

“If you don’t have  
something nice to say...”

...reach a little deeper. Offering *useful* feedback

Writing center tutors do *not* evaluate student writing. Yet writing center tutors *do* offer feedback.

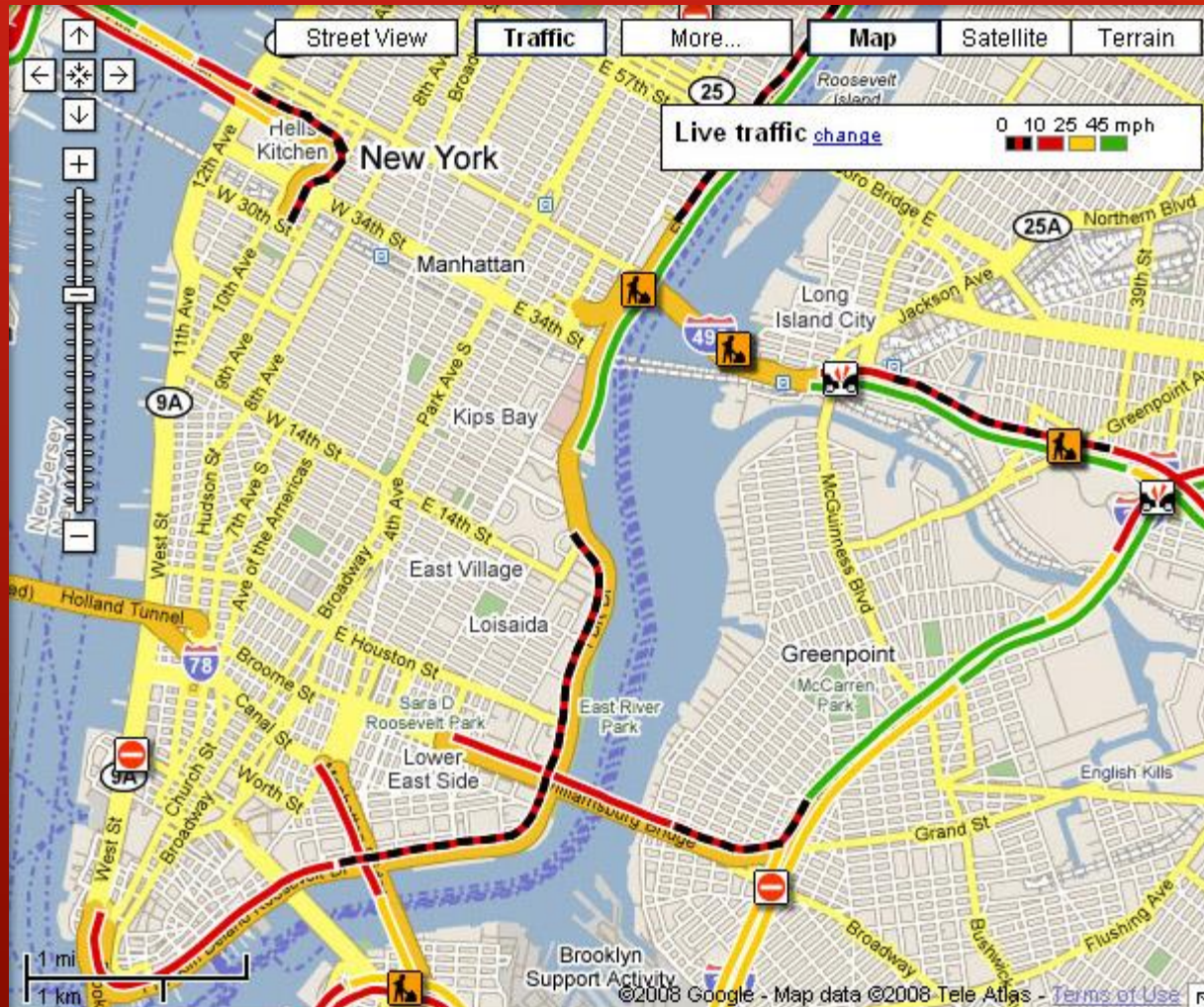
How's that work?

# “Google maps” tutoring

- You can't plan a driving route using Google street view.
- You can't offer effective, useful feedback if you dive straight into the sentence structure—you're too close!
- *Back away* for a bird's-eye view.



