

## **Abstract**

This study sought to determine the impact writing center consultations have on student writing self-efficacy and to illuminate effective consultant strategies for fostering student writing confidence. As part of a multi-method study, a survey was administered for students to reflect upon and to assess their feelings of writing self-efficacy by describing experiences in writing center consultations. Selected respondents were asked to elaborate on the strategies used by their peer consultant(s) in an optional open-ended interview. Findings suggest that writing center consultations help increase writing self-efficacy. The effective consultant strategies described by study participants are synthesized into an overarching consultant framework of empathy-based tutoring, which includes four key consultant moves that work to foster writing self-efficacy, which are listening, translating, advising, and motivating. Results from this study have implications for further consultant training and/or professional development programs and reaffirms the value writing centers bring to student writing growth.

## **Introduction**

During my first semester as a peer undergraduate writing center tutor, I was struck by the level of writing anxiety that I saw in students. Unsure about assignment instructions, students said things like, “This is really bad; I don’t think I’m doing this right.” Such encounters signaled to me that they were coming to the writing center because they had no faith in themselves to complete the task, let alone complete it successfully. I started to see that when students felt validated in their struggles and in the good work they were already producing, they were more empowered to keep writing and keep trying. I was beginning to tangibly see that being a writing center tutor requires a level of empathy, compassion, and concern that goes beyond being a mere “writing expert.”

These interactions, where positive affirmations appeared to be equally important to the rhetorical and pedagogical suggestions, led me to explore the concept of writing self-efficacy. Writing self-efficacy “is defined as the self-assessed ability to successfully implement writing in a specific context” (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 1) and is significantly predicted by the presence of writing anxiety. Anxiety is a self-fulfilling prophecy: Students are not going to produce anything of quality if they don’t think that they *can* produce anything of quality (Camfield, 2016; Camacho et al., 2021; Hassan, 2001; Martinez et al., 2011). Whether in an online or in-person consultation, writers started to believe that they could produce something of quality as I provided suggestions AND iterated the value of the work they brought and ideas they expressed. At the end of every session, students were telling me, “I feel so much better about doing this on my own.”

My consultant experiences were the primary exigence for creating this study. I wanted to determine if writing center consultations were helping students feel more confident about their writing and if my study could illuminate tutoring strategies that are most effective for fostering writing self-efficacy in students. As consultants, not only are we helping to create better writers and better writing, we’re helping students see what they themselves have the power to do, which begs the question: what should consultants be doing to impact student writing confidence? Are consultants doing these things already?

### **Literature Review**

This literature review will overview the field’s current conversations regarding writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy. Next, extant literature will address how writing centers respond to anxiety and self-efficacy via tutoring pedagogies and strategies. These scholarly discussions provide the impetus for this study’s aims and objectives.

## Writing Anxiety

The problem of anxiety in educational contexts is a multifaceted one. The term “writing anxiety” or “writing apprehension” was popularized through a study performed by Daly & Miller (1975), whose Likert-style scale laid the groundwork for much of the discipline’s work in determining factors that caused writing anxiety and apprehension in students (p. 246). Since then, researchers from many disciplines, including writing and composition, have investigated the barriers and burdens students experience towards writing (Cheng, 2004; MacIntyre, 2017; Jahin, 2012; Tsao et al., 2017).

Writing anxiety is extremely common among college students, stemming from a variety of factors, such as difficult courses and prior negative writing experiences (Camfield, 2016; Camacho et al., 2021; Martinez et al., 2011; Stewart et al., 2015). When experiencing writing anxiety, students might react “through nervous tension, preoccupation, or procrastination” (Martinez et al., 2011, p. 352). Even though students may experience writing anxiety in different ways, “the physiological reaction from the stress of writing [reduces] students’ confidence in their ability to write” (Martinez et al., 2011, p. 353). This apprehension is even greater in multilingual students, whose writing anxiety is heightened by the fear of making mistakes and thus can altogether inhibit the act of writing. The presence of writing apprehension also impacts the quality of student writing and their level of self-esteem (Hassan, 2001). The lack of self-regulatory behavior (Cui et al., 2021; Campbell & Batista, 2023; Jahin, 2012), specifically seeking help with brainstorming, revising, and understanding instructor feedback, is a significant predictor of high writing anxiety (Mitchell et al., 2019).

In educational settings, peer review of students’ work has been long supported as an intervention for reducing writing anxiety and apprehension (Campbell & Batista, 2023; Jahin,

2012). Peer review sessions can help students interpret comments from their professors and shape more positive perceptions of instructor feedback, which has also been shown to lower writing anxiety (Di Loreto & McDonough, 2013). Additionally, support from peers, such as graduate dissertation writing groups, is another way of coping with writing anxiety (Wynne et al., 2014). In terms of writing anxiety prevention, McLeod's (1987) analysis of the affective domain of writing processes urged writing teachers to scaffold and model successful writing strategies so students can utilize those devices on their own. Because writing center sessions combine pedagogical, instructional, and peer support constructs, it follows that writing center consultants can also play a role in mediating writing anxiety through their practice. My emphases on empathy and positive affirmations as a writing center consultant helped me limit the scope of the literature reviewed in this study and ultimately echo Stewart et al. (2015): "By examining anxiety directly, we are able to better understand self-efficacy" (p. 5).

### **Writing Self-Efficacy**

Writing self-efficacy is "the belief in one's ability to write" (Martinez et al., 2011, p. 352). Although writing self-efficacy is developed through social and emotional experience and has little to do with actual writing ability (Bandura, 1986, referenced in Martinez et al., 2011), the lack of writing self-efficacy can lead to negative effects similar to those of writing anxiety. Writing self-efficacy can affect performance perhaps as much as writing anxiety (Camfield, 2016; Hetthong & Teo, 2013; Wacholz & Etheridge, 1996). When students are not confident in their abilities to complete a writing assignment according to assignment instructions or course expectations, the resulting anxiety and apprehension can impact the quality of their texts (Camacho et al., 2021). In a study of undergraduate writers, Vanhille et al. (2017) found that writing self-efficacy and writing apprehension are negatively correlated.

