

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

Technical Support at the Writing Center by Anna Nguyen

I am a writing instructor at a local university, where undergraduate students make appointments with me to help with their paper writing. The writing center is a kind of drab smart room that isn't very smart. The lights are designed to detect motion, but we're all sitting and staring in front of the computer. The lights turn off in the middle of a discussion. It is rare for a wave of my arm to alert them to flicker back on.

The students come to the writing center from various classes. Engineering, literature, public health, art history, science labs, nursing. Some students have drafts, some have outlines, some need guidance to begin. Many of them are overwhelmed, unsure where to start. Others seem guarded or there is an air of defensiveness as they intone the reason why they have made an appointment.

When I began my position four months ago, one of my first appointments was with a student from a STEM program. He had an enthusiastic, radio voice, which jolted me from my sedentary slumber on an early Friday morning. He booked an appointment for two hours, on citation formatting. If we had time after the lesson, he would move on to work on small sentence-level edits. Two hours that merely focused on citation seemed excessive, but I followed the student's goals.

The student pulled out his crumpled paper and located the final page. I quickly scanned the references. They weren't alphabetized and the student had only listed links. I couldn't discern what citation style he was using and inquired if his instructor taught him how to cite. He laughed and offered a negative answer.

He and I scrutinized every reference in his bibliography. They were mostly websites with content that I, as an instructor, would discourage students from using as primary research. Rarely did we find an author to cite. Nor were there dates, nor page numbers.

But I'm not his instructor, so I held my tongue.

The student marveled at the different components necessary for citing a government website, for an online essay, and from an academic blog. We moved onto his in-text citations, to match his updated bibliography. I saw the student's low grade and inquired how his instructor had graded his assignment. The instructor had used Turnitin, the student responded. Surprised by my blank expression, he further elaborated on the AI-powered software, explaining that the

instructor had used it to detect plagiarism. He admitted he had copied and pasted links but hadn't realized the seemingly innocuous decision constituted plagiarism.

It doesn't, I assured him. Or, rather, I corrected myself, it shouldn't in this case. An article posted by the National Library of Medicine pointedly emphasizes that Turnitin is a software that considers a "similarity index". But his professor had used it to specifically look for plagiarism and used the software's percentage to significantly reduce the student's grade.

For the next fifteen minutes, the student and I look at the other two comments, unrelated to citations. In the margins, the instructor had raised a broad concern on the student's syntax in his abstract. The other comment advised him to make an appointment at the writing center.

I helped the student revise some of his fragments, the only ones noted by the instructor. I also encouraged the student to restructure some of his sentences.

"Do you feel good about the edits, the revision?" I asked the student. The question is one that I will constantly pose to students toward the end of their appointments.

He affirmed, praising the revised paragraph as one of the better things he's written.

We didn't use the full two hours, and I noticed the student was feeling restless. We've responded to all of his instructor's comments, yet we could have revised more where there were unnoted concerns of fragments and run-on sentences. But I chose not to push. It was his paper, his appointment.

After cheerily thanking me, he left.

This student does not actually exist. He is a composite of the students I've tutored over and over again in the writing center.

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The labor of professors and instructors, adjunct or not, has long been a structural issue in universities. The workload is simply not commensurate with the pay expected from course design and implementation. I try to sympathize, but I am also aware of instructors who continue to perform the role of The Professor despite the ails of the university. The Professor who designs demanding coursework on assumed skills that are not taught in class. Something as seemingly simple as formatting citations is a skill The Professor requires. And so the students turn to AI text generators to help them write their bibliographies, a sign of defeat. Another student from an English class used ChatGPT to summarize a reading they didn't understand. I have never used ChatGPT, but my curiosity is focused on the reason why the student felt the need to use it at all.

Technologies are fallible tools. They cannot detect inconsistency, and they are certainly not designed to be editors or readers. When I make a remark that the students should contact their professors and instructors for clarity, they reveal details that point to pedagogical decay. Their classes are online, many of them recorded lectures that do not require attendance. Their instructors do not respond to emails. Their resources are in the form of video tutorials. This image of such a classroom design is not a new, disruptive force; technology has always been a strong presence in all universities. And it's not surprising that technology has become the student's last, dependable resort. At least these technical entities are responsive.

Yet, the students have also learned that their minor mistakes are largely caused by using AI tools.

When they come into the writing center, they are given a chance to resubmit to improve their grade. Most of my appointments begin with a litany of complaints. Somewhere in their complaints, I hear something resembling unfairness and an awareness of failure somewhere. They do not vocalize a person to blame, cannot quite pinpoint what is the problem, and their angry distinctions are quite vague. But there are similarities across the different classes from different disciplines and programs. I collect and analyze in silence. The students need a quiet, sympathetic listener. But the patterns will always emerge.

