's perception of writing capability. Regardless, this student—an honors student—looked at the writing center as a triage, a space filled with writing 'masters' that would fix her paper. She couldn't see beyond the red comments. It wasn't until we were midway through the hour-long session that the negativity melted away. The paper was well written and followed the conventions of a standard scientific lab report. Mostly, the comments and editing marks were due to a difference of opinion regarding the use of commas and semicolons. The kind of knowledge students would not gain until they submit work to the instructor.

The vibe in the session shifted even further once we reached her Discussion section. It revolved around the effect of displacement, why this animal's habitat was integral to its livelihood, etc. She was lost, unable to see what she was missing. Her timidity, the physical shrinking of her body away from the table, was palpable. I felt her disengagement with the assignment as this aspect of the draft had her frozen in writing apprehension. It didn't matter what I inquired about the topic, I was losing her. I opted to try a new tactic and asked her about her home back East (information I learned during the pre-textual conversation at the beginning of the session)—what specific features of that space, that town, contribute to the feeling she gets when she returns there on breaks. She lit up—the information was flowing out of her. As she dictated, I transcribed on her behalf a running list of the characteristics that were significant to her hometown.

Wanting to strike while the iron was hot, I encouraged her to set the lab report aside for a moment and asked her if she would be comfortable drafting out a scene using the features she'd rattled off. She was skeptical, but willing to "sketch a story about home." I left the table while she composed. Those five minutes of writing was all she needed to spark her writing 'groove.' Together, we went over the narrative she sketched; we discussed the elements of scene, sensory detail, and place—that all derive from my background in creative writing—and she was able to articulate the impact these elements had on informing the audience about her subject, her home—I interjected with, "Wouldn't this be considered your habitat?" A light bulb moment occurred; Karen beamed with realization.

After taking in the creative writing activity, we looked back at her lab report. She quickly created a new list on behalf of the animal she was studying. While the discussion section remained in a traditional lab report format, Karen transferred the details she recalled from her list, compared it to the narrative she crafted, and ultimately brought the reader into the animal's relocated space, highlighting the major differences that were ultimately impacting the animal's growth and development. When I articulated how confident Karen was in herself post-session to Shaun White, one of our graduate assistants, he mentioned that what it sounded like was perceived self-efficacy.

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<sup>1</sup> All client names have been changed.

White was drafting his master's thesis on the topic in regard to our tutor-training program and shared that with low PSE, writer's tend to not only suffer from anxieties about the very idea of writing, but will shut down if confronted with some writing projects. Looking back, I know that the result of our consultation was a significant increase in Karen's PWSE regarding her capability to communicate through writing. I don't know if Karen would have left with the same level of confidence in her writing capability had I not encouraged the narrative fast-write. What I do know is that she loved the revision plan we constructed and looked forward to the idea of revising other areas of her paper. My perception of her PWSE was further compounded by Karen's enthusiasm to bring in a draft for a literature course. She had stated during that first session that her writing in the sciences "sucked," and that she'd been procrastinating on her literature paper.

This turnaround in Karen's PSE was the inspiration for this study. Through subsequent observations of writing center consultations I began to see that creative expressive writing had a great deal of potential as a tool for revision—our main topic of conversation in the writing center. However, I wanted to formally inquire into this further. I wanted to explore using more case studies, to document more sessions. This evolved into a proposed and approved Summer Research Fellowship the following summer. While Karen was the inspiration in my preliminary research, I found that there is much scholarship supporting how creative expressive writing holds potential when used for critical reflection, which could benefit both tutor and client.

By melding existing writing center theory and practice with that of creative writing studies, clients may experience a tutoring session that encompasses each of the three main learning styles—visual, audible, and tactile — which could aid in a more individualized, yet collaborative learning experience. This understanding then, naturally, leads to the development and/or increase in the client's perception of their capability to communicate through writing. In this essay, this is defined as perceived 'writerly' self-efficacy (PWSE). I say writerly because the writing center mission statement is to maintain a student-centered approach. The suffix '-ly' shifts the word writer from noun to adjective, 'like' a writer or the characteristic of a writer—whereas 'writing' connotes a product-centered focus whether it's seen as a noun (written product) or verb (process of inscribing). The intent behind encouraging the client to engage in creative expressive writing during the writing consultation is to maintain a focus on the process of learning, therefore the development of the writer.

Drawing on my experience with creative writing, I used a series of consultations to introduce creative expressive writing. I was attempting to use cognitive scaffolding, hoping to influence the clients' PWSE. By offering the writer a PSE-building activity using expressive writing, I hoped to show that these approaches give the client a feeling of agency. Additionally, I hoped to demonstrate that one critical way writing center consultants can encourage/develop better writers is through expressive and reflective writing practices. Meaning, creative expressive writing can make the purpose of the writing center more transparent to both the client and the tutor, by encouraging positive PWSE in both the tutor and the client. This PWSE development not only allows for both the tutor and client to overcome writing apprehension, but potentially enriches their disciplinary writing process, which also could extend beyond academia. This practice potentially opens the student's mind to what it would look like to actively participate within their field of emphasis—Nurses communicating with writing at an International Medical Conference, Engineers proposing the latest in Self-Sustaining Urban Development.

## Literature Review

To better understand the context of my research, the following is a general breakdown of key terms, background information, and exigencies for the research I conducted these past two years.

*Creative expressive writing.* Writing scholar James Britton identifies the three styles of writing discourse as expressive, transactional, and poetic (*Language* 176). Most disciplines outside of the arts and humanities are familiar with what is referred to as transactional discourse, where students are active, but perhaps less engaged with the genre of writing produced (such as an informational report or cover letter).

Expressive discourse is a more organic, more natural form, resembling how humans communicate (Britton, *Language* 177). Expressive discourse—fast-writing, journaling, and critical reflection via the personal essay—are often utilized in English 101/102 and composition courses. Britton states, "Expressive language is associated with a relationship of mutual trust, and is therefore a form of discourse that encourages us to take risks, to try out ideas we are not sure of, in a way we would not dare to do in, say, making a public speech. In other words, expressive language favors exploration, discovery, and learning" (83). Students exposed to more opportunities to engage with expressive writing are also flexing their inquiry muscles, questioning ideas within their discipline, etc.

Poetic discourse, or creative writing, demands more active engagement from the writer. It is asking them to make something with language. The working knowledge of the conventions of different creative genres places the writer in the position of creator, audience, and spectator—forcing writers to think critically about how they can shape their knowledge of their discourse and show readers how they see themselves interacting within their field of expertise.