# First, zoom out for context

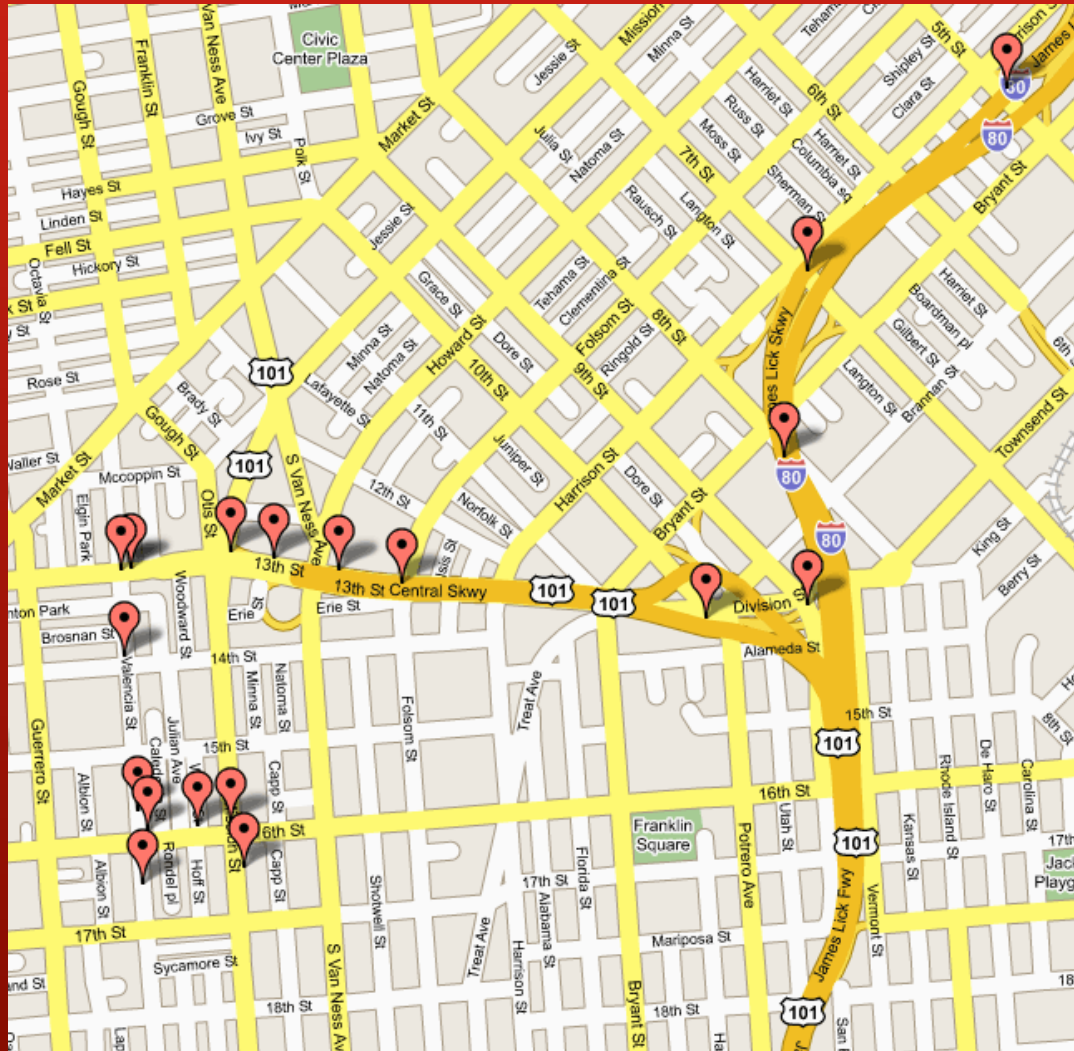


# Zooming out

- ASK the student—
  - “What is this assignment? Would you pull it out so we can look at it together?”
  - “What’s your topic? What are you saying about it?”
  - “Is there a sentence in here that represents your thesis? Can you point it out for me?”
  - “How did you organize this? Causes, then effects? Problem, then solutions? Least important to most important? Where did you put the concession/refutation/counterclaim? Why there?”
  - “How did you connect your main points to your thesis?”
  - “What kind of support have you used—logic & reasons? Examples? Statistics? Expert analysis? Historical precedent?”

Never try to work without the  
assignment at hand!

Now, zoom in



# Zooming in

- Only zoom in for sentence-level scrutiny AFTER you've done your bird's eye survey.
  - Run-ons, comma splices, and fragments
  - Wrong words
  - Tangled clauses
  - Apostrophes & plurals
  - "Awkward" construction (whatever that is)
  - Weird prepositions
  - Wordiness
  - Vagueness
  - *What else?*



# The clash of goals

Evaluative goals (the student's) vs. non-evaluative goals (ours):

- A "good" paper
- An "A" paper
- An "A" in the class
- A passing grade
- A stronger paper
- A clearer paper
- Better use of sources
- *What else?*

A "good" paper is easier to achieve than are the skills to think critically and make effective, strategic choices in writing.

# Evaluative vs Non-evaluative feedback

- This looks right
  - This looks wrong
  - This is good
  - This is bad
  - This is okay
  - Your teacher will love it
  - Your teacher will hate it
1. Acknowledge/name the parts of the essay
  2. Comment on specific rhetorical strategies you see attempted
  3. Comment on effort
  4. Praise breadth of research & subject matter expertise
  5. Express interest in her experience

So, what's does non-evaluative feedback sound like?

# 1. Acknowledging parts of the essay

“I see in your *introduction* you’ve chosen to use question for a ‘hook’ to draw the reader in.”