Students' confidence in their writing abilities can be challenged when they receive discouraging feedback or receive feedback they don't know how to address, which speaks to the necessary role that interpersonal relationships between students, their peers, and instructors play in fostering writing growth and self-efficacy (Aben et al., 2022; Ekholm et al., 2015). Additionally, positive perceptions of peer feedback are found to be crucial in developing writing self-efficacy and writing self-regulation. As found by Cui et al. (2021), peer feedback also positively impacted students' autonomous motivation, which translates to improving writing outside and beyond the mere feedback received and thus further solidifying the significance of effective interpersonal and peer tutoring strategies to foster writing self-efficacy growth.

Furthermore, Mitchell & McMillan's (2018) longitudinal study on writing self-efficacy in nursing students highlights that writing self-efficacy is not static; feeling confident about one's writing skills will inevitably vary over time when faced with new genres, disciplines, and contexts. Writing centers provide a unique advantage here as students can utilize writing center consultations throughout their collegiate academic career, even into graduate school. My research interests then became focused on specific tutoring strategies that can encourage and impart writing self-efficacy because themes of fostering agency and confidence to implement the suggestions I was making were common in so many of my consultations.

### **Writing Centers' Response to Self-Efficacy**

Within writing centers, consultants can engage apprehensive writers in an individualized way to help them understand assignment instructions, interpret feedback from professors, brainstorm ideas, and provide further strategies and approaches. The goal of writing centers is to foster a collaborative environment where "[students are empowered] to make important, informed choices as they write and revise their work, helping to reduce anxiety and increase self-

efficacy” (Martinez et al., 2011, p. 359). Because university writing centers are poised to help student writers utilize effective strategies that promote writing growth, peer consultants are at the forefront of writing self-efficacy development.

Writing center consultations are highly individualized and tailored to student needs, which ultimately can impact writing motivation and writing confidence (DeCheck, 2012; Martinez et al., 2011; North, 1987; Nowacek & Hughes, 2015). For many students, the most difficult aspect of improving their writing is simply seeking help (Mitchell et al., 2019). Writing centers can “cash in” on this self-regulatory behavior to encourage confidence to continue developing writing skills (North, 1987). Consultants are tasked with the metacognitive hurdle of working with students from a variety of cultures, backgrounds, and writing abilities, sometimes all in the same shift—encouraging consultants to perceive writing as “processes of learning that challenge *many* individuals at *many* different stages of their academic careers” (Nowacek & Hughes, 2015, p. 178). The collaborative nature of writing center consultations implies that self-efficacy can be fostered between the consultant and student because “tutoring empowers students to make important, informed choices as they write and revise their work, helping to reduce anxiety and increase self-efficacy” (Martinez et al., 2011, p. 359). Because consultations are driven by student needs, visiting the writing center can be effective for students at different ages and diverse cultures (Blazer, 2015; Camfield, 2016; Harris & Silva, 1993; Trosset et al., 2019; Wang & Machado, 2015). Additionally, the consultant’s ability to serve as an “expert outsider” within consultations can facilitate conversations about transfer as they help students to see commonalities between genres and audiences (Nowacek & Hughes, 2015).

### **Empathy-Based Tutoring Strategies**

Researchers and practitioners widely agree (Aben et al., 2022; Ekholm et al., 2015; Elliot et al., 2011; Horn, 2019) that empathy is a complex human response, requiring an individual to “[enter] in the private perceptual world of the other...[be] sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person” (Rogers, 1980, p. 142, referenced in Elliot et al., 2011). Horn (2019) asserts that writing centers have incorporated just such an understanding of empathy into their very *ethos* through the “dual process of listening and encouraging” (p. 170). Thus, the concept of empathy positions itself as one that can positively impact confidence because it “necessitates getting to know the individual” (Horn, 2019, p. 170).

Ultimately, the interplay between directive and non-directive strategies used by a writing center consultant allows students to develop agency and confidence in their own work with the support of a peer in the writing center (Corbett, 2013, p. 95). The effectiveness of non-directive strategies, such as asking the student leading questions, encourages the student to be “the only active agent in improving the paper” (Brooks, 1991, p. 4), while directive strategies allow students to learn through instructional scaffolding (Bleakney & Pittock, 2019). Above all, when these strategies are rooted in empathy and concern for the writer, the peer consultant can play an important role in motivating the writer (Horn, 2019), especially when students “believe that seeking help will result in a positive change in writing ability” (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 18). In a similar way, Mackiewicz & Thompson (2014) argue that consultants’ use of motivational strategies can have a profound effect on student writing (p. 63).

### **Summary and Implications of the Extant Literature**

While current writing center research suggests the importance of writing self efficacy (Horn, 2019; Michell et al., 2019) and Mackiewicz & Thompson (2014) demonstrate the importance of instructional and motivational coaching, the current literature lacks definitive

descriptions of tutoring practices that are most effective in increasing student writing self-efficacy. My role as both peer undergraduate writing consultant and researcher impacts my perceptions of consultant strategies and student outcomes, thus providing a different perspective to the connection between these strategies, writing anxiety, and writing self-efficacy than seen in the extant literature.

### **Method**

This research took place at Oakland University, an R2 research university in southeastern Michigan. At the time of data collection, the Oakland University Writing Center was offering both face-to-face and online appointments. Consultations were 55 minutes in length and participants could self-schedule their appointments on *WCOonline* from either the graduate or undergraduate consulting schedule.

To examine the relationship between writing center consultations and writing self-efficacy, the researchers adopted a mixed-method approach by first conducting an IRB-approved online survey to understand students' perceptions of their writing confidence before and after consultations as well as how the strategies their tutors used influenced those perceptions. This survey was made available online to all students who visited the Oakland University Writing Center in Fall 2021 and Winter 2022. Next, students who opted to provide their emails for optional one-on-one, open-ended interviews were asked to describe their experience during these consultations and to identify specific strategies that may have affected their writing confidence. Findings from the initial survey and the open-ended interviews were synthesized and compared to the extant literature to further understand if and how writing centers consultations can foster more confident student writers.