For the sake of this essay, I have combined poetic and expressive discourse into ‘creative expressive writing.’ There were two reasons for this. First, the nature of the standard writing center consultation is such that I needed a phrase that referred to the low-stakes writing strategies I imposed in the consultations generally. This way, the activity could draw from one or both discourses. Second, shaping one’s knowledge of expressive to the more formal poetic discourse is where the most critical thinking may actually occur. John C. Bean identifies critical thinking as “interaction with a problem, identification and critique of assumptions, and a dialogic interchange with the ideas of others” (2-3). Britton argues that the techniques derived from creative writing changes how students share their understanding of course content, “yielding new perceptions of experience and the necessary distance for the individual involved in the self-examination of values” (83). As a result of this melding style of tutoring, students may be more likely to have the strength to overcome their writing apprehension. And by extension, may develop their disciplinary writing on a deeper level by drafting through different writing approaches.

To gain more insight into integrated creative expressive writing into the writing center consultation, I sought more research about scholars who have successfully used creative and/or expressive writing within the classroom. Without the knowledge and guided practice of expressive/poetic writing, even in low-stakes writing activities, students are less likely to gain a full contextual understanding of writing within their discipline. There is much scholarship that supports crossing disciplinary boundaries through the use of all three writing discourses. Alexandria Peary considers Creative Writing across the Curriculum (CWAC) assignments to be the “continuum between expressive and poetic discourse” (65). Assigned tasks included writing that used plot development, dialogue, and scene in order to immerse students within a fictional realm that resembled their ideas of professional life within their fields. Peary says, “Working toward more formal creative writing affords benefits to learning” (66). Meaning, assignments that asked students to create fictionalized narratives of their selves working in their disciplines provokes thought on both a personal and social level. Students are asked to think critically about how to transfer their knowledge of discipline-specific content with the writing techniques built throughout their academic journey. This idea of ‘transfer’ is what writing scholar Elizabeth Wardle calls “fostering agency” (1). Fostering agency is where poetic discourse comes in. It is feasible that creative writing assignments can be used across the curriculum for the promotion of discipline-specific learning.

Art Young says that he assigns creative writing to students from a variety of disciplines, such as science, business, and engineering majors, all within the context of a literature course. He uses this pedagogical approach to demonstrate that creative writing should not be limited to literature courses but instead can be “tailored to the content of courses from across the curriculum” (“Considering” 87-88). Through creative writing, students are provided the opportunity to adopt alternative points-of-view, give consideration to context, and search for multiple possible outcomes, or conclusions. In actively bringing this practice into the writing center consultation, students are offered a safe, low-stakes space in which to develop their writing. Thus, develop their perception of self as an academic writer.

When describing the application of creative expressive writing for an Abnormal Psychology class, Patricia Conner-Greene, et. al states that “writing a poem is an exercise in problem finding, a skill essential to creative work in both the arts and sciences” (“Poetry” 215). Another example comes from Patrick Bahls, who develops poetry assignments in mathematics both for general education courses and courses taken by math majors. The shift in discourse offers students alternative ways to explore math in personal and jargon-free ways. As a result, “general education students gain the comfort of using genres familiar to them from the qualitative work of their majors, and underclass math majors gain the confidence that may persuade them to continue with the major” (*Student Writing* 120; “Math and Metaphor” 76-79).

Creative expressive writing via poetic discourse could provide the solid foundation, or a stronger sense of PWSE, students need in order to overcome writing apprehension. Each of these examples of immersion writing is extensive and fits appropriately within the time constraints of a classroom. But, many offer inspiration to draw from for the sake of the client’s development needs in a writing center consultation. They illustrate how integrating creative expressive writing strategies in the writing center may allow students the opportunity to better adapt to their discourse communities. In doing so, their PWSE could be further developed as they foster and develop agency through their engagement within the writing center.

*Perceived self-efficacy.* Considered an extension of social cognitive theory, Albert Bandura (1993) defines perceived self-efficacy (PSE) as “one’s belief in one’s ability to succeed in specific situations” (130). In other words, self-efficacy relates to the individuals’ beliefs and personal judgments about their abilities to perform at certain levels and affects their choice of activities, effort, and performance. Bandura highlights how motivation and persistence are factors that aid in PSE that connect to cognitive development and functioning. Psychologists Gist and Mitchell add, “self-efficacy is an internalized construct which can be learned and developed over time through a synthesis of consistent self-evaluation, coaching, and repeated practice” (qtd. in Lavelle 470). There are four sources of PSE that speak to writerly processes:

- mastery experiences
- vicarious learning
- reduction in stress reaction and negative emotions
- social persuasion

The writing center serves as a prime example of a site for inquiry where coaching, self-evaluation, and repeated practice are inherent. Tutors are offering peer writers an opportunity to broaden one’s perspective beyond performance evaluation to include more positive beliefs about one’s future writing. In offering additional strategies through low-stakes creative expressive writing and in a space the client feels safe, like the writing center, writing tutors are essentially tackling all four sources of PWSE during the session; I am suggesting that in persuading clients to engage in low-stakes creative expressive writing during their consultation, tutors are providing an avenue for clients to gain insight into their PSE that they may not have discovered otherwise.

Likewise, the tutor’s use of creative expressive writing, by way of critical reflection, allows them to examine their motivations as a writing tutor—offering tutors a means to actively engage with their professional development, their tutorly PSE. Meaning, there is an opportunity through using creative expressive writing in a more transparent and applicable sense that could benefit both the tutor and the client. According to recent research that expands on Bandura’s theories to discuss PSE, writing, and motivation (Hidi and Boscolo; Pajares and Valiante; Boscolo and Hidi; Zimmerman and Kitsantas), motivation influences and is influenced by three major components—interest in the writing task, self-efficacy concerning successfully completing the task, and the ability to self-regulate performance. In focusing on PSE in the context of the writing center consultation, this research is choosing to focus on the process of learning as opposed to the acquiring of new skills.

Simply put, PSE is the ability to face one’s writing apprehension and use it for one’s benefit—for good rather than evil. Often writers will allow their apprehension to sabotage their development, resulting in poorly crafted drafts, even lower self-worth with regard to writing, and a lingering fear of future writing projects. PWSE is gained by developing a higher perception of writerly self-efficacy, their perceived confidence in their selves as writers within their disciplines. Recent research (Schmidt and Alexander 2013) attempts to measure the effect of the post-secondary writing center on PWSE. Schmidt and Alexander argue that the primary factor enabling writing centers to forge better writers is, in fact, PWSE. They say, “Writing centers are increasing student-writers’ beliefs about what and how they can perform as writers, which is being introduced in this study as perceived writerly self-efficacy” (1). This is why I opted to include PWSE as a lens for my own research.

