Tutoring Non-Native English Speaking (NNES) students in writing

Although NNES students can be very good writers in their native language, they may find writing academic papers in English a frustrating experience because they face new challenges. By providing individualized attention, a tutor can help students address their specific problems and improve their writing and grammar.

THIS UNIT WILL HELP YOU...

- Clarify the assignment
- Set priorities and expectations for the tutoring session
- Work on development, organization, and argument
- Give feedback on style
- Emphasize the need for revising
- Handle plagiarized work
- Explain and help students correct grammar

Clarifying the assignment

Find out if the student understands the assignment:

Ask for a handout that explains the assignment.

Have the student explain the assignment in his own words.

Clarify the assignment by asking questions in clear, simple language, such as:

- *Do you have to give your opinion?* (a persuasive essay)
- *Do you have to present information?* (an informative essay)

Some NNES students make mistakes in their assignments because they have not fully understood the instructions.

Setting priorities and expectations for the tutoring session

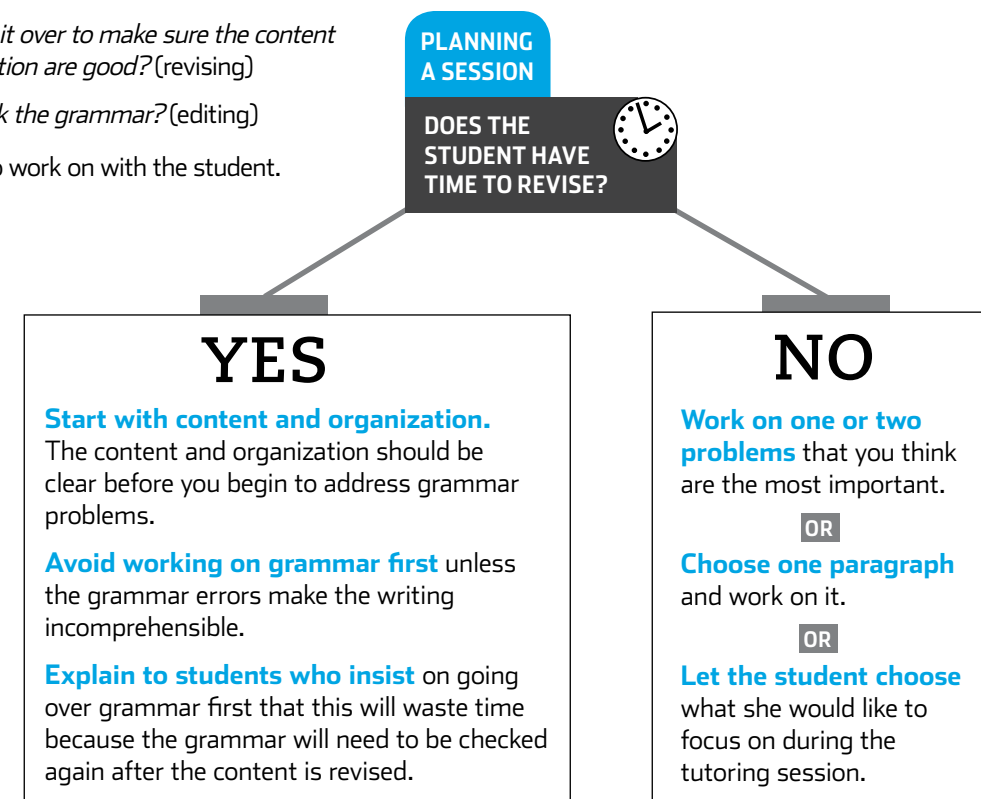**Make a plan based on how much time is available:**

Sometimes NNES students come to the tutorial session with a paper that has several problems, but there may not be enough time to address all of them.

Ask the student when she needs to submit the paper.