#### **Client Survey**



An IRB-approved survey was developed by the researchers to gain an understanding of participant demographics and their perceptions regarding the writing center and their writing self-efficacy. Participants were recruited via email if they had visited the writing center in Fall 2021 or Winter 2022. Participants' emails were gathered from OUWC's online scheduling system, *WCOnline*.

The survey was conducted in *Qualtrics*<sup>TM</sup> and consisted of 37 multiple choice, Likert scale, and open-ended questions, with attention check questions scattered throughout. Before beginning the survey, participants consented to being a part of the study. After answering basic demographic questions about year of study, gender, age, native language, and the number of credit hours they were enrolled in, respondents were asked to provide information about their recent WC consultations. Participants reported how many times they had visited the writing center in the Fall 2021 and Winter 2022 semesters, how many different consultants they worked with, the kinds of assignments and courses for which they sought help, and the goals and major concerns they brought to the session. Next, participants were asked to rate their confidence level entering the consultation and how that confidence impacted the goals they set for the session. Having an understanding of participants' confidence entering the consultation was important; without a baseline, it would be difficult to evaluate if consultations made any impact at all. Furthermore, collecting participants' demographic data reflects the institutional identity of Oakland University and the unique writing anxiety and confidence issues specific to our center.

In the second part of the survey, participants were asked to identify qualities of good writers and report the weaknesses they thought they had as writers in Likert scale format. The questions following the Likert scales asked participants if and how their perceived weaknesses as writers impacted their ability to produce quality work and whether they were confident they

could overcome those weaknesses to produce quality work. As a researcher, I wanted to see how participants' perceptions of good writers and their perceptions of themselves as writers were related to the multifaceted issue of writing anxiety and writing self-efficacy.

The third part of the survey focused on questions about the consultation(s) themselves and how effective they were in addressing the participants' goals and how their confidence was impacted. Participants had the opportunity to identify things they remembered happening in their consultation in "select all that apply" style questions and to indicate if their consultants' strategies played a role in confidence changes. This part of the survey was intended to get an overview of common strategies used by consultants in writing center sessions, which would then be analyzed using statistical tests and compared to data from the open-ended interviews.

The final part of the survey asked participants about the effects of their consultation on their confidence and if they thought confidence was an important factor in producing quality writing. Participants had an optional final open-ended question to provide their email for a voluntary, one-on-one, open-ended interview (See Appendix A for the full survey).

### **Open-ended Interviews**

Fifteen participants provided their emails. To reduce bias, the principal investigator conducting the interviews was intentionally blind to the interviewees' majors, number of visits to the writing center, and any identifying information derived from the survey or *WCOnline*. Of the 15 participants who were contacted, three interviews were conducted over *Zoom*. All interviews were formatted using an identical questionnaire that allowed for individualized responses (See Appendix B for open-ended interview protocol). Having a qualitative element to the study was necessary for me as a researcher to have a more descriptive understanding of

consultants' strategies in consultations and to hear participants speak about their personal, unique experiences without the constraints of a survey.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Seventy-eight participants responded to the *Qualtrics*<sup>TM</sup> survey, which was conducted between April 4, 2022 and April 18, 2022, and distributed via the writing center email account using the blind copy feature. The survey data was exported from *Qualtrics*<sup>TM</sup> to *SPSS* for analysis. Participants who had completed less than 50% of the survey ( $n=25$ ) and those who had responded incorrectly to the attention check questions ( $n=4$ ) were removed from the analysis. The final population for the survey's analysis included 49 participants. Descriptive statistics were calculated, including frequencies, standard deviations, means, and percentiles. Pearson correlations were conducted to better understand relationships between variables. A paired sample t-test was used to examine the relationship between writing center consultations and increased student writing self-efficacy.

During the three open-ended interviews, participants were asked three questions to help guide the conversation about their experiences at the writing center. Rather than recording the interviews, the principal investigator took detailed notes and transcriptions of participant narratives to be used for coding and analysis.

## **Results**

### **Demographics**

Among the final survey population ( $n=49$ ), 79.6% of respondents were female ( $n=39$ ), 16.3% were male ( $n=8$ ), and 4.1% identified as non-binary ( $n=2$ ). The majority of respondents were between the ages of 18-24 (69.4%,  $n=34$ ), but other age groups were represented as well: 14.3% were between the ages of 25-34 ( $n=7$ ), 4.1% were between the ages of 35-44 ( $n=2$ ), and

12.2% were over the age of 45 ( $n=6$ ). All six of the university's schools/colleges were represented across the population: 34.7% from the College of Arts and Sciences ( $n=17$ ), 8.2% from the School of Business Administration ( $n=4$ ), 24.5% from the School of Education and Human Services ( $n=12$ ), 10.2% from the School of Engineering and Computer Science ( $n=5$ ), 12.2% from the School of Health Sciences ( $n=6$ ), and 10.2% from the School of Nursing ( $n=5$ ). Of all survey respondents, 79.6% were enrolled in 12 or more credits of university studies (full-time students,  $n=39$ ) and 20.4% were enrolled in 12 or less credits (part-time students,  $n=10$ ). Of the 49 respondents, 11 noted that English was not their first language.

In the Fall 2021 semester (15 weeks in a semester), 28% of respondents visited the writing center between one and five times ( $n=28$ ), 10.2% visited between six and ten times ( $n=5$ ), 2.0% visited between 16-20 times ( $n=1$ ), and 2.0% visited over 21 times ( $n=1$ ); 26.5% of respondents selected "don't know" for the number of visits during the Fall 2021 semester ( $n=13$ ). In the Winter 2022 semester (15 weeks in a semester), 69.4% of respondents visited between one and five times ( $n=34$ ), 2.0% visited between six and ten times ( $n=1$ ), 2.0% visited between 11-15 times ( $n=1$ ), and 4.1% visited between 16-20 times ( $n=2$ ); 22.4% of respondents selected "don't know" for the number of visits during the Winter 2022 semester ( $n=11$ ).