With a student-centered approach, I have to address the fact that, within the writing center consultations, there are actually two writers involved. Both tutor and client constitute “writers” and so both perspectives must be accounted for. In order to demonstrate how writing center consultations are focused on supporting positive PSE, it is critical to explore not only the interaction between tutor and client, but it is also critical to explore the experience of the tutor. Therefore, this essay explores the ways a consultant can support PSE through expressive and creative writing practices.

*Motivation and persistence through cognitive scaffolding.* From the first day of training, tutors recognize that improving writing skills is something that requires effort over time. Motivation—the drive to actively invest in sustained effort toward a goal—is essential for writing improvement (Mackiewicz & Thompson). A concern for many writing tutors is the problem of limited time to encourage motivation. There’s no way of knowing whether the client will maintain motivation to persist with their revision plan once they leave the writing center. Mackiewicz and Thompson point out that “tutors must work to develop and maintain students’ motivation to participate actively during the brief time (30-60 minutes) they are collaborating in the writing center consultation” (38-39). Though creative expressive writing activities, tutors may encourage motivation by showcasing a different way to articulate through writing. With help from PSE theorists Pajares and Valiente, Mackiewicz and Thompson point out that PSE can be influenced through tutors identifying client successes, allowing the client to make a connection through their efforts (45).

In the case of the writing center, scaffolding refers to “tutoring strategies used to support the students’ efforts to decide on topics and revisions of existing drafts. According to Jennifer G. Gromley and Roger Azevedo, motivational scaffolding is the feedback tutors provide to promote student’s active participation in writing center consultations” (qtd. in Mackiewicz and Thompson 39). To summarize, scaffolding generally looks like the following: one-to-one tutoring, where the tutor structures the task—motivates the client to participate in the task, and sometimes performs those parts of the task the student cannot perform, allowing the client to concentrate on what he or she can do (Mackiewicz & Thompson). In order for writing tutors to effectively support student-learning through scaffolding, tutors need to know how to accomplish the following:

- to make the writing task manageable for each individual student without oversimplifying the outcome
- to mutually define the goals and establish the agenda for the consultation
- to recruit students’ interest in writing tasks
- to encourage students’ persistence and effort in completing the tasks
- to attend to the students’ motivation and active participation
- and to minimize students’ frustration and anxiety during the consultation (46)

This is what my study was inspired to do. It could bridge a gap in scaffolding research by exploring whether the creative expressive writing activities could be used as scaffolding—through an authentic connection, rapport and solidarity, between client and tutor.

Because scaffolding in the writing center can influence solidarity and rapport with students, while guaranteeing in-the-moment success as long as the tutor is present, writing strategies undertaken in the consultation should be less frustrating, less anxiety-provoking, and “less dangerous” (Wood, Bruner, and Ross 98). Unfortunately, Mackiewicz and Thompson point out that only a few studies of scaffolding in the writing center consultation have been published, but they don’t discount scaffolding as a feasible avenue to pursue. They say, “Its [scaffolding research] potential for understanding and improving writing center tutoring is largely untapped” (46). What I am suggesting through my research experience is that integrating more creative expressive writing activities among our traditional tutoring approach may offer more in the way of motivational scaffolding research in the writing center. While this is one method tutors could utilize, the act of writing during each tutoring session develops the learning of each participant—the client seeking out more writing development, as well as the tutor providing the necessary feedback and information during the session.

*Writing apprehension.* Bishop (1989) also asserts that as writing center workers focus on writer’s apprehension, they should also consider the tutor’s apprehensions about working with such writers. Utilizing the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Scale, she demonstrates how students with high apprehension tend to have less control over usage and written conventions and typically write shorter, less complete pieces, especially personal narratives. Bishop argues that in order for student tutors to help the apprehensive writer, they too must understand their own writing processes and the “creative aspects of writing apprehension” (34). This helps to ensure that tutors are process-oriented rather than product-oriented for the sake of the client and the purpose of the writing center. Bishop argues that because of the tutor’s awareness of the writing apprehension, or an understanding of how to effectively use one’s anxieties about writing, tutors are prepared to offer their client’s successful strategies with which to promote development of the writer. Therefore, Bishop emphasizes the importance of awareness and ongoing development of PWSE for the sake of the tutors as well.

Writing apprehension linked to low PSE is one of the largest contributors to the need for a student-centric tutoring approach. In shifting the focus toward alleviating writing apprehension through active participation, the clients gain more confidence because of the nature of tactile learning. Additionally, critical reflection through writing for both the client and the tutor during the final moments of the session gives each some food for thought. Perhaps the client considers how they might take what they learned in the session for further revisions, or locks it away for future reference. Either way, there is potential that the active engagement through creative expressive writing has the ability to foster agency in the writing center; this is a factor I hadn’t considered as there is a gap in research in this regard. Peary’s research on this very subject in the disciplines touches on the potential of creative writing to fostering agency over time in the classroom setting, but the issue of time is a constraint tutors in the writing center face. Based on these outcomes, however, it may be beneficial to inquire into this further.

What is striking about Bishop’s claims regarding the importance of tutors and their awareness of their own writing apprehension are her connections to PWSE. Her claims force tutors of writing to address their own concerns pertaining to working with writers from across the curriculum. For me, one of the more significant concerns I had as a new writing consultant stemmed from the need to validate creative writing as an academic emphasis. More specifically, I felt challenged to make it more transparent to STEM majors that creative expressive writing would be

of great benefit to their discipline-specific writing. In an effort to creatively approach my apprehensions, I reflected on my own writing process. What I found was that I gravitate toward expressive and creative writing. I look at how to tell a story to my audience; I consider what the audience needs to know about the main topic, what details are needed to paint a clear scene of this context. Once I can see an unbiased picture on the page, I am able to pick apart the sort-of story elements and transfer the narrative to suit the assignment at hand. In so doing, my process lends to the argument that actively engaging through creative expressive writing in the writing center—either through reflective, expressive writing about the drafting process, fast-writing, listing, drafting using low-stakes narrative prompts, etc.—serves as another option tutors can look at to help clients to develop a stronger perception of themselves as writers.

