

Language for tutoring of writing for students with cognitive disabilities

Always give the session a clear beginning, a middle, and an end. Do not let the session drag out in conversation. At the beginning, lay out clear expectations and ask the student to clarify what s/he needs and wants from the session. Discourage passivity and encourage empowerment.

Tutor: So Henry, you've said you need to work on development, and some grammar. Let's work on development for about 15 minutes, then you can find 2 grammar items that we need to go over and I can show you strategies for how to correct them. OK?

At the end, give the student a list of things to address in the assignment.

Tutor: OK, Denise, I'm going to write a list of things you need to do after you leave here today. You work on them, and I'll see you when you've worked through the list. Sound good?

Make instructions, suggestions, and examples as clear and concrete as possible. Avoid heady, theoretical language and pontification. Give the student clear frameworks in which to work.

Tutor: OK, Marie, I'm drawing up a template for your outline. Here's a space for your thesis, and 2-4 main points. Now, you fill it in. What are you going to put here?

Tutor: James, where's the handout your teacher gave on compare/contrast essays? Now, on a new sheet of paper, I want you to plan out your own essay according to this handout. Let's start with step one...

Tutor: Thanh, where is your subject in this sentence? Where is your verb? Ah-hah! Is something missing? Yes, you're missing a verb. How do you fix it?

Set boundaries and hold to them. Students with learning disabilities may have learned to become dependent on others in their previous educational experiences, and they may resist the independent work that we require in college. Do not reward passivity and dependence by giving extra time or helping "too much." If a student pushes your boundaries, be gentle but very firm.

Tutor: Yes, Larry, it's true that I'm not helping anyone right now, but we already worked for an hour today on that paper. You need to work on your own now. Please come back on another day, and when you do come back, I want to see some big changes in your paper. I'll let the other tutors know this as well, OK?

Tutor: Kelly, you need to go through every sentence and check it for correct sentence structure. No, I can't do it for you, but I know you can do it on your own because I just saw you do it! You did these three sentences by yourself already. Now you need to do the rest. When you've finished the entire paper, you can come back and I'll look at it.

Tutor: We've already talked about a lot of ideas for your paper, Gilbert. Now it's time to stop generating ideas and start writing. I want you to work on points #1 and 2 and don't come back until you have two really strong paragraphs to show me.

Don't get sucked into negative behaviors such as blaming the disability or the teacher.

Model to the student that no one is perfect, but everyone manages to achieve at their own pace. Help the student put his/her own situation into perspective; it's not about comparing, it's about growth towards achievement.

Lindsey: My teacher just doesn't understand that I just can't do this because of my disability!

Tutor: Lindsey, your disability doesn't prevent you from doing any of this. You just need to employ the strategies that you know work for you. You did the last assignment really well, so there's no reason to think that you can't do this one well, too. Everybody has things they do really well and things they have to work harder at; join the club!

Samuel: This is so easy for you. You don't have a disability, like me.

Tutor: No, Samuel, it's not easy for me; I'm no more special than anyone else. It's just familiar to me because I worked really, really hard at it and I got good at it. It's still not easy. But I learned to do it, and so can you.

When successes happen, guide the student in analyzing what went right.

Glenda: Hey! I got a B+ on my paper.

Tutor: That's great, Glenda! You worked really hard on that. Show me the best part of your paper – find the part that you think the teacher really liked enough to give a B+.

You will find, rightly so, that many of these strategies actually work just fine for people who do not have a diagnosed disability!