Throughout the 2021-2022 academic year, 51.0% of respondents reported that they worked with the same consultant for all of their visits to the writing center ( $n=25$ ), whereas 38.8% worked with between two and four different consultants ( $n=19$ ), and 2.0% worked with over five different consultants ( $n=1$ ). The remaining 8.2% selected "don't know" for the number of consultants with which they had worked ( $n=4$ ).

### **Writing Self-Efficacy and Writing Center Consultations**

In the second part of the survey, participants were asked about the types of assignments and goals they brought to their consultation, their consultant's ability to address participants' goals, and participants' confidence level before and after their consultation. Nearly half of the respondents ( $n=25$ ) reported that they had "no confidence," "low confidence" or were "somewhat confident" before entering their writing center consultation. During data analysis, a paired sample t-test was used to determine if participants' confidence was higher after the writing center consultation when compared to their confidence level before the consultation ( $t(44) = -2.364, p=0.02$ ). Regardless of the degree of confidence level entering the consultation, the statistical significance of the paired sample t-test illustrates that students' confidence increased after the consultation. Most participants also reported that their consultant provided them with strategies/tools to take with them after the session, indicating that they "felt confident after the appointment that they knew what they needed to do next" ( $n=39$ ).

### **Qualities and Weaknesses of Confident Writers**

Participants' sex was significantly correlated to confidence after the appointment ( $p=.30, n=39$  females) but not to their confidence before the consultation. Participants' age and year of study did not significantly correlate to either their confidence before or after the consultation. It is also important to note that almost all participants' self-reported qualities of good writers did not relate to their confidence entering or exiting the appointment. However, the response "never getting writer's block" as a quality of good writers was significantly correlated to increased confidence after the consultation ( $p=-.346$ ).

In terms of self-reported weaknesses of participants' writing skills, responses that expressed "difficulty putting thoughts into words" were significantly correlated with confidence

after the consultation ( $p=-.395$ ). Additionally, difficulty with “proper grammar and mechanics” was also significantly correlated ( $p=-.311$ ) to increased confidence after the consultation.

### **Consultant Strategies During the Consultation**

Survey participants were also asked about things they remember their consultant doing in their consultation. Most notably, participants indicated a welcoming greeting from their consultant ( $n=38$ ), spending time at the beginning of the consultation to discuss concerns and goals ( $n=32$ ), consultant asking questions about the content of students’ work ( $n=31$ ), consultant asking questions about the assignment, ( $n=35$ ), consultant asking if the student had questions throughout the consultation ( $n=34$ ), and consultant explaining the rationale behind their revision suggestions and changes ( $n=30$ ). Other important consultant strategies that were reported in the survey included the consultant asking students to clarify an unclear passage or idea ( $n=28$ ), consultants checking for students’ understanding ( $n=26$ ), and consultants providing a set of next steps for the student to continue writing after the consultation ( $n=26$ ).

**Table 1**

*Breakdown of consultant strategies reported by survey participants*

<b>Select all that apply: What are some things you remember happening in your consultation(s)?</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>% (of 49 total)</b>
Welcoming greeting from consultant	38	77.6%
Time at the beginning of consultation to discuss your concerns and goals	32	65.3%
Consultant reading your work out loud	27	55.1%
Consultant asking you to read your work out loud	8	16.3%
Consultant asked you questions about assignment instructions	35	71.4%
Consultant asked you questions about the content of your work	31	63.3%
Consultant asked you to clarify an unclear passage/idea	28	57.1%
Consultant explained a writing concept to you (such as a thesis statement, claim-evidence-reasoning, organization strategy, etc.)	17	34.7%

Consultant checked for your understanding	26	53.1%
Consultant asked if you had questions throughout the session	34	69.4%
Consultant explained the rationale behind their changes and revision suggestions	30	61.2%
Consultant provided a set of next steps for your writing at the end of the appointment	26	53.1%
Consultant maintained a positive and helpful attitude	14	28.6%

## Coding

Across the three open-ended interviews, participants represented three different gender identities (male, female, and non-binary). The female interviewee was not a native speaker of English. Their names have been changed to John (he/him), Maria (she/her), and Alex (they/them) to protect their privacy.

After taking detailed notes during the interviews, the data was coded according to common themes. Participant responses fit into five main attitudes present throughout the consultation: being heard, maintaining and enacting ownership of work, being an active participant in the consultation, having strategies to take with them after the session, and increased confidence going forward. Descriptions of consultant strategies were placed into two categories: instructional scaffolding and motivational/self-efficacy scaffolding (Bleakney & Pittock, 2019; Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014).

**Table 2**

*Occurrences of the coded consultation attitudes in each open-ended interview*

<b>Consultation Attitudes</b>	<b>Being heard</b>	<b>Maintaining/enacting ownership of work</b>	<b>Being an active participant</b>	<b>Having strategies to take with them after session</b>	<b>Increased confidence going forward</b>
<b>Maria</b>	1	1	2	1	1
<b>John</b>	0	0	0	2	1

**Alex**                    1                    0                    0                    1                    4

In all three interviews, participant responses that described a consultant’s instructional scaffolding strategy was always followed by a statement describing how it affected their confidence via a motivation/self-efficacy scaffolding strategy. This further defines the relationship between what happens in consultations and students’ confidence following the consultation.

**Table 3**

*Occurrences of the coded consultant strategies in each open-ended interview*

<b>Consultant Approaches</b>	<b>Instructional Scaffolding</b>	<b>Motivational Scaffolding</b>
<b>Maria</b>	3	3
<b>John</b>	4	2
<b>Alex</b>	1	3

## **Discussion**

### **Empathy Based Tutoring: Promoting Writing Self-Efficacy**

While the statistical significance of correlated data provides evidence that writing center consultations can foster writing self-efficacy, participants’ descriptions of how consultant strategies affected their confidence are the most valuable findings of this study. Simply walking in and out of the writing center does not magically impart confidence or provide an “inoculation effect” (Trosset et al., 2019, p. 50) against writing anxiety. Disabling beliefs and attitudes can be mediated via the specific moves writing center consultants make, not simply by a student scheduling and attending a consultation. In other words, fostering self-efficacy depends upon more than a students’ self-regulation (Mitchell et al., 2019; Campbell & Batista, 2023; Jahin,



2012). Writing self-efficacy is mediated and expanded on by the nature of the help a student enlist, in this case, the writing center consultant.