*Provocative revision through creative expressive writing.* One of the primary conventions of creative writing pedagogy is an intensive focus on revision. Composition scholar and writing center Director Dr. Toby Fulwiler points out that for novice writers, learning to re-write is “an alien activity that doesn’t come easily” (190). His approach to teaching post-secondary composition mimics that of the creative writing workshop. When it comes to revision, he says “revision is the primary way that both thinking and writing, mature, and improve [...] I not only encourage it, I provoke it, emphasizing where, when, and how to do it, while going to great lengths to ensure the writing is the writer’s own” (190). Within my first year as a writing center tutor, I crafted an approach to addressing multiple needs for clients using creative expressive writing prompts for clients to respond to. The response was very positive. By individualizing each session through these writing activities, my rapport with the clients improved, and I’ve witnessed their PWSE improve. For those I’ve worked with multiple times, they have expressed how they have found ways to transfer what they learned from our previous interactions to address new writing projects outside of their English composition courses. The initial outcome of this approach boosted my own perception of capability, my ‘tutorly’ PSE. This boost was the motivation to develop this research project.

Fulwiler implants the general methodology in outlining the four major revision approaches that are considered High Order Concerns—Limiting, Adding, Switch, and Transforming. Limiting refers to the common writing concern of overgeneralization where specific concrete detail is warranted. Adding addresses the issue of including more—more detail, more research, more analysis, etc. For switching, writers consider the value in shifting the overall voice of the piece, to see the writing from a whole other perspective. For example, switching from a third-person passive voice (common STEM-driven writing) to first-person active voice, or perhaps changing the point-of-view to a different person all together. Transforming refers to looking at the piece through a completely new genre, or stylistic approach, of writing (like transforming a research analysis into a presentation; a story into a haiku; a topic sentence into a tweet). These areas are primarily what the creative expressive writing activities in this study addressed.

There are many expressive/poetic writing exercises that draw from each of these categories. The experience one has in actively engaging in writing poetically (e.g., fictional scene building, poetry, character development) could enhance one’s academic writing because of one’s increased perception of writerly self-efficacy. Activities from expressive discourse include free-writing, personal narratives, journaling, etc.

*Creative approaches to writing center theory/practice.* Writing Center (WC) pedagogy relies heavily on composition and rhetoric pedagogy to develop new peer writing tutors/consultants; however, it only takes a few minutes in a writing center space to see and hear a multitude of interdisciplinary pedagogical approaches at play. Peter Carino (1995) claims that no single “political, pedagogical, or theoretical, relationship exists collectively between writing centers and writing programs, for every relationship varies by local context.” Wendy Bishop (1990) pushes for a theory that offers students the opportunity to consume writing from both creative and academic realms to emulate consumption and production through embodying the conventions of the authors. She questions why there has to be separation in writing when both work so beautifully together (123-24). If the writing center is truly the intermediary “space” that can bridge the gap between how students communicate naturally (expressive) and the classroom expectation (transactional), then creative expressive writing can be seen as the possible conduit with which both tutors and clients can grow and develop their PWSE.

With the mission of the writing center to develop the writer and not simply the writing (North 1984), approaches to revision play a significant role in their consultations and discussions (Bean, 1996; Bishop, 1989; Clark, 1999; Fulwiler, 1992; Geller, Eudice, Condon, Carroll, & Bouquet, 2007). Fulwiler’s suggestions for transferring writing are beneficial for students who anticipate presenting their academic writing in multiple formats—such as a written proposal and a digital media presentation. Scientists are often publishing study findings, but also are expected to share their knowledge with the general public via interview or mass media publication.

Students who actively practice writing in these conventions may develop mindfulness about their audience that can influence the effectiveness of their academic writing. Fulwiler's claims and specific suggestions for revision support the key component of this research as he demonstrates the value of creative writing in academia.

## **We're All Mad Here**

My inquiry is motivated by the following question: How can active participation through low-stakes creative/expressive writing during the consultation help writers develop motivation and persistence that ultimately impacts PWSE?

Thus, comes the method to my madness., I performed the following tasks to determine the impact of fusing creative expressive writing strategies with writing center praxis to explore PWSE development:

*Task 1. Utilize a case-study observational approach to document PWSE development in the writing center consultation.* The pre-textual conversation is where tutors elicit information about the writer directly from the writer. In line with writing center praxis, the pre-textual conversation is vital in matching the appropriate creative expressive writing activity to the clients and their writerly needs. This conversation (3-5 minutes) allowed me to discover nuanced detail about the client—demographics (personal and academic), their thoughts about the writing process, assignment requirements, classroom experience, and the amount of feedback they've received thus far for this project, among other details.

I collected field notes and chronicled my study data, opting for a case-study approach for each participant's writing center consultation. Under IRB Protocol, these case studies asked for voluntary participation. Informed consent was verbal, and each willing participant was provided a copy of the proposed study, its purpose, and the option for anonymity regarding all aspects of their participation.

I listened for emotional triggers using indicators inspired by the Daly-Miller (1995) Writing Apprehension Test. Triggers included the following expressions voiced by the participant:

- I avoid writing
- I am afraid of writing graded essay drafts
- Expressing myself through writing is a waste of time
- My mind goes blank when I try to write down my thoughts or ideas
- I am nervous about writing
- I knew I was going to fail when there was writing involved
- When I hand in an essay, I know I will do poorly
- I have a terrible time organizing my ideas on paper
- I don't think I write as well as other people
- I don't like my writing to be evaluated
- I am not good at writing

*Task 2. Document the suggested use of creative expressive writing activities intended to help develop PWSE and combat writing apprehension within the context of each writing center consultation.* Additional field notes included a checklist of revision topics categorized using Fulwiler's scholarship regarding provocative revision that addresses four main areas of content-related revision concerns. This checklist, dubbed, "The Tutor's Toolkit," helped to set the agenda of each consultation. The revision concerns addressed during each consultation categorized according to the following:

- Limiting
- Adding
- Switching
- Transforming
- Other

The checklist also allowed me to catalog both the writing activities practiced during each writing consultation drawn from the previously mentioned 'provocative revision' and the agreed upon plan for revision at the close each consultation.



*Task 3. Research client attitudes toward their PWSE.* To determine if an improvement of writerly self-efficacy is affected by expressive/poetic writing activities, an additional variable will be provided following each consultation that is facilitated by the researcher. I provided an online survey through Google Forms. The survey was provided online through Google Forms and specifically addressed the writing activities used during the session and specifically measured the client’s perception of capability as a result of actively participating in these exercises using a Likert Scale.

