

SUPPORT FOR ESL STUDENTS AT THE WRITING AND LEARNING CENTRE



The Writing & Learning Centre tutor is a kind of quiet collaborator with the OCAD course instructor. And tutors are of course collaborators with students, working on whatever challenges they bring, through dialogue, coaching, and conversation. In the case of ESL students, the work involves help with grammar, but it involves much more. As with all students, WLC tutors work with ESL students to develop and clarify their ideas and to find their written “voice.” WLC tutors also help with understanding assignments, and with reading, research, and study skills. They help orient ESL students to the academic culture of North America in general, and of OCAD in particular.

WLC tutors are trained in the discourses that are pertinent to an art and design institution. Some have advanced degrees, others are current upper-level OCAD students themselves. While tutors cannot replace course instructors, they can help students to master key concepts and difficult readings. To understand what an assignment is asking of them, some cultural decoding is often required. Students also frequently need an explanation of the form and style of the academic essay in North America (see “Supporting ESL Student Writers”). Tutors can also help students formulate clear research questions and note-taking strategies, which can help avert plagiarism.

WLC tutors work with ESL students on grammar in a couple of ways. One approach is to focus on passages where meaning is obscured. For many students, articulating their idea verbally can help them articulate it more clearly in writing. In another approach, tutors help the student identify one recurrent pattern of errors in their writing and coach them on self-editing skills. Students who want to work more intensively on grammar can sign up for a “Tutoring Mini-Series” with a specialized ESL tutor (see opposite).

Tutoring at the WLC is oriented towards the student’s acquisition of skills, not just the perfection of a single paper. For this reason, tutors do not simply edit papers for students. Research shows that watching someone else circle and correct their errors rarely leads ESL learners to any long-term improvement in grammar skills. Instead, tutors work with students to gradually develop skills they can use independently.

While grammar is one possible focus of a WLC appointment, or part of an appointment, student and tutor together may agree to devote the appointment to higher level concerns such as essay structure, development of the thesis, or integration of research sources.

Because of the time and effort involved in developing second language skills, the process is aided by regular, sup-

portive monitoring. This is likely where the tutor is most effective. Single appointments can be useful, of course – for example, to clear up a specific citation issue, or to overcome writer’s block. But much of the most fruitful student-tutor interaction occurs within a relationship built up over some time, from a few weeks to months – even years. Many students make the WLC a part of their routine, scheduling a regular weekly appointment with the same tutor over the course of a term or an academic year.

Overall, WLC tutors attempt to help ESL students to overcome the idea of English as a mere school subject. Tutors strive to communicate a sense of the different registers of the language, the sense of slang and idioms, and to gain a feel for nuance and subtlety. They encourage ESL students to engage with the English language as a living medium for thought, exploration, and creation.

The WLC offers two types of tutoring services geared specifically to ESL students:

General ESL tutoring: ESL students book appointments as needed to work on a particular assignment or general writing or learning concerns. They can request a specialized ESL tutor, though one may not always be available. All WLC tutors have some training in working with ESL students. Students can

choose to work with the same tutor on an ongoing basis.

Tutoring Mini-Series: To work more intensively on vocabulary or grammar, ESL students can sign up for a series of four appointments with a specialized ESL tutor. This is an opportunity to work specifically on language rather than an upcoming assignment. In the Vocabulary Building for Writing mini-series, the tutor helps students build vocabulary through active reading, advanced dictionary research, and creation of a personal dictionary. In the Editing for Grammar mini-series, tutors help students identify their most common error types and learn self-editing techniques.

RESOURCE

The Writing & Learning Centre has a wealth of handouts online that you can direct students to, on everything from the writing process, to using sources, to grammar and style. There is also a special page of resources for ESL students, including online grammar handouts, and listening and vocabulary practice. Access the Writing & Learning Centre website under the Student area of the OCAD web site at <http://www.ocad.ca/students/wlc.htm>

FAQ

What change can I expect in a student's paper after they've visited the Writing & Learning Centre?

The improvement you see after a single visit to the WLC will depend on what the tutor and student have decided to work on together. It may be in research, structure, or clarity of expression. It will be limited of course by the time the tutor and student have had together and by the work the student has done after the session – no miracles, unfortunately. Consistent changes in grammar and writing style will come only after concerted work by the student over an extended period of time.



RESOURCES FOR ESL STUDENTS AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT OCAD

Writing & Learning Centre

Offers general tutoring for ESL students and four-session Tutoring Mini-Series (See description page 45). To make an appointment, students can contact the WLC at x 229 or wlc@ocad.ca. The WLC also has a wealth of handouts on writing and learning skills at: www.ocad.ca/students/wlc.htm (click on “Handouts”). Specialized resources for ESL learners including grammar exercises that can be completed online are available at www.ocad.ca/students/wlc.htm (click on “ESL Resources”).

Dorothy H. Hoover Library

Offers grammar handbooks with exercises ESL students can work on and correct on their own. For vocabulary building, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, a “learners” dictionary recommended by the Writing & Learning Centre, with accompanying CD-ROM is also available. Also, a beautiful Firefly Visual Dictionary is available in the quick reference section. Ask library staff for assistance in locating ESL resources.

Diversity & Equity Initiatives Office

Works with members of the OCAD community to promote a respectful, inclusive work and learning environment. Students are invited to meet with our Director, Diversity & Equity Initiatives, to confidentially discuss their ideas, comments, or concerns about diversity, equity and inclusion at OCAD. Contact diversity@ocad.ca.

International Student Services Office (ISSO)

Offers individual and group support, and services and referrals for international students (as well as for incoming/outgoing exchange students) pertaining to immigration, health, employment, and cultural adaptation. International student activities and opportunities include fall orientation, peer mentoring, and ISSO student advisory group. Contact international@ocad.ca.

ESL Credit Programs

OCAD offers two excellent credit programs for ESL students. English for Art & Design (EAD) is a five-week intensive immersion program for incoming ESL students. It includes a credit studio course and a non-credit class in Visual Studies. The program helps ESL students build the vocabulary, the spoken fluency, and the academic skills they will need to study at OCAD. EAD is also available on a non-credit basis for returning students who want to improve their English. Information online at www.ocad.ca/ead.

English Language Pathway is a full-year program for ESL students in first-year Design. Students take five of their required first-year Design and Liberal Studies courses in an ESL-only section. They receive extra help with language and academic skills and also benefit from belonging to a year-long learning community. Information online at www.ocad.ca/pathway.