



FROM THE DESK OF THE WRITING SPECIALIST

## Overcoming a Writer's Reluctance

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Several months ago, a Touro colleague and I were talking about ourselves as writers and about our writing—published and unpublished. My colleague expressed interest in reading some of my work; I took this as a compliment. “Fine,” I said. “And I’d like to read some of your work, too.”

There was no problem—until I tried to select some of my already published fiction and creative nonfiction to share. What was good enough? Serious enough? Interesting enough? What would my colleague, a distinguished author of scholarly books, think about my work? It took me more than a week to create a small packet of published stories and essays that seemed both worthwhile and representative. I included a cover letter that explained the work and put it in context, but even then I had qualms about how it would be received. After all, fiction and creative nonfiction are too often misread as thinly disguised autobiography. I discovered that my colleague, who was sharing his scholarly work with me, had feelings similar to my own.

I was astonished at the intensity of our shared reluctance to exchange already-published work. I was also astonished at how much each of us wanted the other to like the work. At some point, each of us said: “This isn’t my best writing. I’m planning to revise this. You might not like this, so don’t feel obligated to read it.”

Now, if professionals can suffer, what about students? When I told the preceding story to several students they reacted with disbelief, amusement, and relief. It didn't seem possible to them that their instructors had trepidations about sharing writing. After all, we're the adults! This is published work we're exchanging! "Now you know how we feel all the time," one student said.

"Even when you come to see me at the Writing Center?"

"Showing my writing is never easy," the student replied, "no matter what."

When students hand over their writing, it is usually for a grade or for criticism—it's for real and it's required. Students endure red-ink corrections. They struggle to decode the scrawled comments of instructors who some-times seem impossible to please. I remember, I understand, and I empathize.

I began to ask myself what I could do to encourage students to share their work with me. I'd assumed that because I don't grade anyone, because I avoid using red ink, and because I try to make clear, helpful comments it was easy for students and colleagues to share their writing with me.

Apparently this was a false assumption. What about the students who walked into the Writing Center, papers in hand, and said in words uncannily like my own: "This isn't my best. I'm planning to revise this. You might not like this."

If these students were suffering from fear of self-disclosure and possible rejection, it would be difficult for them to learn how to be better writers. Although the Writing Center is designed to be a friendly, non-judgmental place for students to get writing advice, I needed to rethink my attitudes and behaviors toward students, starting from the moment they stepped into the office.

Soon afterwards, I greeted a student who was coming to the Writing Center for the first time. I was seated behind the desk, pencil in hand as if I were impatient to begin writing comments or pointing to errors on that student's paper. However, since I hadn't worked with this student before I didn't know what kind of help she wanted. I didn't know whether she'd brought an original copy that she preferred to keep "as is" or whether she'd welcome a written record of my ideas. There was too much I didn't know. I put aside the impulse to move forward; instead, I decided to stop, look, and listen to this student.

Although encouraging students to share their writing more comfortably is an ongoing process, here are some strategies I started using that day.

I put the pencil down. Instead of reaching for the student's paper, I put my hands in my lap. I wanted to indicate that I was in no hurry and that I'd give this helping process the time it needed to unfold. I wanted the student to sense that right now it was more important for me to focus on the writer than to "work" on the writing with her.

Without my usual props of a pencil in one hand and a student's paper in the other, I was better able to look at the student herself—a person who was struggling. I didn't know whether she was struggling with a history of unhappy writing experiences or whether she was struggling with the assignment itself. I asked her several questions and, my hands still in my lap, I listened. Listening was difficult for me because it didn't feel like "real" work, but listening without taking notes made me pay close attention to what the student was actually saying.

I asked her to tell me about her writing strengths, but she didn't feel she had any. I asked her to recall an instance when she'd enjoyed writing or had felt that her writing was successful. Not one! I then asked what kind of help she'd like from the Writing Center.

She wanted what I'd like for myself; she wanted what I believe every writer deserves: an empathetic reader who could give her feedback in a direct, non-judgmental way. She wanted to know why the reader liked or loathed a given piece of work (in this case, a second-year writing requirement) and where the writing went wrong.

The last question I asked was: "Can you, in a sentence or two, tell me what the work you've brought to me is about?"

All of this took less than five minutes. The student handed her paper to me, and I picked up my pencil. We were ready to move from the oral presentation of ideas to the written form.

I've continued the experiment, and it seems as if the simple strategies I'm using are a helpful starting point. I want to encourage students who come to the Writing Center to bring work that is not their best; I hope students discuss planned revisions with me.

The Touro colleague who expressed interest in reading some of my work was politely receptive to the stories and essays that I shared with him; I found his scholarly work useful and interesting. As it turned out, the most important part of our exchange may have been discovering our feelings about sharing our writing.