Because the results of this study did see increases in student writing confidence after their consultations, it can be inferred that the success of these consultations is a result of effective strategies used by the consultants within them. Despite the implied successes of writing center interventions, it is important for researchers to define and make visible successful tutoring strategies that we may already be doing to be defined and made visible, even if we are enacting these on an instinctive, intrinsic level. As Blazer (2015) posited, “[n]o other area of our work is more important than the learning we do with our staffs, specifically the staff education we design, experience, and reflect on” (p. 25). When these tutoring strategies receive definitive names and purposes, we can continue enacting these with greater intentionality. This intentionality goes beyond mere awareness: when consultants can truly see the person behind the essay in front of them, these tutoring strategies honor student writing by first honoring the author.

Students’ descriptions of their consultant’s strategies illuminated four key writing center consultant moves that contributed to their increased confidence after the session. These four moves are: **listening, advising, translating, and motivating**, all of which constitute what I am calling **empathy-based tutoring**. These moves are defined in present tense gerunds, signifying that consultants employing empathy-based tutoring are doing these things throughout the entirety of the session, existing as a steady drum beat in the background rather than a compartmentalization of strategies in boxes from which consultants pull. Additionally, the use of present tense gerunds implies that intentionality and energy are necessary for consultants to keep the steady drum beat going.

## Listening

Listening is “[i]ntegral to the role of a friendly tutor . . . described as a way for a tutor to convey empathy and respect” (Valentine, 2017, p. 100). Consultants listen to determine why the student needs help, to acknowledge what parts of their writing makes them anxious, to set goals for the session, and to clarify unclear concepts, all of which create and maintain an environment of collaboration and of respect for where the student is at with their writing. Listening sets the stage for the consultant to reaffirm what the student has done well and to address the writer’s immediate concerns.

Survey respondents recounted consultant strategies such as discussing student concerns and goals ( $n=32$ ), asking questions about the content of student work ( $n=31$ ), asking for clarification on unclear ideas ( $n=28$ ), and checking for student understanding by asking questions ( $n=34$ ), which are all tactics that “scaffold writers’ thinking (their cognition) about their work by helping them figure out answers for themselves, such as by “pumping,” asking clarifying questions, or paraphrasing what they’ve read or heard” (Bleakney & Pittock, 2019, p. 135). The driving force for the success of “pumping” lies in the consultant’s ability to listen to what the student is saying or what they have written. Additionally, Maria and Alex each recounted interactions with their consultant that were coded as “being heard,” contributing to their positive experience at the writing center. These findings support that “Recognizing the student’s struggles and validating his or her experiences, followed by highlighting the student’s strengths and potential, can open the door” for productive conversations about writing (Horn, 2019, p. 171).

As consultants actively listen throughout the session—asking questions and checking for student understanding—they also invite students to take part in a collaborative and conversational writing environment, which can reduce anxiety (Corbett, 2013; Horn, 2019). By maintaining a

high level of student involvement throughout the consultation, students practice and refine writing tools and strategies that increase their confidence and self-efficacy, strategies they will enact after the consultation for future assignments. Consultants can ensure that student writers retain agency and ownership of their work when asking questions and clarifying unclear ideas, supporting the writing center's "student-centered model that corresponds nicely to empathy and listening" (Horn, 2019, p. 170). Together, Maria's and Alex 's experiences and Horn's (2019) claim that the "tutor has to fight through the student's years, even decades, of negative self-talk concerning writing or even academics as a whole" (p. 170) further defines the powerful roles active listening and empathy play in dismantling and disrupting negative self-talk.

Listening is of utmost importance for consultants because understanding a student's unique experience presents the first opportunity to promote the students' agency over their writing (Horn, 2017). The impact of listening on student agency, a collaborative writing center environment, having strategies that students can take after the consultation, and increased confidence were illustrated after thematically coding the open-ended interviews (see Table 2). Listening is the cornerstone on which empathy is built, because "A focus on listening for receptivity...suggests that tutors might use listening as a means to invent flexible understandings of the students they work with and of themselves as tutors—ones that don't rely solely on recognizing commonalities or negotiating away differences" (Valentine, 2017, p. 208).

### **Translating**

Of the weaknesses that respondents identified, difficulty putting [their] thoughts into words" ( $p=-.395$ ) was significantly correlated to increased confidence after the consultation. This finding illustrated that consultants were able to help "translate" their thoughts into ideas that could be written down. The consultant's role as a "translator" of sorts allow them to engage in

instructional or “cognitive scaffolding strategies [that] create opportunities to construct and connect ideas and to display what [students] do not know and understand” (Mackiewicz & Thompson, 2014, p. 61). This act of translating involves talking through ideas and helping to transform them into things that can be written down. Most importantly, this action acknowledges and affirms the value of the student’s ideas by helping them to find and express the best words within the given rhetorical context.

Translating students’ thoughts into words also proves effective in producing deeper genre awareness, better engaging the “social and rhetorical dimensions of their writing and learning” and facilitating transfer (Nowacek & Hughes, 2015, p. 181). Additionally, helping students put their thoughts into writing supports the use of cognitive scaffolding as described in Bleakney & Pittock (2019), where tutors help students “figure out answers themselves” (p. 135). Bleakney & Pittock indicated that cognitive scaffolding occurred the most in their study’s tutoring sessions, but, like our study, still reiterated the connection between cognitive, instructional, and motivational scaffolding as part of all tutoring sessions.