*Task 4. Critically reflect on each participant’s writing center consultation.* Qualitative data regarding post-session reflection was documented through field notes I took after each consultation. Specific questions, adapted from Gillespie and Lerner’s *The Allen-Bacon Guide to Peer Tutoring* (2000), were used for each reflection, and organized and expanded on by way of a blog. I cross-referenced the documented case study material to further inform my reflections. The intentions of the blog were to connect the dots from theory to practice, from internal construct to performance assessment. The following are the specific questions I used to direct each post-session critical reflection:

1. What type of consulting took place—was I directive or more collaborative with the client?
2. Do I feel like we established a good rapport?
3. Can I see myself working with this client again? Did the client ask about scheduling a follow-up visit?
4. Did the client ask me questions about their own text?
5. Did I encourage positive aspects of the client’s work?
6. Did we discuss issues not directly related to their paper?
7. Did digressive conversation help our mutual understanding of the assignment at hand?
8. How did I respond to the client’s attitudes? Did I feel like I had to adjust my tone in order to work with them?
9. Did I feel as if the client expected something from me that I wasn’t prepared to offer (i.e., did the client expect me to edit and make all the corrections myself)? If so, how did I negotiate their expectations?
10. Were we able to spend a few minutes reviewing at the end of the session?
11. Did I suggest any follow-up strategies for the client?
12. What would I change or do differently about the session?

### **Follow the White Rabbit**

The following section offers the overall results of the 10-day field study I conducted in the writing center over the summer of 2014. Included are statistical results.

#### **Statistical Results of the 10-Day Study**

- 8:9 session participants agreed to case-study observation<sup>2</sup>
- 7:8 session participants engaged in creative expressive writing activities during the session
- 6:8 English 102 portfolio work
- 5:8 participants identified as International Student/ELL
- 4:4 ratio of male participants to female participants

*Task 1. What insight did I gain from my observations, with regard to writing apprehension and PWSE development?* Writing apprehension linked to low PSE is on one of the largest factors that builds a wall between clients and writing center tutors. In shifting the focus toward alleviating writing apprehension through active participation, each participant—regardless of their level of PWSE—gained more confidence because of the nature of a more tactile learning environment as a result of their creative expressive writing activity.

The conflict of being “lost between languages” was a contributing factor I hadn’t thoughtfully considered before, with regard to developing this study. I was pleased that most of my participants wound up being non-native English speakers in some capacity. I find that this demonstrates the value of considering creative expressive writing as a means to help develop PWSE as it is not hindered by any cultural differences. On the contrary, these particular

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<sup>2</sup> 2:8 study participants returned a second time during the 10-day study and are counted twice.

participants seemed emboldened by the writing activities. They felt they had more control over their writing, as they continued to grow and develop as writers. In light of this perspective, it motivates me to pursue more inquiry among this thread of thought. Creative expressive writing, low-stakes of course, to approach ELL/ESL/international students is definitely worth pursuing further.

*Task 2. What creative expressive writing strategies were proposed during each case study? What purpose did each strive to serve with regard to revision?* The following is a breakdown of the creative expressive writing activities proposed and the corresponding revision concern each attempted to address:

CS1: First, Sarah opted to try a creative expressive listing exercise comparing the physical appearance and clothing customs of Iraqi women to women in the United States. Using this list, she was able to plug in specific details. To address awkward sentence phrasing, Sarah wanted to know if it was okay to have some of her native language included into the narrative. Sarah and I referred to the second activity as “Lost in Translation.” Meaning, sometimes sentence clarity was anything but clear when she tried to translate phrases from Arabic to English. She switched these awkward phrases back to Arabic and added sensory detail in English to help show readers specifics rather than tell them generalized detail.

CS2: Neal opted to try the “Tweeting Your Thesis” exercise to address vague, general, or otherwise wordy thesis statements and/or topic sentences for each paragraph in his essay draft. Initially, he opted to not engage in a creative expressive writing activity, but did keep a pencil in his hand to jump in and annotate missing articles as I read aloud to him. Reading aloud to him helped to naturally segue into discussions about wordiness, awkward phrasing, etc. I was able to sneak in an activity without him realizing it at first. I asked if he used Twitter. He said he ‘loved the Twitter’ because it made him ‘think hard about what he writes.’ I focused revisions then on trying to keep a dialogue via tweets: looking at his sentences individually to determine which were the most important phrases that got his points across the clearest. The creative expressive writing, and the connection to social media that Neal uses often, gave him a sense of even higher PWSE. He left saying that he was going to use Twitter to test out different thesis statements to make sure his friends understood what he was wanting to write about for his next essay.

CS3: Neal returned for a new project and opted for more hands-on grammar practice first. Then, participated in his own “Lost in Translation” activity to address some generalization and awkward phrasing concerns we found along the way. He also used free-writing to figure out if his draft was informative or argumentative. He also mentioned that he was ‘tweeting’ his sentences more often and really liked using that ‘trick’—his wife told him his stories are becoming less long-winded.

CS4: Sarah returned to discuss an argument essay draft. First, she wanted to address dropped articles throughout, but realized her opening paragraph was missing a clear thesis/claim. So, she free-wrote a list of images that came to mind when I said the phrase “cost of higher education.” The list served to address both limiting issues (sweeping generalizations) and adding—she constructed an outline of what needed more research as well as what specific topics she wanted to address for the sake of her argument. The last 20 minutes of her session, Sarah used the list again to craft a small narrative describing the diverse needs that motivate people to consider college and the consequences (positive and negative) of those decisions in today’s society.

CS5: Fred was frustrated about revising his review of an art exhibit. He initially was super aggressive and wanted me to tell him what to write (i.e., showing me a photograph he took of the exhibit and asking me how I would describe it, what meaning did I get, etc.). To help him structure his review, we reviewed the assignment requirements. With this framework, Fred was able to free-list specific characteristics that he felt suited each assignment requirement. These included adding sensory description—I prompted him by first asking him to close his eyes after he pulled up the art exhibit photo on the computer. Then asked, “What do you remember seeing? What stands out about this exhibit?” He admitted he was more into music and “not so much the visual art.” I suggested putting his reflection of his art experience into lyrics to help him find a way to engage with the material a little more. This motivated him to approach the writing process more positively. Fred was also receptive to the idea of drafting an introductory scene to help place the reader in the art museum and free-rapped who, what, where, when, and why as I scribed the information he shared.

CS6: Erica wanted to address the issue of clarity in the draft of her literacy memoir. The draft suffered from a lack of focus—lots of filler about her friend throughout. First, Erica opted to engage with “cut n’ paste”—and moved these passages into a dedicated section of the draft. Second, she built a scene to emphasize these relevant moments and connect the individual memories to the topic of literacy development. She also enjoyed “tweeting” why this friend was pivotal to her writing development. In fact, Eric liked the “Tweet Your Thesis” activity so much that she attacked her draft, tightening sentences and/or removing them entirely. Near the close of her session, Erica

disclosed that she loved poetry. So, for her revision plan, I suggested that she think about the specific elements necessary to construct a haiku to help her to cut the extra and focus on relevant details.