Find out how much work still needs to be done by asking:

- *Is this a first draft or a final version?*
- *Did you read it over to make sure the content and organization are good?* (revising)
- *Did you check the grammar?* (editing)

Prioritize what to work on with the student.

PLANNING A SESSION

DOES THE STUDENT HAVE TIME TO REVISE?

YES

Start with content and organization. The content and organization should be clear before you begin to address grammar problems.

Avoid working on grammar first unless the grammar errors make the writing incomprehensible.

Explain to students who insist on going over grammar first that this will waste time because the grammar will need to be checked again after the content is revised.

NO

Work on one or two problems that you think are the most important.

OR

Choose one paragraph and work on it.

OR

Let the student choose what she would like to focus on during the tutoring session.

Build confidence and focus on key areas:

Students produce better writing when they are confident and focused.

Point out strong parts of the paper, such as a good argument, or well-written sentences, in order to build confidence.

Write down and discuss what you will work on (e.g., logic and development), explaining that time is limited.

List other problems later at the end of the session. Suggest that the student work on those problems as well when he revises the paper.

Working on development, organization, and argument

Respond to problems in the paper based on why they occurred:

Two NNES students may have the same problem with the development, organization, or argument, but the reasons why that problem occurred may be different.

Identify what needs to be improved.

- Is the paper lacking in content?
- Is it difficult to follow?

Ask questions to determine why the student had a problem developing, organizing, or building an argument.

- Make sure she has understood the assignment.
- Find out how much she knows about the topic.
- Check to see if she outlined her paper.
- See if she can explain her ideas verbally more clearly than in her writing, or if she needs help with the language to express her ideas.
- Determine how familiar she is with the American standards for academic writing.

Provide individualized help based on the specific problems in the paper and why they occurred.

> " *Ask questions to determine why the student had a problem developing, organizing, or building an argument.* "

✔ ADDRESSING PAPERS
THAT NEED MORE CONTENT

WHAT CAUSED THE PROBLEM?	WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP
■ The student might **not have all the background knowledge** about the topic if he has been in the United States for a short time.	**Start by asking what he knows** about the topic. He might find it easier to talk about it. **Write down key ideas** that he mentions. **Help him fill any gaps** by discussing the topic with him. **Encourage him to take notes** during the discussion to use for the paper. **Introduce him to researching** by directing him to the online library catalogue, electronic databases, and credible internet sources. ☞ See Section: *Recognizing and addressing gaps in students' background knowledge* (pp. 16-17).
■ The student **may not have the language** to express her ideas.	**Ask the student to explain** the topic in her own words. **Provide vocabulary** if she has difficulty expressing some ideas. **Write down** key words and phrases for the student to use in her paper.
■ The student may be **new to the steps involved in writing an academic paper,** including how to brainstorm.	**Demonstrate brainstorming techniques** such as listing and diagramming. **Ask guiding questions** to help the student access what he already knows about the subject, such as: ■ *What do you know about …?* ■ *What have you read about …?* ■ *What do other people think about …?* **Show him how to organize his ideas** by grouping and linking ideas. **Let him practice generating ideas** with easier topics if there is time. ☞ See Worksheet: *Brainstorming and organizing ideas.* See Online Exercises: *Generating ideas.*

◼ Working on development, organization, and argument

✔ **WORKING ON PAPERS**
THAT ARE DIFFICULT TO FOLLOW

WHAT CAUSED THE PROBLEM?	WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP
◼ The student **misunderstood the assignment.**	**Clarify the assignment** by looking at the instructions (if available) and/or asking questions. **Review the paper** with the student, identifying what she still needs to do to complete the assignment. ☛ See Section: *Clarifying the assignment* (p. 28).
◼ The student **did not follow a clear outline.**	**Ask if the student has made an outline.** If he has not, ask him to explain his argument and how he is supporting it. **Explain the benefits of outlining,** including how it is easier to write a well-organized paper if he outlines his ideas first. **Show him how to plan his paper** and organize his ideas using an outline or a diagram. **Explain the relationship** between the outline or diagram and the introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion of the paper. ☛ See Worksheet: *Outlining an essay.*
◼ The student **didn't have the necessary vocabulary** to express her ideas clearly.	**Ask the student to explain her ideas** to you. Some NNES students find it easier to talk about their ideas than to write. **Rephrase some of her statements** to help the student clarify her ideas. **Write down key words and phrases** she needs to discuss the topic. **Provide techniques** for building vocabulary. ☛ See Section: *Assisting students with unfamiliar vocabulary* (pp. 18-19).