While the relationship between having difficulty putting thoughts into words and increased confidence was significant across all participants, it becomes more important for students who are non-native speakers of English ( $n=11$ ) because they can struggle with being understood. As stated in the extant literature, our findings further imply that these students may experience a distinct, heightened form of writing anxiety that may present “difficulty putting thoughts into words” or hinder their ability to write at all (Cheng, 2004; Li, 2022; MacIntyre, 2017; Tsao et al., 2017). Consultants can mediate these difficulties through the power of conversation. Maria, a non-native speaker of English, explained that her consultant “read her essays aloud so [she] could hear what [she] had written and could interrupt if something didn’t

make sense.” Consultants can promote writing self-efficacy simply by talking through the writer’s ideas and affirming their value, but as Maria noted, they can “suggest better word or phrase choices” to convey those ideas more effectively. Additionally, consultants can translate feedback from professors or other peers, promoting writing self-efficacy and agency as students understand the feedback they have been given and formulate strategies alongside their consultant to address this feedback. Comments such as Maria’s reinforce the positive effect peer tutoring can have on student writing self-efficacy, especially those who are non-native speakers of English (Aben et al., 2022; Ekholm et al., 2015, Cui et al., 2021).

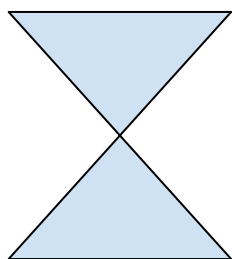
### **Advising**

Findings from our survey and open-ended interviews support results from Martinez et al. (2011) that “[t]utoring empowers students to make important, informed choices as they write and revise their work” (p. 359) because of the consultant’s ability to offer advice via scaffolding activities and explicit instruction. These actions are consistent with common role titles like “expert outsider” (Nowacek & Hughes, 2015, p. 181). The significant negative relationship between confidence before and after the appointment ( $p=0.02$ ) indicates students are receiving the guidance they need to exit the consultation more confidently and they perceive their writing more positively. Advising students comes in the form of making suggestions, introducing or explaining a writing concept ( $n=17$ ), explaining the rationale behind suggestions ( $n=30$ ), and providing tools or strategies for the student to use after the session is complete ( $n=26$ ). All three interviewees reported that their consultant used instructional scaffolding tactics during consultations, recounting that their consultants “gave suggestions,” “described every change [consultant] was making and why,” and “asking for what kind of help [the client] needed.”

In John's interview, he described an example of how his consultant advised him on his paper via instructional scaffolding. John recounted how his consultant analogized writing a paper to two pyramids, one on top of each other, with the first being inverted to represent the narrowing of the writer's scope, which leads to the thesis. He claimed this strategy "helped [him] see writing in a whole new way" and that the pyramid method can be applied to any writing because he knows that he "must start from a place where readers can relate to." By learning this new strategy, John described even this one appointment as making "an extraordinary impact" because the tool gained from the consultant's guidance can be successfully applied to any future writing assignment. When he explained that his consultant "helped [him] see writing in a way" that "always relates to the reader and connects to what [he] is trying to say," implying that he was not seeing writing in this way before. John indicated that he felt more confident after his consultant worked with him on this concept, labeling this realization "life-changing."

### **Figure 1**

*Representation of the pyramid analogy from John's consultation*



Participants who reported consultants' use of these kinds of scaffolding tactics often better "understand their feedback on their writing assignments and know when it is relevant to a future assignment" (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 20). The open-ended interviews confirmed a recurring relationship between consultants' use of instructional scaffolding and motivational/self-efficacy scaffolding. This relationship is consistent with the "combination of cognitive and motivational scaffolding and instruction in tutoring sessions," recalling the work of

Bleakney & Pittock (2019). Their conclusions support how writing center consultations impact students' motivation to effectively revise, but our study posits that this is intimately related to the issue of writing self-efficacy, because the ability to effectively revise after a writing center consultation often requires the writer to feel confident in their abilities to take the next step.

When participants described instructional strategies used or the writing advice offered by their consultant, the statement was always followed with another that described how their confidence was positively impacted. These positive impacts sometimes were implicitly stated through comments such as “[consultant] helped me see writing in a bunch of new ways” and “Going into the second appointment, I felt really good about the structure.” Moreover, the significant number of participants who identified that their consultant(s) checked for student understanding throughout the appointment supports that “students who reported reading and applying their feedback or that their feedback made them feel positive about their writing demonstrated a reduction in anxiety over time” (Mitchell et al., 2019, p. 10). One interviewee noted that “before ending the session, the consultant would check if my questions were answered and if I felt confident to work on my writing on my own...I [felt] better prepared to work on my writing assignments,” demonstrating confidence to apply the tools learned in the session (Bleakney & Pittock, 2019).

Other times, the positive impact of a consultant's instructional strategy was described explicitly, as described in comments from the open ended interviews, such as “I have more tools because she gave me more tools and suggestions to do better in my writing” and “After the writing center, I wasn't so insecure...because it doesn't matter if you use big or small words, it's more important that you are able to get the point across and people understand what you were saying.” Consultants checking for understanding and providing space for students to ask

questions is vital to their success after the appointment, especially as consultants can explain the rationale behind their revision suggestions. Advising via scaffolding and explicit instruction impacts student confidence a great deal because consultants can provide writing-specific knowledge and strategies that can be utilized and confidently applied after the session.

### **Motivating**

Perhaps the most important move within empathy-based tutoring is the consultant's ability to motivate the writer. Reaffirming the value of the students' ideas, encouraging collaboration within the session to slowly build confidence, and demonstrating kindness and concern for students' success cannot be overlooked when seeking to foster writing self-efficacy. The findings of this study reiterate the importance of motivation in encouraging writing confidence as posited by Mackiewicz & Thompson (2014) and DeCheck (2012).