CS7: Susan wished to address issues of organization, grammar, and meeting assignment requirements. The reflective essay revolved around identity. The opening of the draft was particularly broad in scope—how children inherit the sins of their parents. The overall theme of the draft was about the dichotomy between who is impacted by male/female behavior. To help address the generalized language, Susan opted to engage in sketching mini-narrative scenes, each from her perspective, but at specific ages. For all three scenes, I prompted her by asking what she saw, heard, felt. To help narrow the focus, she free-wrote about how she hoped to connect to the reader. I prompted her by asking what the essay is really about. The draft lacked the reflection aspect of the assignment. To help add this aspect, more free-writing was prompted after each paragraph. I asked Susan to look back on those moments as her present self. Did she feel the same way? What was she doing, specifically, to ‘break the chains?’ She free-listed about both the impact of her father on her and on her family and her relationship with her husband.

*Task 3. What were the results of the PWSE-inspired survey? What were the observed attitudes regarding client PWSE?* The results of the post-session PWSE survey proved to be inconclusive. Only one of the eight study participants agreed to take the survey. The number of participants and abbreviated amount of time devoted to field research severely limited this aspect of the study. That said, I don’t think that the lack of participation in the PWSE survey had any bearing on the validity of my research study given the demonstrated increase in PWSE reflected in each study participant’s demeanor when he or she left the writing center.

Seven of the eight study participants each displayed high levels of writing apprehension at the onset of their consultations. Many sat across from me, shoulders hunched, as if they were physically afraid to be near the ‘dreaded draft.’ What was interesting was the behavior of one participant in particular. Neal identified as the only non-traditional student participant, due to his age. He also identified as an international student. While his English was somewhat limited, he came into his consultation intending to face his fears about not coming across as “a fool.” He was aware of his grammatical ‘issues.’ However, he wasn’t letting any dropped articles or awkwardly translated phrasing get him down. He was excited to face what I have often observed to be a vulnerability reflected in the eyes of many international/ESL/ELL clients. He was smiling, even laughing upon leaving the writing center, as were the rest of the participants. The seven participants that initially were demonstrably anxious about talking about their drafts progressively engaged with me the longer we talked. None of the participants left with what might be considered an inflated perception of their writing capability. Each exited their consultations with a more positive mindset. All articulated their endorsement of creative expressive writing through phrases such as crafting; sketching; demon-writing (aka free-writing); telling stories; and listing. All were happy with their mutually agreed upon revision plan.

The most telling aspect of my field observations was that two participants returned the following week to discuss revisions and talk about new writing projects. One was Neal, mentioned before. The other was Sarah (Case Study One). Each arrived early for their second appointments, engaging with the summer staff, whereas each was cordial, yet quiet prior to their first sessions. Neal was joking with me, nudging me with his elbow. He was more than happy—jolly to be back in the writing center.

In Sarah’s second consultation, she was extremely engaged—full of questions about how to craft an argument. The timid, downtrodden client from the week before was gone. Like Neal, she kept a pencil in her hand the entire hour, creating lists in the margins of her drafts, posing questions above each paragraph in an effort to perform a reverse outline for herself. She was proactive in wanting to articulate what her revision plan was, for when she got home. She knew it was going to be a few hours before she could revisit the draft, so she repeated her plan a few times as I scribed it onto her client revision plan sheet that we offer every client at the end of their consultations. She nearly skipped out of the writing center with her four-page argument draft, the back-side of one page loaded in her swirly-scripted free-write list of things that came to mind when I said the phrase, “cost of higher education.” For 20 minutes at the end of the session, Sarah drafted a new narrative built from the list she’d made. This filled up the other two pages of her draft-backs. Both Neal and Sarah articulated that they felt more in-control of their writing process. I asked if they felt like I was manipulating their style. But each felt that by using prompts to help spark ideas, it was the act of writing during the session that helped the ideas “stick.” Neal mentioned that he would remember the writing part the session, and that would help him to remember what we talked about. I think that this speaks to the impact that creative expressive writing could have on developing PWSE in the writing center.

*Task 4. What insight did I gain through critical reflection immediately following each field study-related consultation? What, if any, insight was attained through narrative reflection (i.e., drafting and revising research data to transform into a polished journal article)? Narrative reflection.* Critical reflection through creative expressive writing during the final moments of each consultation gave both participants, me and the client, some food for thought. Perhaps the client considered how they might take what they learned in the consultation for further revisions, or locked it away for future reference. Either way, there's potential that active engagement through creative expressive writing has the ability to foster agency in the writing center. This potentially fills a gap in scaffolding research that is certainly worth researching further.

When I consider Peary's research of creative writing and the potential it has on fostering agency in the composition classroom, I can't help but wonder if the issue of time is truly a constraint anymore in the writing center. Granted, my research is somewhat skewed by the fact that two of my participants returned. There's no telling whether my clients fostered agency unless I see them again, meaning multiple experiences in the writing center over time. The idea of agency is another avenue worth exploring.

It is nearly one year since I proposed my research fellowship. It's been surreal to continue deep, critical reflection on my research, and on the processes I chose, in an effort to develop a tutor narrative for publication. Going through the writing process of this tutor's narrative, I am even more convinced of the positive influence creative expressive writing can have on developing both writerly and tutorly PSE. Mindfulness of potential writing activities that could benefit the client gives me a more innate need to reflect on my tutoring experiences, even today. The caveat to this is to allow tutors in the writing center to find their 'right-fit' in regard to reflection style. I will freely admit that I much prefer a Luddite-style of reflection, good old pen and paper versus a blog. I believe that my preference is skewed by my choice in approach. I opted to not face vulnerability online. Instead, I leaned on a structured reflection, carefully crafted from notes I chose not to publish online until they were drafted and revised into coherent renditions of the consultations.

The blog is a great option to format reflective practice and share thoughts openly and organically. Patrick Bizzaro (2009) suggests that this approach to researching writing—through the act of writing itself—can be described as writing “from the inside out” (265). This ethnographic approach to writing research, proposed and initiated by Bishop (1999) served as a foundation for my concept of narrative reflection. She was articulating ideas with regard to developing writing instruction, not peer tutoring strategies. That said, I felt that incorporating a blog would allow me to maintain a sense of accountability. Unfortunately, my choice in using a formal reflective practice was a bit stiff, constrained, and ultimately limiting.