WHAT CAUSED THE PROBLEM?	WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP
◼ The student **writes in a conversational style** instead of developing a formal argument.	**Isolate the problem areas** in the paper. **Ask him questions** – *why? how?* – to encourage him to make his argument more explicit. **Help him create an outline or diagram** to organize his ideas. **Point out that in college papers** (unlike in conversations) every point needs to be explained and proved. ☛ See Worksheet: *Outlining a paper.* See Online Exercises: *Writing tutorials.*
◼ The student **was taught to write in a different style** in her native country.	**Find out** if the student was educated outside the United States. If she was, ask her how she was taught to organize papers and what she knows about writing papers in the United States. **Provide examples of academic writing** in the United States, showing how sticking to the topic and making points directly are expected. **Help the student clarify areas that are unclear** by asking questions related to the main idea, helping her diagram or outline the paper, and providing her with transition words if necessary. **Ask her to identify unrelated** details, and help her cut them out. **Encourage her to revise** the paper based on the outline or diagram you created in the session. ☛ See Worksheet: *Writing academic papers in the United States.* See Online Exercises: *Writing tutorials.*

Giving feedback on style

Help the student write more formally:

Some NNES students have learned English by listening to peers, not through extensive reading and writing. Because of this, their writing may be too conversational for college papers.

Show the student the difference between academic and informal writing by contrasting the two.

Rewrite some informal phrases and sentences in an academic style.

Help him practice rephrasing and rewriting sentences on his own.

👉 See Worksheet: *Avoiding informal language in academic writing.*

Help the student write more concisely:

Some NNES students may write in an overly complicated style because that is what is expected in their native county, or that is what they believe is expected in college in the United States.

Find out what the student thinks is good academic writing by asking her questions.

Tell her to avoid using wordy expressions or phrases when simple ones express the meaning as well.

Write a more succinct version of some of the student's complicated sentences, and have her contrast the two sentences.

Help her practice writing in a more direct way with fewer words.

Emphasizing the need for revising

Show the student how to revise on his own:

Some NNES students may come to a tutorial session assuming that the tutor will revise the paper for them.

Point out the benefits of revising, especially before a session. Revising leads to better papers and grades, and the session will be more productive because it can focus on what the student really needs help with.

Show the student techniques for revising a paper, using his essay as an example.

Provide a checklist for revising a paper and have him complete it before coming to a session.

> " *Explain to NNES students who just want to focus on grammar that content and organization are equally important.* "

Handling plagiarized work

Find out why the student copied work before addressing the problem:

NNES students may plagiarize or copy sources for different reasons. Some may be unaware that copying work is a problem.

Ask where the student found the information for the paper.

Find out how much she knows about how to properly paraphrase and cite sources to avoid plagiarism.

Explain the importance of avoiding plagiarism in colleges in the United States, including the consequences of submitting plagiarized work.

Provide techniques for avoiding plagiarism based on why the student copied from the source or did not give appropriate credit.