These Professors send their struggling students to the humble writing center, where I've become a kind of expert, one who has learned to read and understand terse rubrics with high expectations and to translate instructor's feedback into possible revisions. I've learned to read hasty drafts and encourage the students to be in dialogue while I try to understand their research. When I turn on the suggesting mode and see their panicked faces at my comments, I've learned to tell them as kindly as I can that my notes are merely notes, that they can and should reject any suggestions I make. I've learned to be supportive when I see the students at their breaking point.

It is mandatory for nursing students to make an appointment at the writing center. I have to send a report of my appointment to their instructors, as proof that they've completed an assignment. I have read enough nursing drafts to understand recurring medical topics and debates, a common language that helps me interact with them. I've learned to quickly sketch an outline for the students based on their papers. For their annotated bibliographies, I make a template following their professor's examples. Paragraph one, summary. Paragraph two, overall thoughts on author's work and address strengths and limitations. Paragraph three, how they will use the article in their own work. They eventually catch on to the pattern and they can move forward once our hour is up.

They just need a formula, to help them translate jargon and jumbled thoughts into paragraphs for an eight-page research paper. They need someone to ask them how they might summarize a peer-reviewed paper. They only need a little writing guidance.

An AI tool cannot help the student with this without sounding robotically formal. It's largely technical, but my own role at the writing center is also viewed as a technical resource. And I feel resentful because I feel that my labor is cheapened when I'm essentially asked to do the leftover tasks that the professor cannot manage to do during their own lectures.

At the end of the summer, I applied for an adjunct gig in the English department. I was not offered the position, though I do find myself wondering if the person who had been hired had sent some of their students to the writing center. I found this glorified tutoring job because it was advertised as a graduate assistantship with a tuition waiver in addition to a monthly stipend.

I was hired, but the funding had been rescinded. I am paid by the hour, on limited hours because of ongoing budgetary cuts.

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I'm never quite sure what Professors are worried about concerning these bots, but I avoid talking to them directly; instead, my mind turns to literature. In Nishanth Injam's story collection, *The Best Possible Experience*, technology is unexciting and largely exploitative. The issue of labor is always connected to technology. A character works as technical support for Bank of America in India. Another character is a coder. In a different story, a young man leaves India to study engineering in America because of the promise that AI is the future. That story was set in 2010.

Technology was just an uncomplicated detail in the stories. The author deliberately chose not to imagine what the technology could be or what their tech jobs entailed. It just was part of the world.

Outside of fiction, the same proclamation, that AI is the future, is stated each year, over and over again. When I interviewed Nishanth for my podcast, he said it so succinctly: "Technology is just a distraction, another form of capitalism."

Some of the overworked Professors have also turned to AI to help them with grading. But that grading shortcut has caused these students to depend on me. The same students return whenever another paper is due. I don't ask about their grades, but they voluntarily share positive news on an assignment we have worked through together. A student, in an offhand

way, commented that she cared about my opinion on her thesis statement. I'm not their professor, I always caution them, and my feedback can only help so much.

My schedule at the writing center has been booked for the last two months. Many students send emails, wondering if they could be on my waitlist. The writing center is an additional resource, not a class with a waitlist. I do not have a waitlist. I offer them options, that they could set up an appointment with one of my peers or that I will keep an eye on any cancellations and openings.

The supervisor of the writing center reminds us to write out every individual report after each appointment. These reports are used to log the center's traffic, as material evidence that the writing center is important enough to stay open. Metrics are used to entertain the possibility of its utility, not that students actually use it. The logic does not make sense.

Universities will defund whatever they want despite empirical data. Objectivity is only real when declared by those in power.

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It is pitch black when I finally lock the door a few minutes after 7 pm. Across the street from my office is the newly built dorm and student union. The school is proud of their new additions. Very few of the students who make appointments at the writing center live in the gleaming dorm. Many are commuter students.

There is also news of Northeastern University purchasing land nearby to open a campus that specializes in machine learning and AI. Their blueprint promises a luxurious, boutique campus space, unlike where I work.

We know how the story will continue. Universities will compete with each other and will defund flailing resources and programs which have no place in an administrator's vision of the future. Someone at Northeastern will create an AI writing tutor, where there are no waitlists, no concerns of budget cuts. Most importantly, this tutor will not be so emotionally troubled by the university's chaos.

Yet somehow the role of The Professor will be maintained. It's a role that has seen its own dignity and security stripped away, but there are many who enjoy playing the role. The university needs this Professor.