Motivating throughout the session can be one of the first antidotes to writing anxiety. Because there were so few correlations between confidence after consultations and self-reported qualities of good writers/participants' weaknesses, this suggests that participants' confidence level before the consultation may be impacted by their perceptions of their own writing skills compared to 'good' writers. When Alex entered their consultation, they were unsure if their language was "sophisticated enough" and described prior experiences in high school where their teachers disliked their use of "simple words." Alex was "insecure" about this aspect of their writing even though they "felt confident in [their] ability to express [themselves] in words," thus entering the consultation with decreased confidence because of their perception of what 'good' writers do. However, Alex expressed that "After the writing center, I wasn't so insecure about it because it doesn't matter if you use big or small words, it's more important that you are able to



get the point across and people understand what you were saying,” supporting the importance of writing centers’ interventions on students’ confidence levels.

Participant responses indicate that writing centers are places where self-efficacy can be mediated and developed through empathy-based tutoring strategies as consultants provide writing suggestions for students to use after the consultation. Camfield (2016) calls for classroom research that helps students “to reframe writing problems as manageable” (p. 10), but this study demonstrates that writing center consultants can encourage students to shift their perceptions of writing situations through motivational tutoring strategies. Similarly, the relationship between instructional scaffolding and motivational scaffolding support self-efficacy and agency development because writers can make informed choices about their writing and how to address feedback with the guidance of their consultant (Aben et al., 2022; Ekholm et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2011).

While consultations themselves are collaborative, the guidance provided by the consultant is highly individualized and consistent with qualities of kindness, concern, and empathy, which are all types of motivational scaffolding. According to Mackiewicz & Thompson (2014), “motivation influences and is influenced by students’ interest in the tasks they are performing, their self-efficacy in successfully completing those tasks, and their ability to self-regulate their performances” (p. 63). My findings illustrated that consultants promoted motivation and self-efficacy as defined by Mackiewicz & Thompson (2014) when participants identified that their consultant checked for their understanding and asked questions about their work, demonstrating concern and empathy for the student and their writing. Alex stated that the feedback they received on their paper “didn’t make [them] feel weird at all, it made [them] feel more confident, and [the consultant] was really nice throughout the whole thing.” Alex even

went so far as to say that “the writing center is really good at finding nice people” when they described the kindness shown by their consultant. Alex’s positive experience in the writing center, alongside the many others recorded in this study, reinforce the significance of empathy and encouragement in peer writing center consultations. Even though students have ownership of the development of self-efficacy and agency towards their writing, data from this study shows that post writing-center confidence has more to do with the consultant’s moves than the consultation itself.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation of this study concerned the instrument itself. After the survey data had been collected, I realized that the questions that addressed how often writers had visited the writing center in the Fall 2021 and Winter 2022 semesters did not include an option to select “zero visits.” Although the survey was distributed only to writers who had an appointment in the Fall or the Winter, they were asked to indicate how many times they visited in the Fall AND the Winter. It is anticipated that if participants did not visit the writing center in one of those semesters, they most likely would have selected “don’t know” as their answer to either of those questions (Fall 2021 “don’t know,”  $n=13$ ; Winter 2022 “don’t know,”  $n=11$ ). For this study to be replicated, participants should have the option to select “zero visits” for either semester so results regarding an individual’s attendance in writing center consultations could be more accurate. In a similar vein, another limitation was that many of the participants who provided their emails for optional follow-up interviews had only visited the writing center one time within the Fall 2021-Winter 2022 school year. Similarly, many of the participants who volunteered to participate in open-ended interviews after the survey had only visited the writing center one time. Because “a single visit does not have an inoculation effect” (Trosset et al., 2019, p. 42), a replication of this

study should ensure that interview participants have completed more than one writing center consultation.

Aside from methodological limitations, this study's scope was limited by the size of its population. Although the final survey population included 49 participants, only three interviews were conducted. Replications of this study should focus more on qualitative data collection by conducting more open-ended interviews to solicit a wider range of client experiences. While there was diversity of ages, genders, and years of study among the survey and interview populations, a larger qualitative sample size could further support the conclusions drawn here.

### **Conclusion**

This study demonstrates the positive impact writing center consultations have on student writing self-efficacy and defines this impact through the lens of empathy-based tutoring. Descriptions of consultants' strategies are summarized as listening, translating, advising, and motivating, moves that consultants enact throughout the entirety of the session to increase student agency, confidence, and ownership of their own writing skills. Students saw increased confidence regardless of gender, age, and years of study. This increased confidence was especially important for students who did not speak English as their first language. Participants who had difficulty putting their thoughts into words illustrated increased confidence after their consultation, suggesting that writing centers are indeed a crucial zone for writing anxiety intervention and provide insight to students' writing that might not have been realized on their own.

Creating a world where everyone is capable of successfully accomplishing what is asked of them requires individual agency. This confidence can be fostered in an environment that promotes collaboration, mentorship, and empathy; writing centers are, without a doubt, that sort

of environment. Shifting students' writing anxiety to self-efficacy actualizes this abstract and perhaps grandiloquent sentiment of individual agency on a smaller, more tangible scale. When writing center consultations are able to produce even one more iota's worth of confidence in student perceptions of their writing ability, writers are leaving the center knowing that they can do what they need to do with a distinctive zeal and self-concept, which can be transferred into any element of a student's life. Even though writing center consultations inspire students to enact this self-efficacy on a limited level, the writing center's mission to foster better writing *and* better writers (North, 1984) also encourages authentic and deliberate confidence, solidifying the importance of the work done in writing centers and transcending the discipline of writing itself.

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## Appendix A: Survey Questions

### Demographics

1. What is your current level of study?
  - a. Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior, Graduate Student, Faculty/Staff
2. Are you a native speaker of English? If no, what is your native language?
3. What is your gender?
  - a. Male, Female, Non-Binary, prefer not to respond
4. What is your age group?
  - a. 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45+
5. In which OU college/school are you studying?
  - a. College of arts and sciences, school of engineering and computer science, school of nursing, school of health sciences, school of business administration, school of education and human services
6. Are you enrolled full time or part time?
7. How did you hear about the writing center?
  - a. Self, professor, friend, OU advertising, tutoring center, class, other
8. About how many times did you visit the writing center during the fall 2021 semester? (15 weeks in a semester)
  - a. 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21+ don't know
9. About how many times did you visit the writing center during the winter 2022 semester? (15 weeks in a semester)
  - a. 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21+ don't know
10. About how many different consultants did you work with?
  - a. Same one, 2-4, 4+, don't remember

### Attention Check: what year is it?

2022

### Client Attitudes Prior to Consultation Questions

1. Select all that apply: what kinds of assignments did you bring to your consultations?
  - a. First year writing assignments, citation style questions, writing assignments from upper-level courses, professional documents (personal statements, grad school applications, professional applications)
2. Select all that apply: from which courses did you seek assistance for?