“This part reads like a *thesis statement*; is it intended to be the thesis statement?”

“This whole paragraph seems to be about X. It would make this paragraph stronger to add a *topic sentence* that summarizes X.”

“So here I see you acknowledge a *counterargument* to your view—how do you plan to *refute* it?”

“So here you’ve created a summary *conclusion*, restating your thesis. Have you ever tried a different kind of conclusion?”

# About parts...

- Many essay parts will be there—acknowledge them!
- Some parts may be missing. Ask about them. Suggest them.
- Students may put the parts together in an inexperienced way. That's okay. Acknowledge their effort.
- Offer your suggestions in the form of *choices* that respects the students' authorship.

## 2. Noticing rhetorical strategies

“I like how you connect your topic with a historical precedent in this paragraph.”

“These statistics seem right on target. Did it take you long to find them?”

“You cite this person but don’t explain what his expertise is on this subject. Why do you find him so believable?”

“This seems like a clear signal that you’re doubtful about the research.”

“I like how you present the counterargument fairly and without exaggerating it. You don’t demonize the opposition.”

“Here I see you summarize all the pros above before signaling that you also have cons. That’s a really good transition.”

# About strategies...

- Student writers may use fewer strategies in a less-expert way.
- Some strategies will be there. Acknowledge them.
- Some strategies may be new to the student—suggest one or two.
- Offer choices that respect the student's ownership of the paper.

### 3. Notice amount of effort

- Dweck: children praised for the amount of effort they put into a task out-performed children praised for how well the task turned out.
- Praising the end product reinforces fear and a **fixed mindset**.
- Praising effort reinforces determination and a **growth mindset**.

“You read *all* these articles? Did that take you long?”

“Oh, you read all these abstracts? That was a smart starting point. Now you know better where to focus the rest of your reading.”

“Wow, you’ve written quite a bit. You must have worked all weekend.”

## 4. Breadth and depth of research, subject matter expertise

- “Wow. You must know quite a bit about X by now.”
- “Well, you know quite a bit about X; maybe you should look for something on Y to balance it out.”
- “You know more than I do—do you think you’re missing any important research at this point, or do you think you have enough to go on?”
- “You’re the expert. You’ve done all this research. What do you think?”
- “Ah, I see you chose this topic because you already knew about it from personal experience. You can probably use some of that information in your paper.”



Writing center tutors do *not* edit student work. Yet writing center tutors are honest about the prevalence of mechanical errors.

How's that work?

# Allowing students to work on grammar from a strong place

- Acknowledge the strengths of the paper (zoomed out) FIRST.
- Acknowledge that there are, nevertheless, a few (or possibly many) mechanical errors that need to be addressed.
- Explain that an important part of the message IS the grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- *Don't ignore these issues! Students often feel misled and angry when we've glossed over their mistakes.*

# What to do about grammar

- Offer to discuss one or two error types if you both have time. Otherwise, invite the student to come back after they've revised to look at their grammar.
- Explain a rule, demonstrate a couple ways to fix it, and ask the student to find the next couple of similarly patterned errors.
- Always offer *choices* so the student retains autonomy and ownership. There's more than one way to fix a comma splice!
- Look at the Editing & Proofreading tip sheet to see if there are any ideas you can adopt.

# Rosemary's abbreviated hierarchy of sentence errors

*Rosemary's hierarchy may differ from yours. Discuss!*

1. Sentence boundaries (run-ons, comma splices, and fragments)
2. Verb problems (wrong form, verb not matching subject, wrong tense)
3. Wrong words (where/were, its/it's, are/our, there/their...)
4. Everything else: pronouns not matching antecedents, lapses in parallel structure, wrong prepositions, commas, apostrophes, articles...

# Study up on our time

- If you're not sure how to explain a particular error, use your down time (if any) to look it up in a writer's reference.
- Use the tip sheets to learn about common errors.
- If you think you already know it all, browse a writer's reference to find something you don't.
- Many writer's references have special ESL sections. You WILL learn something you didn't know.

# Study up...

- Can you explain the difference between *excited* and *exciting*? Between *surprised* and *surprising*? (-Ed and -ing Adjectives)
- Can you explain why *shopping* is not a verb? (Gerunds and Infinitives)
- Can you explain the difference between *too* and *very*? (Adverbs)
- Can you explain why we don't say, "*She is liking pizza*" or "*He is owing me money*"? (Stative Verbs)
- Can you explain how to tell whether or not a final consonant should be doubled when adding a suffix? (Spelling Tips)
- Can you explain how to recognize when an author uses logos or pathos? (Logos, Ethos, & Pathos)
- Can you explain why a writer should not plop quotes into a paper without following them with explanation or reflection? (Quote Sandwiches)
- Can you explain passive voice? (Active & Passive Voice)
- Can you explain a few common logical fallacies? (Fallacies & Emotional Appeals)

# Have fun tutoring!

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Spring 2014