✔ HANDLING PLAGIARISM

WHAT CAUSED THE PROBLEM?	WHAT YOU CAN DO TO HELP
■ Some students may not understand that **changing a few words does not avoid plagiarism.**	**Explain that changing a few words is not enough** to make the writing his own. **Use examples to show him how** to paraphrase, summarize, and cite sources.
■ The student **may not be confident she can say it in her own words,** so she copies someone else's work.	**Ask the student to explain in her own words** a part of the text she has copied from another source. Provide help if she has difficulty. **Show her how** to paraphrase, summarize, and cite sources. **Have her paraphrase, summarize and cite** what she has explained or what you have discussed with her. **Provide her with some words and phrases** if you see she is stuck. **Encourage her to use her own words** in the future and explain the consequences of plagiarizing work.
■ The student **may not realize that copying work is a problem** because in his native country copying from texts may be accepted, and even a sign of respect for the original author.	**Find out what the student has learned** about using sources. **Explain the rules** for using and citing sources in American colleges. **Make him aware of the consequences** of copying or not citing work. **Show him how** to paraphrase, summarize, and cite sources. 👉 See Online Exercise: *Paraphrasing to avoid plagiarism.*

Explaining and helping students to correct grammar

Deal with grammar at the appropriate time:

Some NNES students may want to start by working on grammar even though it may be more productive to review the content first.

Generally review the content before the grammar.

Explain to students that reviewing grammar first can waste time because the grammar will need to be checked again after the paper is revised for content.

Review and explain grammar first when:

- The grammar mistakes make the paper very difficult to understand.
- The content is mostly clear and the student doesn't have much time to revise.
- The student is very confused about a specific grammar point and will have trouble concentrating on the paper until that point is explained.

Prioritize errors that affect meaning or are repeated:

NNES students may have many grammar errors in their papers. Some mistakes are more important to explain and correct than others.

Start with errors that affect meaning, such as problems with sentence structure, verb tenses, word form, and word order.

Next, address repeated errors even if they do not affect the meaning as much, such as problems with articles.

Focus on one category of errors at a time (e.g., first sentence structure, and then verbs).

Try not to over-correct even if the student asks you to do so since this can discourage and confuse the student.

Have the student correct as many similar errors as he can after you identify and explain a few examples of the specific type of error.

Work on grammar errors differently depending on whether the student studied grammar.

Not all NNES students have learned grammar from a book. Some may not be familiar with grammar terms or rules.

ASK THE STUDENT:

DID YOU LEARN ENGLISH GRAMMAR FROM A BOOK?

YES

Use grammar terms and rules to explain errors.

Give the student clear direction for applying the rule (e.g., use *a*, *an*, or *the* with singular, countable nouns).

Deal with exceptions after the student has mastered the rule.

Have the student practice applying the grammar rule to identify and correct errors in her paper.

☞ See Worksheets: *Explaining grammar points.*

NO

Highlight examples of correct patterns rather than explaining rules (e.g., as the verbs *have* learned and *have* spoken show, the verb that follows *have* usually ends in *–ed* or *–en*).

Have the student identify errors by looking for examples that do not follow the correct pattern.

Encourage her to highlight corrections so she notices the correct pattern more.

Explain grammar terms simply (e.g., an *adjective* describes an object or a person).

☞ See Worksheets: *Identifying and correcting grammar errors.*

Show the student how to identify and correct grammar errors:

Techniques for self-editing give students more control over their writing.

Have the student read his paper aloud and listen for errors—if he speaks English fluently.

Show him how to highlight key words to find specific kinds of errors.

Help him identify the errors he commonly makes, including those based on his first language.

☞ See Worksheets: *Identifying and correcting language transfer errors.*

HIGHLIGHTING KEY WORDS TO FIND GRAMMAR ERRORS	
TO FIND	**HIGHLIGHT**
Fragments	**Subordinating conjunctions** (e.g., *because, before, which*) at the beginning of sentences
Comma as periods	**Commas in the middle** of sentences
Errors in **verb tense, verb form** and **subject-verb agreement**	**Subjects and verbs**
Errors with **articles, plurals,** and **possessives**	**Nouns**

☞ See Worksheets: *Identifying and correcting grammar errors.*
See Online Exercises: *Grammar tutorials.*