- b. Humanities (English, Art, History, etc), STEM, Composition/First Year Writing, Social Sciences, Other courses, n/a
3. Select all that apply: What goals did you intend for your consultation to address?
- c. Understanding assignment instructions, brainstorming, outlining, looking over a first draft, looking over a final draft
4. Select all that apply: What higher order concerns regarding your assignment(s) informed your goals for the consultation(s)?
- d. Assignment adherence, clarity of writer's purpose, organization/structure, integrating sources to support argument, explanation of evidential support, voice/tone
5. What was your confidence level regarding your assignment entering the appointment?
- e. No confidence, Low confidence, Neither high or low confidence, Somewhat confident, High confidence, N/A
6. How did those feelings influence the goals you intended to achieve in the consultation?
- f. Very much influenced goals of the session, influenced some, did not influence at all, n/A

**Attention Check: If you are reading this, select 'red'**

Red, Yellow, Blue

**Qualities of Good and Weak Writers**

What qualities do you think make a good writer?

1. Ability to decipher assignment instructions: yes, no, N/a
  2. Adherence to assignment's purpose: yes, no, n/a
  3. Bring new ideas to the table: yes, no, n/a
  4. Produce an in-depth analysis: yes, no, n/a
  5. Proper grammar/mechanics: yes, no, n/a
  6. Utilizing prewriting strategies: yes, no, n/a
  7. Proper citation practices: yes, no, n/a
  8. Use evidence effectively to support thesis: yes, no, n/a
  9. Never get writer's block: yes, no, n/a
  10. Have a large vocabulary: yes, no, n/a
  11. Have a unique stylistic voice: yes, no, n/a
  12. Strong English language background: yes, no, n/a
13. Do you consider yourself a confident writer?
- Yes, sometimes, not at all, N/A

What weaknesses do you think you have as a writer?

14. Difficulty understanding assignment instructions: yes, no, n/a
15. Difficulty choosing a topic: yes, no, n/a
16. Difficulty including all the necessary aspects of an assignment into writing: yes, no, n/a
17. Difficulty organizing thoughts and ideas in pre-writing and drafting processes: yes, no, n/a
18. Difficulty writing a thesis statement: yes, no, n/a
19. Difficulty putting thoughts into words: yes, no, n/a
20. Difficulty with proper grammar/mechanics: yes, no, n/a
21. Difficulty with proper citation practices: yes, no, n/a
22. Difficulty utilizing evidence to support thesis: yes, no, n/a
23. Difficulty beginning to write at all: yes, no, n/a
24. Difficulty writing introductions/conclusions: yes, no, n/a
  
25. Do any of those weaknesses hinder your ability to produce quality work?  
-Yes, sometimes, never
26. Do you feel confident in your ability to work through/overcome those weaknesses to produce quality work?  
-Yes, sometimes, never

**Attention Check: If you are reading this, select 'blue'**

Red, Yellow, Blue

### **Consultation(s) Questions**

1. How effective was your consultation(s) in addressing the goals you had at its beginning?
  - a. Very effective, effective, somewhat effective, ineffective, very ineffective
2. Did your consultation(s) provide you with strategies/next steps to continue working on the assignment?
  - a. Yes, I felt confident after the appointment that I knew what I needed to do next; Somewhat, I had a rough idea of what to do next; Somewhat, I knew what I needed to do next but I did not feel confident that I could do it effectively; No, I left the appointment equally or more worried/stressed/anxious about my assignment
3. Select all that apply: What are some things you remember happening in your consultation(s)?
  - a. Welcoming greeting from consultant, time at the beginning to describe your concerns and goals, consultant reading your work out loud, consultant asking you to read your work out loud, consultant asked you questions regarding assignment

instructions, consultant asked you questions about content of your work, consultant asked you to clarify an unclear passage or idea, consultant explained a writing concept to you (such as thesis statement, CER, explaining evidence, organization strategy), consultant checked for your understanding, consultant asked if you had questions throughout the session, consultant explaining the rationale behind their changes/revision suggestions, consultant maintained a positive and helpful attitude, consultant provided a set a of next steps after the appointment

4. Based on the selected answers from the previous question, how effective were those consultants' strategies in addressing the goals you identified at the beginning of the session(s)?
  - a. Very effective, effective, somewhat effective, ineffective, very ineffective
5. How much did your interactions with the consultant(s) influence your feelings towards your writing after the appointment(s)?
  - a. Very much, I felt confident that I could apply what we discussed on my own; Very much, I maintained the same or increased levels of stress/anxiety/worry; a little bit, I felt somewhat confident that I could apply what we discussed on my own; not at all, my feelings (positive or negative) towards my assignment remained the same

**Attention Check: If you are reading this, select 'yellow'**

Red, Yellow, Blue

### **Client Attitudes After Consultation**

1. Do you think that good writers are confident?
  - a. Yes, somewhat, no, N/A
2. Do you think that your writing center consultation impacted the confidence you have in your writing abilities?
  - a. Yes, it made me feel more confident; neutral, my confidence level was not impacted positively or negatively; no, it made me feel less confident
3. How do you think the writing center can better support your writing confidence?
  - a. Open ended

### **Appendix B: Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. Walk me through your experience in writing center consultations. What are some things you remember your consultant(s) doing or saying?
2. How, if at all, has coming to the writing center affected your writing self-efficacy, your confidence in your abilities and skill set to complete writing assignments successfully?
3. How can the writing center better support your writing confidence?