I find that the format I chose is especially dry. It is interesting that little to no creative expressive writing was utilized on the blog, only in my chicken-scratch field notes. To be honest, my apprehension about being a new writing researcher blinded my focus in this regard. I should have taken my own advice during the reflection process and simply shared my “raw data” in its original organic and creatively expressive state. The desire to be taken seriously, to be data-driven, overrode my own advice leading to my own writing apprehension. My choice to approach reflection in this manner is also worth investigating further.

In regard to the process I've experienced with transferring my research into a published article, expressive and creative approaches to segments of this essay have been more fruitful. I've had months of writing, reflection, and more writing in an effort to mold my findings into a narrative that conveys the effect creative expressive writing has had on me and my study participants. This is reflective of how I feel the writing center experience has been for me. At the same time, I've discovered elements of Greek rhetoric, specifically metanoia and Kairos during the latter half of my research experience that I wished I'd learned much earlier. My basic understanding of Kairos alludes to the significance of action at a specific moment in time. For the sake of this research, I can't help but wonder about the significance of me, researching creative expressive writing as a developmental strategy for writers during a writing center consultation, at this moment in time. As far as metanoia is concerned, I have been mindful of reflection on my failures as well as successes in this research process and look forward to diving even deeper into critical reflection through this lens of Greek rhetoric once I have my bearings of the subject.

### **Through the Looking Glass**

*How can active participation through low-stakes creative/expressive writing during the consultation help writers develop motivation and persistence that ultimately impacts PWSE?* This research expands on the idea that creative writing in the disciplines allows course material to become a vivid detail, part of a tricky plot, to be molded and fused and passed around by complex characters—all of which becomes part

of a complex critical act of asking, “what if?” Therefore I ask, “Why not the writing center?” Integrating creative expressive writing in the writing center consultation serves as a testing ground for students to try out writing strategies that they can, then, transfer to accomplish various writing projects. Additionally, the critical thinking skills provided by poetic discourse gives them a more contextual understanding of what today’s professional climate is expecting from individuals transitioning from student to professional.

Through this research I suggest creative expressive writing become more transparent writing center praxis. Offering clients prompts to write toward during their session offers the writers (both the client and consultant) a way to actively and thoughtfully build PSE, which, in turn, improves writing. Granted, this development of agency occurs over time, but planting the seed through creative expressive writing is a viable method. I am motivated, however, to researching PSE further within the context of the writing center. Developing a measurement scale to assess the use of creative expressive writing requires significant critical thought and the aid of scholars from sociology, psychology, among others—warranting further inquiry.

From the tutor’s perspective, my motivation to continue encouraging the use of creative expressive writing for writing development is directly connected to the positive reaction my clients share. Seeing people get excited about writing definitely carries weight in my overall tutorly PSE. Of the sessions I observed, I was most surprised by the overwhelming changes in demeanor expressed by the international student participants. As five out of six participants identified themselves as international students, I feel this exposes a significant opportunity for consultants to capitalize on and warrants further inquiry. For example, one of these participants struggled with clarifying his thesis statement/purpose statements in each paragraph. He was so pleased with the ‘tweet my thesis/purpose statement’ exercise that he returned a week later to “learn more through creative eyes.” Based on the physical and emotional response of the clients, the results affirm the idea that low-stakes creative expressive writing during the consultation is one effective approach writing center consultants can utilize, not only for the sake of the client, but for the tutor’s own sake as well.

Ongoing reflective practice has been part of our writing center training for some time. There is always the fear that over time, writing center tutors may become complacent in their roles—the end-of-semester rush of students requesting last-minute consultations, the tutor’s own course load bearing down on them, maybe they’ve been following the same lock-step session routine to the point that they could do it in their sleep. Once their tenure with the writing center ends, tutors can reflect back on the experience, and most find it rewarding. With the addition of active critical reflection, I feel that the value of tutoring writing has become more transparent to me. Engaging in critical thought in this manner forced me out of my comfort zone. I was motivated to remain centered on the needs of the client and ever mindful of how my engagement with them could impact their overall PWSE. It may not be a suitable course of action for every writing center tutor—but I do feel that should a tutor opt to utilize more formal reflection (blogging, journaling, perhaps a weekly roundtable meeting among all tutors) in their writing center experience, complacency may be less likely to occur. Additionally, this practice offers insight that proves invaluable to the tutor while in the moment—versus simply in retrospect—allowing for self-directed ongoing professional development that may be easier to transfer to incoming tutors. The value of ongoing critical reflection, specifically of how it impacts the tutor—while actively tutoring writing—is worth exploring further.

In regard to using creative expressive writing, with respect to critical reflection, I feel that I ended up with more questions than answers. The process of narrative inquiry and critical reflection by way of creative/expressive writing seems to remain at the forefront of my interests. Having just stumbled upon the idea of Kairos, metanoia, and phronesis—I am seeing a correlation among Greek rhetoric with my writing center consultation approach more than ever. As Alice eventually found her way back home, she also found her way back to Wonderland. I, too, hope to eventually offer even more insight into the significance of reflecting on these everyday situations through a more rhetorical lens. What would be even curiouser, would be to share on-going conversation with others in regard to transparency of creative expressive writing in the writing center. I guess that will have to be another story.

## Acknowledgements

I’ve been asked frequently about my choice to structure my essay after allusions to Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. There are two reasons. First, Carroll’s protagonist demonstrates curiosity better than just about any other literary character. I identify with her, embrace her excitement and her frustration in making logic out of what appears to be utter nonsense. As a creative writing, liberal arts major surrounded by STEM-driven scholars, I often felt I fell down a well rather than a rabbit-hole. But, Alice learned to apply her perspective with the guidance of her newfound friends. Much like I have. My cohort of McNair Scholars has been there from day one, putting up with my nonsense these past two years, and I couldn’t ask for a more understanding, insightful, or passionate group of

colleagues. Thank you for being my guinea pigs and dipping your toes into more creative expressive writing as I sought activities to bring into my formal consultations.

Secondly, I couldn't have utilized my method of inquiry without the mentorship of Dr. Bruce Ballenger. As the pioneer of the *Curious Writer* textbook series, I wanted to take a page from a scholar I am humbled to have had the opportunity to work so closely with. He has been immeasurably supportive, forced me to challenge myself, to remain steadfast to an inquiry-based research approach. To him I will forever be grateful.

