

Writing Center Triage:

Higher Order Concerns vs. Lower-Order Concerns

One of the challenges of working with students on their writing is avoiding becoming overwhelmed. Thirty minutes isn't a lot of time, and even in the best essays there are frequently more changes to discuss than time to discuss them. To that end, it's important to distinguish between **higher order** and **lower order** concerns.

HIGHER ORDER CONCERNS

Higher order concerns typically involve larger, structural questions rather than stylistic, grammatical, or mechanical errors.

Always read the prompt, if possible – professors will frequently provide specific guidelines for the thesis, organization, development, or audience of a paper

Higher-order concerns generally include:

Thesis – Although the thesis statement tends to take on more importance in essays written for Humanities courses, every text has a purpose that should be clear to the reader.

- Try asking the student to **jot down a quick summary** of the paper. If they can't, this is a sign of thesis problems. Moving away from the paper to a clean notepad can be helpful as you ask questions to help the writer clarify their argument. (UCSB).

- You might also ask the student **to tell you their argument** as you write down what they say (UCSB).

Organization or Structure – This can frequently be a difficult thing to talk about with students, particularly when papers are longer.

- Asking students to **reverse outline** is always useful.

- You might also ask the student to **draw a "map" of the ideas**, if they seem more inclined to find such visuals helpful (UCSB).

- **Transitions can be a useful place to focus** here. Reread & the first and last sentences of each paragraph and try asking the student how the idea of each paragraph or section relates not only to the preceding, but to the thesis.

- As you read aloud, **try to “forecast,”** or explain where you think the paper might go. Encourage students to articulate the relationship between ideas as you reach each new topic sentence (OWL).
- Sometimes, simply asking students to **re-read a few paragraphs and identify their topic sentences** can help them realize if they’re not including enough signposts.
- Since we’re focusing on teaching writers rather than texts, **talking to students about various methods of organization** – by evidence source, or by idea, or sequentially, or narratively – can be really useful (the possibilities for organization are, of course, variable by assignment).
- Working with a student to **develop an outline** can be a really productive consultation!

Development or Evidence – A draft of an essay may be clearly organized, but if the ideas aren’t adequately developed the argument will still be unconvincing. This can be dangerous territory, however, for tutors – you’ll want to make sure you’re helping students articulate their own ideas, not shaping those ideas.

- When an idea needs more development (either additional nuance or evidence), sometimes the most useful thing you can do is **talk to the writer**. Taking notes or encouraging them to take notes as they work to “convince” you of their argument will frequently result in ideas more developed than those in the text.
- Sometimes it may be helpful to **have the student free write for a set period** (say, five minutes). Assure the student that they should write about the underdeveloped idea for the entire period, even if they’re repeating ideas already in their paper. At the end of the time, review their ideas together & help them develop an outline for incorporating new ideas or evidence (UCSB).
- **Research librarians are a wonderful resource**, if students have a little time. You can help them set an appointment on the library website.

Audience Awareness - This is where we start to get to the grey area between higher-order & lower-order concerns. Most commonly, lack of audience awareness results in students writing too informally or either over- or under-explaining basic ideas.

- Much of this can be addressed by speaking with the student as you read their paper aloud.
- Audience is entirely dependent on the assignment, but you may be sure to **ask students what citation style they should use** and direct them to the appropriate resource.

- You might also **check with another consultant**, if there's time, to determine disciplinary conventions.

- Finally, we do have a few **resources available in the center** for different types of writing assignments. Or you can direct students to the websites of the UNC or UT writing centers, both of which have useful handouts for disciplinary conventions.

LOWER ORDER CONCERNS

Lower order concerns are more generally sentence-level concerns. You might find problems with **sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, mechanics, or grammar**. While these are certainly worth discussing, the most effective consultations begin with a focus on higher-level issues and then move on to lower-level concerns.

SOURCES

"Tutor Training Session: HOCS and LOCS." *University of California, Santa Barbara Writing Center Handbook*. nd. 76-78.

Purdue Owl. "Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) and Lower Order Concerns (LOCs)." *The Purdue OWL*. Purdue U Writing Lab, March 31, 2013. Web. March 25, 2014.