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## Appendix A

The following section offers one expanded narrative from Case Study One. I chose to share this narrative, versus an exhaustive rendition of each consultation narrative for the sake of brevity. For those interested, additional case study narratives and post-session reflections are available via my study blog-site, [www.downthewritingcenterrabbithole.blogspot.com](http://www.downthewritingcenterrabbithole.blogspot.com).

### Case Study One: Sarah

During our pre-textual conversation, I learned Sarah was a health sciences major, with a goal of becoming a surgeon. Sarah warmed up the longer she talked about her major; her eyes brightened when talking briefly about human anatomy and physiology. When I asked her about what motivated her to choose medicine, Sarah revealed she was an international student, born in Iraq, but immigrated to Syria when she was six years-old.

“There are few female surgeons in Iraq, but those that are, are highly respected,” she said.

Sensing that Sarah was comfortable, I transitioned over to the English class, asking her about writing—specifically writing in English. She offered that she is a “nervous writer,” but that it wasn’t that writing in English caused her anxiety (“It is difficult, yes, but manageable.”). Being in the United States for the past five years, she’d lost most of her native tongue, Arabic. Therefore, some of the choices she’d like to make with regard to her assignment—reflecting on memory—are even more difficult because she felt lost between two languages. The personal essay draft was a narrative about women’s customs she was recalling from when she and her family immigrated to the United States. At just 11-years old, she hadn’t personally felt the impact of native Muslim customs, but has memories of the difficulties her mother and sister endured.

“I wanted to compare female Muslim customs with the Western customs I first experienced when we arrived in New York,” she said, setting her draft on the table.

Understanding the intent of the draft, I shifted to agenda-setting. I asked Sara about specific areas she’d like to work on. Based on her instructor’s feedback, the participant asked if I could help her with some small grammar mistakes, and to understand how to ‘show’ readers something rather than simply ‘tell’ them about something. In response to this, we set the agenda for the session collaboratively. I explained that because the essay draft was short (only three pages) we could read through for content-related revision concerns and this way her primary concerns about grammar and showing/telling could also be addressed without impacting the overall content of the draft.

As I read the draft aloud to her, I noticed that for the most part, her phrasing was clean. There were very few instances where the translation muddled the phrasing. I asked her about the phrases openly. One, for example was the way she had translated the word *hijab*, by referring to it as a ‘head curtain.’ I was familiar with the terminology, but I was curious about how Sara chose to describe it to me, someone outside of her culture. She depicted it as warm, enveloping the head and neck as opposed to loose, or tight-fitting. These were two ways I had experienced head scarves. In our discussion, the phrases she’d used to describe the feeling of wearing a hijab were so poetic, that I let her know using ‘veiled head curtain’ would be an effective translation with the accompanying description to offer detail to the reader.

One thought as I was listening to her describe this custom to me in English was how powerful it might be to just include the phrase itself in Arabic, with the accompanying poetic description. I shared this idea with Sarah, offering that this was a great example of showing, versus telling—something her instructor had requested. She scribbled notes frantically in the margins as we talked and she opted to switch the awkward phrases back to Arabic (some she admitted that she had to re-research because the exact phrasing escaped her). This blossomed into almost a scavenger hunt to find key places where Sara felt she wanted to add more Arabic ‘flavor’ to her essay.

Sara was incredibly enthusiastic about the results. She voiced that she felt the essay was “more powerful” because she was able to incorporate her native language. I validated this statement by sharing with her that I felt, as a reader, the choices she made with the sensory descriptions in English were poetic and unique, meaning rhetorically effective. By unique, I meant strong and distinctive—her essay had a voice that reflected the person sitting before me that day. The blending of her native language and the English descriptions provided insight and detail in a concrete way. The revisions delivered much context and perspective that showed rather than told, very effectively.

At the close of the session, I reviewed the specific activities used during the session and the benefits each offered to her writing. Sarah asked me to write down the ‘prompts’ on her revision plan sheet for future reference. To close the session, I asked her to reflect briefly on the session, fast-writing the experience and how it made her feel about not only the project, but how she felt in regard to her perceptions of self as a writer. This was completely for her benefit as I finalized my session notes, which included one additional creative writing activity to consider for this and future assignments on her Revision Plan Sheet. When she left, she was looking forward to trying the new

activity and already had some ideas for how she wanted to expand her paper after reflecting on the activity she used in the session.

*Post-session reflection one.* The pre-textual conversation at the start of the session really helped inform me about the writer's anxieties, about writing in general, and specifically about this assignment. She confessed that she felt lost between languages because she has been away from Iraq and Syria for so long that she's lost some of her native tongue, yet lacks proficiency in English as well.

I never considered the idea of writing apprehension stemming from feeling 'lost between languages' like my client today. As an observer, Sarah appeared to be empowered by bringing in words and phrases from her native language into her essay. Likewise, the rhetorical choices she made with the English sensory descriptions also seemed to bolster confidence and capability.

I felt that Sarah's goals for the session remained consistent but what was striking was witnessing her anxiety physically wash away during our hour together. She confessed that she loved writing short stories—English was easier in comparison to trying to write entirely in her native language. Her physical tension melted away as she wrote throughout the session. Her responses were always candid, but, the further we went along, our exchanges over how to adjust an awkward phrase felt, to me, like they were becoming more comfortable—the vibe was very collaborative rather than tutorial-esque.

As far as encouragement is concerned, Sarah had a very solid grasp of formal English grammar that eclipsed my own. I made sure to share this with her often. Again, her draft was solid overall in flow, content, organization. Some of the turns of phrase she opted for were incredibly poetic and I believe this comes from her international background. Many were more poetic than anything I could conceive of. These I stressed to Sara because they are distinctive to her voice. I wanted to ensure that in working with her today that I didn't negatively impact her poetic voice.

Although part of the initial conversation was off-topic, it was important to me to make Sarah comfortable in the writing center before diving into her paper. Our pre-textual conversation (1-3 min) gave me insight and context about her feelings about writing in general, her major, and her plans for the future after college. While these were not directly related to her paper, I feel this time was vital to help me determine the best course of action during the session. Additionally, this gave me insight into individualizing writing activities to help her in revision.

I believe that there's always a fear in me when working with international students. Often, I find that I question whether I am capable of appropriately addressing their concerns in a way they can understand and take with them (fostering agency). I don't feel that I had to adjust my tone or demeanor with Sarah. In fact, there's a part of me that was bolstered by her enthusiasm for the writing activities. I realized that part of my own motivation to include active writing during the session is to witness others engaging with creative expressive writing, and enjoying what these activities offer. Sara's demeanor during and especially afterward demonstrated for me the impact this style of tutoring approach had on her and her perceptions of writing capability.